

# Daan van Golden Red or Blue

FUNDAÇÃO CAIXA GERAL DE DEPÓSITOS

***Culturgest***

**As the sun colours flowers, so does art colour life<sup>1</sup>**

Anne Pontégnie

Many works that have been produced since 1945 do not belong to the major movements that have given structure to that period. In the last ten years, non-conformist artists like Paul Thek, Dieter Roth, Yayoi Kusama or Oyvind Fahlström have re-emerged from the limbo to which they had been relegated by the orthodox history of modernism. Daan van Golden belongs to that category of artists whose work, while not in any way outdated, has developed at the margins of the major international styles. It is significant that during the 1960s and 1970s, the paintings of textile motifs which he produced in Japan in 1964 were included by turn in the context of exhibitions devoted to Pop Art, Group Zero and American abstract painting. They might also have found a place, as

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1. Sir John Lubbock. This quotation is taken from the speech that Daan van Golden gave when he received the PC Art Award on 25 November 1990, in Amsterdam. The speech is reproduced in *Daan van Golden, Werken - Works, 1962-1991* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1991), p.19.

indeed might his later works, in exhibitions devoted to conceptual art, Minimalism, or the Appropriation art of the 1980s. However, it is equally clear that these works exist totally independently of these movements, just as much as they share common ground.

Van Golden is not a marginal artist. He has exhibited at the ICA in London, at Documenta 4, and also represented the Netherlands at the Venice Biennale in 1999. There are pragmatic explanations to explain why his work has thus far remained the preserve of a few enthusiasts and the Dutch art institutions that own almost all of it.<sup>2</sup> One such argument would be the fact that van Golden produces very small amounts of work, too little to nurture a 'market'<sup>3</sup>, but this cannot be divorced from a more speculative explanation suggesting that the unassuming nature of his output is an integral part of a project in which art and existence are inextricably intermingled.

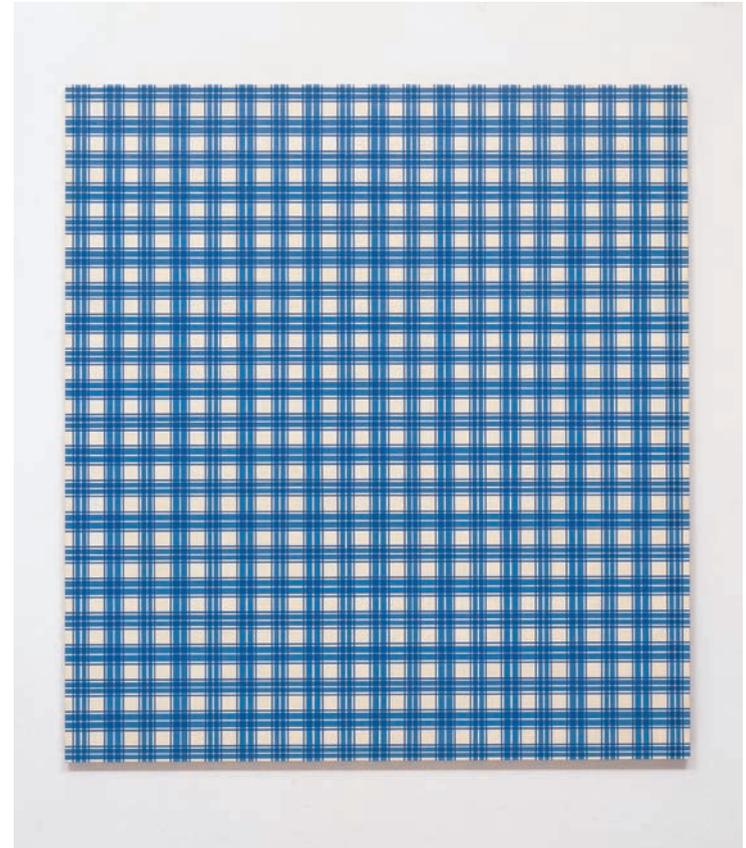
To mark the award of a prize<sup>4</sup>, rather than writing a speech, van Golden collected together a set of quotations devoted to art. Among them is a story which illustrates the artistic position he chose at the start of the 1960s, and which has exerted a crucial influence on his work ever since: 'An emperor commissioned a group of Greek artists and a group of Chinese artists to produce a mural. There was a dividing partition so that neither team could see the other's picture before it was finished. When the Chinese had finished, their mural was unveiled. A few weeks later, the Greeks finished too, and the emperor could also see their work. They had polished their wall so that it gently mirrored the Chinese mural.'

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2. From the end of the 1960s until the beginning of the 1980s, van Golden practically stopped painting. He then chose to subscribe to the BKR, a system of financial support given to artists in exchange for their works. As a consequence, the bulk of his work now belongs to Dutch public collections.

