A DOUBLE TAKE Terry Haggerty

By Jurriaan Benschop

Should Terry Haggerty's paintings be called abstract? At first glance they seem to explore a formal vocabulary that we have come to know as minimal and abstract. Yet there is, in most of the paintings, a sense of familiar form, inherent in the play of stripes and colours. The works seem to have a second identity.

Terry Haggerty is an illusionist. Not in the sense of somebody who does tricks with cards or pulls rabbits from hats, but in a more literal sense. As a painter, he creates spatial illusions, and because he does so on different levels, this presents itself as a central focus in his work. Through that interest, he connects to a very old technique in painting: the *trompe l'oeuil*, dating back to Greek and Roman wall paintings where paint was used to create, for instance, the illusion of a window in a wall to suggest a view outside. Thus, painting was used to extend real architecture in the imagination. In Haggerty's case, this does not happen so much through depiction, but through changing the spatial orientation of the viewer.

Part of Haggerty's work is "stand alone" or autonomous painting. But another, significant part you could call "applied" or "site-specific" painting, since it responds to architectural situations, such as the wall drawing "Untitled" at the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida, that he did in 2014. With large wall paintings, the artist influences the experience of a space, and he does so through illusion. For instance, one sees a corner that is not actually there–or, the other way around, one sees an ongoing flat surface of stripes where in fact the wall has made a 90-degree turn. These illusions occur only from a certain perspective. Actually, there are only two viewpoints where the image forms a whole. If perceived from other angles, the wall drawing appears fragmented. So while walking around in the space, the viewer sees an image that is changing: forming itself or breaking down, gaining depth or flattening.

In Haggerty's autonomous paintings, the illusion of space works on another level. The basic surface is usually a panel or canvas. It might be rectangular, but in recent work, the wood has been shaped into a form that is unusual for a painting, for instance with round corners, or curves that follow the painted image. The panel looks solid, a few centimeters deep, and so as a viewer you feel that this is actually an object, not just a flat image on the wall. On top of this surface, there is a play of parallel stripes, moving around, bending at the edges of the panel, creating speed and direction. And these lines create an illusion of space, a suggestion of volume and depth.

Several paintings suggest that something has been wrapped up in the pattern of stripes–like a physical object in three dimensions, although one cannot see what it is since the stripes are not only creating this illusion, but also hiding it. Another group of works implies a window with the lines of what could be lowered blinds. A third series, *Masks*, hints at the human face, but only in very basic features. A horizontal opening seems to indicate the eyes, while a triangle underneath could be the nose. Nothing is defined in specifics; the figuration is more like a possibility in these paintings.

The allusions to figuration give an extra entrance into the work and make the painting as a whole act like a double image: first there is an abstract image, defined by color and the play of lines, and then there is a form we know and have seen before, even though it is just a faint notion. So it would not be adequate to call this abstract painting. It is certainly not pure abstraction, as the Minimalists would have liked to see it.

Looking at the paintings, no artist hand can be traced, no personal gesture or temperament can be seen. It is clearly not about individual expression here. Further, the process of making these works is not typically that of a painter. Part of the artist's studio equipment is a plotting machine, used to cut out a vinyl stencil which contains the composition for the painting that the artist has prepared on the computer. He covers the surface of the paining with this stencil, filling out the negative forms with the roller or spray

paint, before removing it again. To finish the work, the artist adds several layers of varnish to attain a smooth, flat surface. In the end, it looks like everything was painted in just one layer. But again, this is an illusion.

One wonders how the precision was achieved in the composition of lines. At the border of some paintings, there are lines almost as thin as a hair, which seems hardly possible to realise without making mistakes, without gliding over to the side of the painting. But it never happens; there is no dripping. The paintings seem, in such details, both fragile and immaculate, and this is part of their appeal.

The hidden or latent forms that appear in Haggerty's works seem to have a resonance in the unconscious. Somehow they are very primal, maybe exactly because they are not descriptive in a very specific way. They address spatial constellations such as enclosure, stretching, collision, or openness–qualities that apply to forms, but also connect to human experiences such as freedom or distress. Behind the clean and minimal forms that appear so detached, a subjective world of vivid experience starts to unfold.

For his upcoming show at the Von Bartha gallery, the artist will further his research into spatial issues, and he will look for new territory. While so far illusion has been the key to his conception of space, he is currently experimenting with three-dimensional objects that would also introduce actual physical space into the work.