

THE QUIET PASSION OF LIEUWE KINGMA



Sometimes you experience a small wonder. On a gray, rainy weekday I picked up my son at the home of one of his friends. As I was waiting for him to put on his coat, my eye fell on a painting. Colorful, lively, of substantial size. It seemed to shine, making the drab and cold afternoon light disappear. [A fruit stand](#), seen from above and close-by. A piece of Southern France in Breda, just like that. It made me feel warm. The painter turned out to be the out-and-out Dutchman Lieuwe Kingma, the painting from 2003.

The work of an artist who makes beautiful paintings about timeless subjects runs the risk of being labeled as 'classical', 'traditional' or even 'decorative'.

Paintings that enable you to dream away, that you can enjoy or that move you, are not very popular in contemporary art. For art is big business, and a lot of money can be made with it (especially when you produce a lot of

noise around it). Artists shock, supply social criticism, make people think – in the best of cases – or – in the worst of cases- simply fool their public. But how often do you see pure beauty?

Inspiration

Lieuwe Kingma makes high demands on himself. What makes a retrospective of 25 years of painting fascinating is not just that it makes a development visible, but that it allows you to make connections. You see how Kingma keeps on exploring his own limits, poses questions to himself, solves artistic problems, works out ideas, harks backwards and grows further. His subjects are usually traditional: Landscapes in the [South of France](#) or the spacious [polders](#) in Groningen, a [harbor](#) or a [beach](#), [still lifes with vases or apples](#), [nudes](#). But his treatment of materials and use of color are totally his own and of this time. His hand bespeaks passion. His landscapes and still lifes contain something you can't

see but which you immediately feel. As if they're ensouled. A 'Kingma' is an image that speaks for itself. It requires no explanation, doesn't need to be placed in a context. The painter speaks with paint and shows the viewer a piece of himself. Working in series, as Lieuwe Kingma does, entails a certain limitation, but at the same time it gives him the possibility to explore his subjects in depth. It makes for a framework within which he can explore and expand his possibilities and technical skills. By continuously combining the skills he has acquired in different ways, he keeps discovering new possibilities. In this way, [a minor detail of one painting](#) can form the basis [for a whole new series](#). As he himself says: 'I walk from one painting to the next.'

Newspaper

Lieuwe Kingma was born in 1957 in Grijpskerk, Groningen. He describes himself as 'a contemplative child, interested in the world around me. I wasn't good at things boys do, such as football, but I could draw well. I think drawing was my way of getting a grip on the world. When I was about nine, natural gas was discovered in Groningen and pipelines were installed, which I found very interesting. I drew a lot of technical things, and was interested in how things worked or came into being.'

He grew up on a farm, in the middle of the wide landscape; the fields and the skies, the horizon and the changing seasons. Already as a child he would arrange flowers in vases. Although he doesn't come from an artistic family, his parents stimulated his interest by buying sketchbooks for him. Proud of his results, they'd sometimes [send a drawing to the paper](#) – and it would get published. At secondary school he became fascinated by poetry: 'In poems, the writer shows something of himself.' An inspiring art teacher also played an important role in his early development. 'Besides art history, we also received classes in

etching. A small group of us would often stay after school in order to experiment.' The young Lieuwe wanted to become a [jet pilot](#). After lower, higher and pre-university secondary education ('I struggled my way through it'), he eventually opted for his original passion. At the age of 23, he successfully took the entrance examination to the art academy. Kampen, Groningen, Arnhem: He was accepted everywhere. He chose for the Minerva Academy in Groningen. 'I wanted to learn to paint the traditional way, from observation.'

Discoveries

Yet he already had a distinct preference for the abstract and conceptual. As can be seen from a youthful sketch of the [Reitdiep](#) - a subject that recurs throughout his entire oeuvre - which in a very pure way (he'd never taken any serious classes) shows how Lieuwe translated the world around him into images.

Minerva is a real academic institution. 'They also taught philosophy and cultural history. It was a very inspiring environment for me, and I learned a lot from my fellow students. You were taught a particular way of thinking, to reflect about why you did something, how you painted something. It accelerated my development and made me discover things that I hadn't yet come around to: Film, music, theatre, but also things about myself. It could go quite far in psychological terms. There were a number of talents in our class and it made some almost manic-depressive – I saw that happen. I wanted to maintain my equilibrium and get as much out of the curriculum as possible.'

And so Kingma also explored sculpture and [graphics](#). But in the end he chose for painting. 'With all those other possibilities, technique played too large a role for me. I'm too impatient to wait long for a result. But it did teach me how to look.'

