

Comments, a Conversation Between Language and Paint

Contemporary visual culture mainly consists of technically assembled images that are displayed on computers, tablets, mobile phones or other convenient devices. We derive our knowledge of the world from those images. The notion that technology manipulates the meaning that we bestow on the world usually isn't part of the picture. Painting seems to have less and less to say in this visual bombardment. In his series *Painted Words* Alexx Meidam shows that this is a misconception.

These paintings show words, letters, or at least the suggestion of those. A number of titles, such as *Witregels (Blank Lines, page 47)*, *Omschreven letters (Circumscribed Letters)*, *The Word*, *Les mots m'échappent*, *Smell of Language* (page 45), and *Creation of Language* also refer to language. The texts are, that much is clear, illegible. They give an account of an unknown written language, or better yet: the suggestion of a written language. It looks like writing: unfamiliar characters that are vaguely reminiscent of Greek, maybe the characters on clay tablets, or of 'Arabic' or Cyrillic letters. It is a fantasy language consisting of neatly filled out lines, without space breaks between the words, without punctuation marks. In short, just lines.

And while the images depict this form of written language, the characters are actually not written, but painted. The image is the writing. A form of writing that is a *gesture* of matter, of paint. Actually because the *medium*, the *carrier*, the *form* and the *content* of the paintings withhold from unambiguous definition – there is nothing being told or illustrated, there is no message to sell – the painting is an *event* of which the given frames are disrupted, an event that cannot be understood within any known categories. Meaning defines, the event escapes definition.

Yet it is this withholding from comprehension that gives rise to comment. This comment then, will not be a witty criticism, telling you precisely how it is. A show and tell. The word comment originally means *the going together, the thinking together of distinguished spirits*. They ring together, and that doesn't always have to be in harmony. Who then, are ringing together? The comment continues the work with other means. In that sense the possibly slightly odd phrase *a conversation between language and paint* is perhaps indicative of the reflexive movement of these

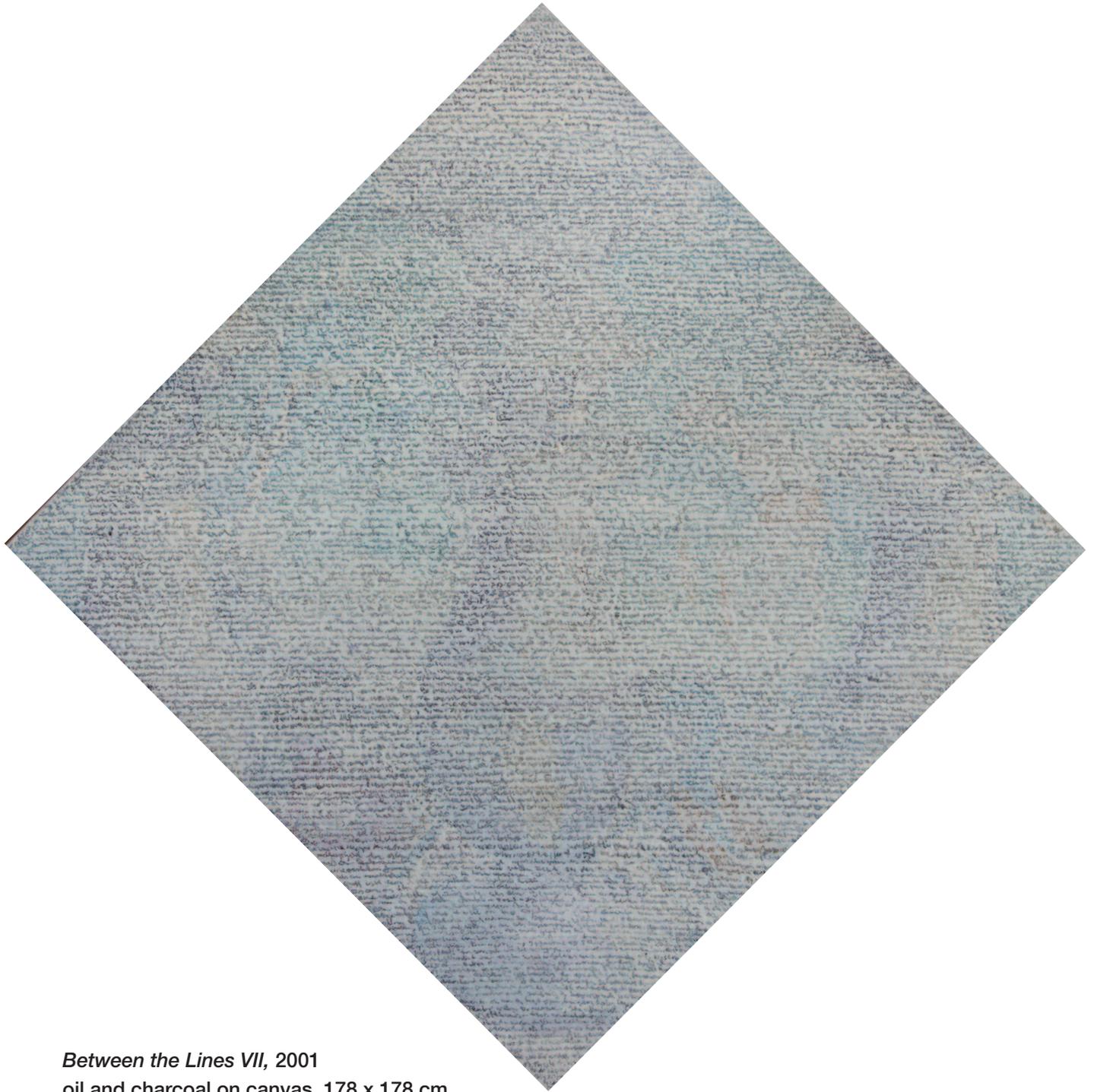
paintings in which written language and image are commenting on each other. How is this possible?

Meidam's paintings are not about language as such, they're not illustrations accompanying a statement. But they do pose questions and they comment on the usual representation of things. *We normally read language and look at images*. Here this contradiction is subverted. This work invites us, or perhaps it's better to express it more violently – it *forces* us, to *look* at language when we try to understand the image, something that we normally do when we *read*.

Because when we read we mainly read the *meaning* of the words. That causes the *materiality* of the word to disappear from view, the typographical shape, or in spoken language the sound. A good story may very well be able to sketch an image of a situation, but that would likely take place in the mind's eye. In the act of reading it's precisely the act of *seeing* that is forgotten. The materiality of the signs is literally being overlooked. We don't *look* at words in their printed form, and we don't listen to pure *sound*. Normally we read and hear *meaning* immediately.

Yet the contradiction is not absolute. Meaningful language has a visual component as well. The intervals, the white spacing between the letters, the spaces between the words, the "blank line" between the paragraphs make it possible for language to actually have meaning. It is therefore striking that space breaks are nowhere to be found in the pseudo-lines of Meidam's paintings. The blank spots, the void that is *necessary* in order to create meaning, do *not* belong to the materiality of language. The white is the *carrier*, the piece of paper that is written on, the canvas that is painted on, the clay tablet that is carved. And precisely because of that, the French philosopher Lyotard states in reference to the original meaning of the verb *figere* – to shape, give shape –, language becomes fictional. Meidam creates, by giving written language a palpable form, a fictional language in a literal sense.

A letter is – materially speaking – a physical line that, in the act of 'comprehensive reading', is ignored *as a line*. In order to see that line – as these paintings keep pointing out – we have to stop



Between the Lines VII, 2001
oil and charcoal on canvas, 178 x 178 cm