

# SEANKELLY

Yau, John. "So Much Achieved by One Artist in So Little Time." *Hyperallergic*.  
March 26, 2020.

## HYPERALLERGIC

### So Much Achieved by One Artist in So Little Time

The Belgian artist Ilse D'Hollander rejected abstraction and figuration as an either/or premise in favor of a path that embraced both.



Ilse D'Hollander, "Untitled" (1990/1991), mixed media on cardboard. Artwork: 27 15/16 x 39 3/8 inches; framed: 34 1/2 x 46 1/4 x 2 inches (© The Estate of Ilse D'Hollander, courtesy Sean Kelly, New York)

The Belgian artist Ilse D'Hollander (1968–1997) spent less than 30 years living in this world. By the time she graduated from the Hoger Instituut voor Beeldende Kunsten, St. Lucas, Ghent, in 1991, it was clear that she was “a consummate draughtswoman,” as Eric Rinckhout states in a catalogue essay devoted to her “early and unknown work.”

According to Rinckhout, “In 1980, D'Hollander decided to devote herself exclusively to painting.” While he goes on to point out that painting “was a deeply unfashionable discipline at the time,” I am much more taken by the fact that D'Hollander was apparently summoned by the slow medium of painting before she became a teenager, and that for the rest of her short life she never wavered in her commitment.

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The directness of drawing, and of drawing in paint, was D'Hollander's ideal. She explained, "A painting comes into being when ideas and the act of painting coincide."

In this statement, one can see what she shares with the Belgian abstract artist Raoul De Keyser and the American Abstract Expressionists, particularly Willem de Kooning and others committed to drawing in paint.



*Installation view of Ilse D'Hollander: Tension Field at Sean Kelly, New York, March 12 – April 24, 2021 (Photography: JSP Art Photography, New York, courtesy Sean Kelly, New York)*

At the same time, D'Hollander wanted to be as direct as artists of previous generations working in Minimalism and Color Field painting without following in any of their footsteps. Nor was she interested in the flamboyance of the artists associated with Neo Expressionism and "the return to painting" that dominated the international art world's attention for much of the 1980s.

Given the painterly achievements of the postwar generation that emerged in America and Europe during the 1950s and '60s, and of European artists as distinct as Nicolas de Staël, Eugene Leroy, and René Daniëls, D'Hollander's rejection of abstraction and figuration as an either/or premise in favor of a path that embraced both possibilities, without quite becoming either, is admirable.

To get a sense of what D'Hollander did in her life, you should see the exhibition *Ilse D'Hollander: Tension Field*, at Sean Kelly (March 12-April 24, 2021), which contains a dozen works.

Rinckhout's essay opens with a sentence that gives this show its title: "Ilse D'Hollander's paintings are one enormous tension field." While much attention has been paid to her negotiation of the figural and the abstract, particularly through the subject of landscape, I want to take a slightly different tack.

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I believe that D'Hollander did not want either direction to dominate because so many other artists had already achieved so much in the realms of representation and abstraction. Yet, by working in a way in which the destination was unclear, she could continue within the domain of painting until the idea and act coincided. The pitfall was getting bogged down in the process, as de Staël and Leroy often had, or becoming whimsical, which was a strong part of De Keyser's temperament. I have no concrete evidence for my theory about D'Hollander; I am going by what her work tells me, and the visible decisions she made.

The exhibition's earliest works are five paintings done on cardboard. They are among the largest D'Hollander made; someone gave her more than two-dozen identically sized sheets of cardboard during her last year of school. Two of the paintings are dated 1990-91 while the other three are dated 1991.

You don't need to be an artist to recognize that it is better to keep adding paint to a thin cardboard support than to try and scrape it off or sand down the surface. Since cardboard is not as flexible as a gessoed canvas, it compels the artist to make different decisions.

D'Hollander elected to use this distinctive support, and in a larger size than was usual for her. These choices indicate both her ambition and her willingness to

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paint outside of her comfort zone.