Among the teachers from his time at the academy were Martin Tissing, Piet Pijn, Jan van Loon and Jouke Wouda: 'Each in his own way has influenced my way of perception and translating it into a painting.'

Kingma obtained his teaching certificate ('My parents knew that artists were poor as church mice and felt I ought to be able to earn a living') and in 1987-89 he took evening classes in graphic design. It served him well in later years. 'I learned to work with a computer with the greatest ease and it now helps me present my work.'

Success

Already in his final year at the academy Lieuwe began teaching at a secondary school. 'A number of teachers disapproved, as they felt it was a waste of my talent. But I wanted to develop at my own pace and I didn't want to receive subsidy.' Nevertheless, his final exam presentation at the Minerva Academy in 1985 already led to one of his first successes. One of the people on the committee was art history teacher (nowadays professor) Marlite Halbertsma.

'Every year she would buy a work by one of the candidates. That year she picked one of my works.' It was [Still Life with Yellow Vase and Tomato](#), a work with an almost graphic line, a mixture of abstract and decorative-like elements. For the composition Lieuwe cut pieces of paper (pre-)painted with oil paint into shapes, moving them around just as long until he had found a balance, a working method comparable to the early collages of Henri Matisse. Many facets of Lieuwe's later development were already present in this work. This first purchase gave him the courage to continue in the direction he had taken and to develop his own signature further. More people began to show interest and Kingma started to exhibit his work.

Predecessors

Altogether Lieuwe taught for thirteen years, in the meantime steadily working on his oeuvre. 'That self-confidence really had to grow. After all, it took me almost ten years to crystallize my own style, which really became visible during that period.' And it received notice. His breakthrough came in 1995. Sacha Tanja (1942-2004), head custodian of the [art collection of ING](#), visited his studio and bought five works. She recognized a contemporary echo in his paintings of Dutch predecessors such as [Otto de Kat](#) (1907-1995), [Wim Oepts](#) (1904-1988) and [Jan van Heel](#) (1898-1990). With them he shares a deep love of color, division of planes and 'flattening' a landscape or still life. Besides [Mondriaan](#) – whose struggle to move from figuration to abstraction was the reverse path traversed by Lieuwe – classic moderns such as [Van Gogh](#), Morandi, Klee, [De Staël](#) and [Breitner](#) also played an important role in the development of his painting style. And Kingma admires the work of the Groningen painters collective [De Ploeg](#) (founded in 1918). 'They captured an image of a time gone by, the poetry of the landscape. When you grow up in that landscape, you take it for granted. Their way of looking opened my eyes.'

Analytical Approach

The acquisitions by ING formed an important step forward, not in the least for Lieuwe's self-confidence. Between 1995 and now he has made about 500 paintings. 'There are a few high points among them, the rest has served to reach them,' he says himself. What is a high point?

'When I have the feeling that I have come a little bit further. It has to be right.' This is a recurring theme in our conversations. Kingma consciously works towards something. He doesn't wait around for 'the magic of the paint', but works with premeditation, processive.

A painting for him is literally a self-constructed reality. His work could almost be called conceptual: With his hands he executes a clear-cut plan that already exists in his head. That procedure is at least as important as the result. Or as Lieuwe says: 'The enjoyment is in the process of creation, the tickle in my fingers. I don't linger over the end result for very long.'

Tools

'But there's also room for chance. Sometimes [in my studio](#) [full of old paintings, sketches, photos, bottles, dried flowers, etc.] from the corner of my eye I'll see a color pattern or a composition that contains the solution for the painting I'm working on at that moment. If that accidental connection hadn't been there, I'd probably solved it as well, but in a different way.'

The preparatory work is essential, not only for specific paintings, but also for putting ideas down. And they can then lie around for quite a while. 'If I've used ten percent of the ideas I have in my head, it's a lot and I ought to be satisfied. I never think: What am I to make now?'

Kingma uses the computer as a 'plaything' or tool. 'I try out quick composition sketches on it. Although I like drawing better, as that mouse in between does make it more indirect. But these days I don't do much sketching anymore – the impressions are inside my head. When I close my eyes, the images come. I do still take pictures occasionally. In the Czech Republic I made pictures of rape seed fields, for example, but I don't know if I'll do anything with them. I use them as memory aids. Just like a picture of a ginger jar – I don't have one, but that way I know what it looks like.'