3. Van Golden collaborated sporadically with various galleries in the Netherlands before working exclusively with the Galerie Micheline Szwajczer in Antwerp from 1982 onwards.

4. Cf. note 1.



**One Painting**, 1964  
Gloss paint on canvas on panel  
150 x 138 cm  
Collection Agnes and Frits Becht, Naarden

Van Golden's art is resolutely on the side of the Greek artists. During the period he spent in Japan from 1963 to 1964, van Golden abandoned the black and white expressionist-style abstraction he had been developing since the late 1950s. Instead he started to reproduce on canvas the motifs that he found on wrapping paper and paper handkerchiefs. Over the course of the two years he spent in Japan, he produced twenty or so paintings based on these motifs. Grids, floral patterns and organic forms characterize the motifs, and sometimes the names of shops like *Mitsukoshi* appear. The meticulous technique used to reproduce the motifs as accurately and neutrally as possible required a great deal of time and concentration, but it had the advantage of freeing the artist from the need to draw his inspiration from a closed mental and emotional space. From then on, van Golden would adhere to that position: of observing and finding the subjects for his pictorial practice in his daily experience of the world and of art. The backdrop against which van Golden's 'gesture' appeared was provided by artists such as Jasper Johns at the start of the 1950s, Yves Klein, the *Affichistes*, and Andy Warhol - who had systematised his painting two years earlier - but they alone are not enough to explain it. What was at stake in his decision was existential as much as it was artistic, or rather it lay in a desire to reduce the space that separates art and everyday experience. Formally, since they stage a coming together of major modern forms like the grid and contemporary consumer objects, van Golden's works are located on the European flank of Pop Art, alongside Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter or Richard Hamilton. In reality we will see that the project that gave rise to them brings them, on the one hand, to something approaching 'attitude' art: upstream where they are close to the work of someone like Yves Klein or the *Affichistes*, and downstream where they are near to conceptual artists like Douglas Huebler or On Kawara. On the other hand, they also touch on a Dutch visual culture which van Golden's work endows with new relevance.



Heerenlux, 2001  
Oil on canvas  
55 x 55 cm  
Collection of the artist

The works that van Golden has been developing since the end of the 1970s – be they paintings, editions, or photographs – carry on with the method that was started in Japan. *Heerenlux* (begun in 1993) is a series based on a floral motif that was found on a fabric sample. Depending on the nature of the exhibitions, details of the motif are reproduced on differing scales and on canvases of varying sizes. In parallel, van Golden isolates a work, or a detail from a work – such as a budgerigar found in the work of Matisse (*Blauwe studie naar Matisse*), a walker by Giacometti (*Studie A.G.*), or a drip-painting by Pollock (*Studie Pollock*) – and reproduces its silhouette in colour on a canvas that is otherwise left untouched. Four copies of each painting are then produced. A set of works, editions or photographs accompanies this pictorial practice and these form a counterpoint that again reinforces the intimate resonance that van Golden constructs between art and existence, while also being the product of a process which is equivalent to that of the paintings, insofar as they proceed from a stage of observation to one of selection from among the flow of images encountered by the artist. *Golden Years* brings together seventy photographs found in daily newspapers. They have been chosen on aesthetic grounds, but also because each one is accompanied by a date that corresponds to one of the years that separates the birth of van Golden in 1936 from his seventieth year.<sup>5</sup> *Youth is an Art* consists of more than one-hundred photographs from the daily life of his daughter Diana, from her birth until she reaches the age of eighteen. These two series are presented in a linear frieze, whose horizontality evokes the passage of time that haunts them and bestows their emotional power. The paintings isolate artistic phenomena; with *Golden Years*, images from the press and with *Youth is an Art*, moments in a life. Together, they do not attempt to draw simplistic parallels, but rather to show how art – as a

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5. This work was completed in 2006 and presented at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, in Rotterdam, to mark the artist turning seventy years of age.



**Blauwe Studie naar Matisse, 1982**  
[Blue Study after Matisse]  
Oil on framed canvas  
188 x 118.5 cm  
Collection Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam

practice – makes it possible to enrich and intensify the everyday experience from which it cannot be abstracted.