*Installation view of Ilse D'Hollander: Tension Field at Sean Kelly, New York, March 12 – April 24, 2021  
(Photography: JSP Art Photography, New York, courtesy Sean Kelly, New York)*

What I take away from D'Hollander's work — which this exhibition reaffirmed — is that, along with dedicating herself to painting, she rejected the masterpiece tradition in favor of exploration and openness, of discovering where the paint could take her. To this end, she discarded pure abstraction and overt figuration in favor of a third possibility, which she could find only in the doing. She kept the legacy of discovery in painting open; this is why I am such a fan of her work.

This sense of discovery is crystal clear in the five paintings on cardboard: while dissolving the border separating figuration and abstraction, and incorporating green into every painting (which is notoriously hard to use), D'Hollander does not repeat herself. There is no motif that she returns to, no compositional format she relies on, nor any variations on a theme. She always seems to be setting out anew. In this regard, she is closer to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who observed that we are unable to step in the same river twice, than to Plato and his cave of ideal forms.

D'Hollander also seems to have never met a hue that she could not use, something that is most prominent in her use of green. Her range of greens suggests that her paintings originated in the landscape. However, as with the work of certain poets I admire — I am thinking of John Ashbery and Michael Palmer — it is impossible to trace the work back to a specific source or event.

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What are we to make of the vertical dark green form edged in the front by a fiery orange in "Untitled" (1990-91), one of the earliest paintings done on cardboard? While the shape evokes a hooded figure seen in profile, that is as close to identifying it as we can get. This ambiguity is what distinguishes D'Hollander from De Keyser and Luc Tuymans, with whom she has been compared.

It is clear from the painting that D'Hollander covered over earlier color choices, but exposed enough of the colors to reveal some of the paths she took to make this painting. For every form that we might think we can name, there are others that we can barely approach.

In the other early "Untitled" (1990-91), the stack of curving green bands occupying most of the painting's upper half, topped by a different shade of green, which is tempting to read as sky, never fully coheres into an obvious landscape. Is it an aerial view or one that tilts up toward the picture plane? Rather, it seems simultaneously to court and refute all of these readings.

Here, we have to remember that D'Hollander was just out of art school and only around 22 years old. If some of these early works bring to mind the paintings Richard Diebenkorn made in New Mexico in 1950 to '52, when he was around 30, it is clear how sophisticated she was at a young age.

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In a group of three “Untitled” paintings from 1995 and '96, D'Hollander works with a somber palette of lights and dark. I think it is best to resist reading them in light of her suicide, as that only diminishes them.



*Ilse D'Hollander, "Untitled" (1995), oil on canvas. Painting: 16 1/8 x 18 7/8 inches; framed: 17 1/8 x 19 7/8 x 1 3/4 inches (© The Estate of Ilse D'Hollander, courtesy Sean Kelly, New York)*

“Untitled” (1996) consists of two black planes, one angling in from the lower right-hand corner until it intersects with the top edge, the other extending in from the right and top edge, and taking up more than a quarter of the painting. The light gray space between suggests an opening that we might pass through from the semi-enclosed space defined by the two planes.

A thick, lushly painted dark gray strip runs along the bottom of the black plane on the left, and crosses the space between the two planes until it stop just short of intersecting. We could read this dark gray strip as a threshold between the confined space and the one implied above it. Remembering that there was an unfinished painting on her easel when she committed suicide, I am reluctant to connect this painting to her death and fetishize her, as has been done to other young woman artists who died young or ended their lives early.

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As I walked home from the gallery, I remembered an experience I had with John Ashbery. He had invited me to go to the opera with him. Having never heard of the one we were seeing, I asked him if it was a comedy or tragedy. He said, "It's a little-known three-hanky opera. I am sure you will love it."

Ilse D'Hollander: Tension Field continues at Sean Kelly Gallery (475 Tenth Avenue, Manhattan) through April 24.