One painting seems to lead to the next as a matter of course. Kingma often uses details from a 'mother painting'. 'With the aid of Photoshop I can mirror it, rotate it, widen it, stretch it out, enlarge it, knead it

into any shape I want. At the academy I did that with [scissors and paper](#).' In this way, a huge working archive has developed over the years, which Lieuwe can always draw on. For some paintings he makes as many as ten prints with different compositions and color patterns. And he keeps detailed notes, a kind of [log](#) in which he records what has been done and what still needs to be done to the paintings he is working on, such as restoring layers or deepening and adjusting colors.

Failures as Groundwork

And yet he considers a third of his paintings in the first place as 'failures'. He uses them as groundwork for other works Kingma: 'I know from experience that a failed painting can be assimilated, that I sometimes even need it. I make use of the [texture](#), the material weight. On the back of the picture of the original work in my archive I'll then write 'painted over'. The paint surface and structure are very important in his work. He is fond of different textures and qualities, such as smooth and rough, shiny and dull, heavy and thin, in a single painting. But what makes a painting a failure? 'When the first setup isn't right I hardly ever succeed in still getting it right afterwards. My paintings do not develop spontaneously, but are practically finished in my mind before I even start. That doesn't always make it easy to execute them. It doesn't always work. Composition and form take me a lot of hard work. If the composition is right, the color will come automatically, but if the division is not okay, it can't be remedied by means of color. That's why I used to work with those cut-out shapes, for that very reason. By now I have partly integrated that approach in the painting process itself. Strong forms help to create a strong composition. I often use a [palette knife](#) to do so, which allows me literally to apply structure.' As can be clearly seen in a painting like [Vase with](#)

[Roses III](#) (1999), in which the frivolous roses are painted with a brush, while the robust vase has been drawn with the forceful sweep of the pallet knife. You can even see it in his nudes. The background is done with a filling knife, and partly wiped out in the foreground (with kitchen paper or hands) for the [softer texture](#) of the female body.

Colorful Black

Color constitutes a large part of painting. Lieuwe's feeling for color is pronounced, intuitive.

The depth and intensity of the colors characteristic of his work are the result of a layering of color nuances (within the lines or forms), layer upon layer. That creates a subtle color effect, even if the colors sometimes appear to be very similar.

The colors react to one another, they speak in their relation to other colors. Lower layers play a part. Sometimes there are subtle transitions between tone and color, sometimes color planes are clearly marked off. His black isn't just black. Kingma often uses ultramarine and madder in transparent layers to attain a suggestion of 'colorful black'. 'Sometimes black has to have a deep shine, while in other paintings I like it better dull.' He doesn't hesitate to use [scrapers](#) or sanders to remove layers and thus create variegated shades of gray.

Kingma plays with the dimensions of his work, also within a series. Sometimes he'll opt for a small panel, then for a large canvas. 'It depends on what I want to say. A large canvas, with lots of color, is a kind of statement. On it I show what I'm capable of. A small panel is often more inward-looking, reflective. I often do small paintings again on a large scale. When it's bigger, [I handle the brush with my left hand \[he is left-handed\] for the details and touches, and the pallet knife with my right hand](#) for the sweeping motion. It's a challenge to try and make a

large plane interesting. I've only been doing it since 1995, because I know my own limitations. At the beginning it was a struggle.'

Unexpected Developments

For Lieuwe Kingma, 'figurative' and 'abstract' are not opposing concepts between which a choice must be made. Far from it: 'I often arrive at the abstraction by means of reality, and the other way around.' That can happen in terms of form (representation) or technique (matter). [Pictures of rust \(flaked car parts at a wrecker's yard\) or old doors](#) can make themselves felt in [abstract works](#). 'I don't paint the flaked surface, but make it like that – by literally pulling off the paint.' So it's not painted suggestion, as with the realists, but layered matter.

Because of the way Kingma looks at things, the transition point between abstraction and figuration (or between perception and imagination) often takes an unsuspected turn. As when he ['discovers' a landscape in an old door board](#). That leads to works like [Mud Flats I and II](#) (1985), dry plains in the water with clouds above. Sometimes chance and time play a part of their own. Kingma made an undercoat of gouache and binding agent on prepared paper, on top of which he then applied oil paint. Over time it started to pull a little, so that a craquelure developed (which doesn't come off). A stroke of luck, as it looks like the mud flats do in reality: dried-out clay soil. Lieuwe: 'It could have done without it, it's technically not really correct, but it's a happy incident.' The 'mud flats series' is still in progress. Like the [Reitdiep](#), it's an inexhaustible subject.