In this connection, the influence of Zen thinking on van Golden's work is indisputable<sup>6</sup>, but the work also derives its uniqueness from the tradition of Dutch visual culture. In her study on seventeenth century Dutch art, Svetlana Alpers defends the idea that the special qualities of Dutch painting are rooted in a culture that is very different from Italian culture. To be more specific, she highlights the descriptive mode of Dutch art as compared to the Italian narrative mode: 'For the Dutch, their pictures describe the world we see rather than imitating human actions laden with meanings.'<sup>7</sup> There is a mirroring aspect to this that fits in with the conclusion of the Chinese tale quoted above. If the formal characteristics that Alpers picks out in the seventeenth century Dutch pictures – liberties taken with regard to scale, the absence of a preliminary frame and the sense of the picture as a surface – could be used three centuries later to describe van Golden's painting, the constituent elements of Dutch art that she highlights – the absence of learned references, resorting to traditional techniques, the renewed use of the motif and the reawakened joy of discovery<sup>8</sup> – all correspond strikingly with van Golden's own artistic position. Although the artist systematically refuses all interviews, he enjoys speaking freely about his painting. I have often seen disappointment on the face of the person with whom he is speaking when van Golden describes his interest in the hidden forms he highlights in his painting. Discovering a dog's silhouette lurking in a decorative motif, or a face in a drip-painting by Pollock may seem anecdotal in view of the

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6. See the essay by Luke Smythe, pp.77-82, published in the exhibition catalogue.

7. Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p.16.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.



Studie Pollock, 1991  
Oil on canvas  
120 x 120 cm  
Collection Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

complexity of modern and contemporary aesthetic projects, yet this approach is emblematic both of the principles of observation that underlie the Dutch pictorial tradition and the relationship that van Golden constructs between his art and his experience of the world. The challenge in all his work is to discover the marvellous, the extraordinary, at the heart of everyday experience, and then to preserve and transmit the quality of this event by showing it the greatest respect. 'Dutch images do not disguise any significance, but show that meaning is invested in what the eyes are capable of grasping', Alpers again explains.<sup>9</sup> Thus van Golden's work shares with the still-life paintings of Willem Claesz, the landscapes of Ruysdael, or the interiors of Vermeer, the capacity to let us see what is visible, but not necessarily perceived. That cultural continuity is paradoxically reliant on van Golden's very contemporaneity. For his work can develop that 'cultural' continuity against the background of a re-questioning of modernism, at a moment when the international style of the avant-garde is giving way to a culturally and socially more specific development of art, as evidenced by the German, French or English versions of Pop Art, Arte Povera in Italy, or a few years earlier by the Gutai movement in Japan.

This openness correlates with another deeper re-questioning of the autonomy of art, on which modernism was based. In *Différence et Répétition*, published in 1968, Deleuze gives theoretical form to the idea that the most arduous and most political invention is 'to extract a difference from the repetition of everyday things'.<sup>10</sup> While Deleuze takes Warhol, Beckett, or the *Nouveau Roman* as examples, artists like van Golden, but also Huebler or On Kawara, are taking part in a similar shift of the artistic stakes. The famous statement from Huebler that 'the world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more', and the continuity

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9. Ibid., p. 22.

10. Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition* (Paris: P.U.F., 1968).



Finistère, 1986 (From the series *Youth is an Art*)  
Framed colour photograph  
36 x 24 cm  
Collection of the artist

that his *Variable Pieces* induce between his practice of art and his life, have something in common with the work of van Golden. However, it is On Kawara, and the way he has elaborated a system enabling him to weave close relationships between his practice of art and his existence, who strikes me as being the closest to van Golden. Both men borrow 'found' objects that they invest with intensity in the pictorial process. Thus their works do not offer the representation of an everyday space, but carry within them the quality, the intensity and the singularity of the experience of that everydayness. In this respect they invert, and even complement, the system of Pop Art which tackles the everyday by depicting it. In fact, in response to Pop's criticism of the ever increasing uniformity of experience, van Golden and On Kawara counter with a proposal for effective resistance by means of a reciprocal and quite particular investment in art and existence. Neither van Golden's work nor that of On Kawara has undergone a process of progression since its initial elaboration. On Kawara continues with his Date Paintings, just as van Golden is today considering a return to Japan to make new works, using a process identical to that which he embarked on in 1963. This absence of tension gives their work a serene radiance, a power to fascinate, and paradoxically attests to their extreme and intuitive contemporary significance.



Wales Picture, 1967  
56 black and white photographs framed  
8 x 13,5 cm (each)  
Collection Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam

## Exhibition

### Curator

Anne Pontégnie

### Production coordination

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### Production

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Paula Tavares dos Santos

### Set-up coordination

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### Set-up

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Henrique Neves  
Nelson Melo  
Sérgio Gato

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Gráficos do Futuro

### Printing

Maiadouro

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## Talk with Daan van Golden and Anne Pontégnie

Saturday, 20 June, 4.30 pm

Daan van Golden – Red or Blue is organised by Camden Arts Centre, London, in association with Mamco, Geneva, and Culturgest.

Monday to Friday, from 11 am to 7 pm (last admission at 6.30 pm)

Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays, from 2 pm to 8 pm (last admission at 7.30 pm). Closed on Tuesdays.

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