Such mud flats can in turn lead to abstract works again. Or another example: [Details from a painting of beach cabins lead to an abstract series with blue and white planes](#). As Lieuwe himself puts it: 'Abstraction exists in

parallel with figuration or realism. I can use both to do my thing.'

Maintaining Spontaneity

'I work on several (sometimes ten) canvases at once. On the one hand, because of the time it takes for the paint to dry, but also because often they're contemplative paintings. I [prepare the canvases using gesso mixed with ochre pigment](#). That allows the colors to blend better. Then I quickly sketch out a plan in a first layer of acrylic. Then comes the development and finishing in oil ([layer upon layer](#)), often with the aid of the pallet knife, for swiping or scratching (with the sharp edge). In some places I'll let the canvas show through (the original undercoat, often in ochre), in other places an extra thick coat will develop. Those are works I look at and work on for a long time. I'll keep on sanding and filling to build up those layers.

Experimenting is essential. Using new or different techniques will make you run into things. That's how I discovered glazing [[using a very thin layer of enamel](#) to break the light, in order to obtain saturated colors], when I wanted to evoke a more contemplative atmosphere which you don't easily obtain any other way.

But in contrast to all that, I also make [wet-on-wet paintings](#), to maintain my spontaneity. I just pick a subject – be it flowers in my garden or some memory. Sometimes I like paintings made fast when they're just done, but a year later I'll think: I should have done that differently.'

The undercoat varies as well. 'Painting on (prepared) paper is different from painting on canvas or wood. The smoothness makes all the difference. Paper still has some spring to it, since it has pores, while a wood panel is as smooth as can be.'

Private Collection

Every year, Lieuwe's wife Julie chooses at least one work that can't be put up for sale. The resultant collection hangs on the first floor of their house in Hilversum. It often concerns a first (key) work from a new series. Such as a beautiful small landscape in green tints on paper, dating from Lieuwe's student days ([Cows Under the Trees](#), 1983). He remembers: 'The first two years at the academy we weren't allowed to paint. We were taught chromatics and had to do endless [drawing from models](#). Of course you furtively made a painting every now and then to put what you learned into practice. But you didn't show it! Nothing compares to the direct observation of light and the color patterns that results in – for you can't make those up. At the same time I found it hard not to include all the details, to keep it somewhat abstract.' In the painting [The Red Tree](#), from 1983, the influence of De Ploeg is clearly visible. 'I suddenly dared to do that, to make trees red.'

Another work, [Minnesota, Early Snow](#), is literally heavy with paint. 'Yes, those are thick daubs of paint. So for that I needed a failed painting with a lot of texture. We often go to the United States in winter. Here you could still see some leaves in the aspens, already turned yellow.' The snow has just fallen, inviting you to touch it. In recent years he has been making regular visits to the landscape of his youth. There's a series of [warm paintings of the Reitdiep](#), dating from 2007, as it is stored in his memory. Long ago perceived, with the noise filtered out over the years, but perhaps also colored by affection. For when Kingma went cycling around that area last summer to visit the places dear to him, it turned out that much had changed beyond recognition. His paintings of it constitute a memory of a bygone time.

Somewhere in a corner stands a [small flower still life](#) with an atmosphere that reminds one of the French painter Fantin Latour. A tender, contemplative and touching painting. That too is Lieuwe Kingma...

Variations on a Theme

As he talks about his work, something of the passion that glows beneath his quiet demeanor comes to the fore. He recognizes that: 'I'm glad that I've found a way to express that passion. I paint because it allows me to show a part of myself that otherwise doesn't manifest itself. I can always recall how I made something and what I felt at the time. When I look back on [25 years of painting](#), the same things keep coming back in different ways. The subjects are what prompt the paintings. The subjects remain the same, but the paintings always have their own expressiveness. I don't try to break new ground, or only for myself: I open new horizons for myself. I sometimes compare painting to composing a piece of music. The driving force for me to keep painting comes partly from the idea that I find myself among like-minded painters from the Minerva school who want to continue the realist tradition in Dutch art and give it an individual and contemporary interpretation. Which doesn't mean that I'm not also motivated by the desire for recognition...'

Annelette Hamming,
Breda, January 2010

Annelette Hamming (Amsterdam, 1962) studied art history at the Rijksuniversiteit Leiden, after which she completed her master degree in journalism at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. Examples of newspapers and magazines that have published her work include *De Telegraaf*, *Residence*, and *BN De Stem*. She has written autobiographies on Hans Truijen, Renée van Leusden, Mattie Schilders, Jan Cremer and Cole Morgan, among others. From 1992 to 2010 she was editor of *Tableau Fine Arts Magazine*.

