

**Beyond Landscape | Charlotte Caspers | EENWERK | May 2021**  
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What makes nature a landscape? Charlotte Caspers knows exactly how to answer this question in her new series of mostly monochrome works that are presented here. Wooden panels in various sizes, grouped in twos and fours, seem to be immersed in muted earthy colours. On closer inspection, these works show a surprising amount of texture and depth. These are not landscapes in the traditional sense, vistas with billowing clouds rising above reclaimed land bordered by winding forest edges. Caspers' paintings show abstract views, with greyish slopes, ochre valleys and deep brown fields, shades of colour reminiscent of brittle pumice, grim showers or damp clay. The surfaces and shapes do not set us at a distance but invite us to come closer. Our eyes follow the contours of the incisions and undulations as if they were footpaths. The longer you stand before them, the more you lose yourself in the depth of the image. These are landscapes without recognisable elements, but nevertheless comprise a whole world. Where are we?

In Caspers' works, raw materials play the leading role. Inspired by medieval painting techniques, she creates scenes from earth pigments and chalk, from rabbit skin glue and gold leaf. Caspers calls her work abstractions, but they could also be called panoramas of pigment. *Caput mortuum*, for example (fig. X), which fills an entire panel, is like a field of heather at dusk, while at the same time the name *caput mortuum* (Latin for "dead head") evokes a *vanitas motif*. The pigment consists of iron oxide and has been applied over a layer of chalk extracted from layers of earth that used to form the seabed. The landscape is not an image here but comes to the surface in the material, in the pigments that have been used by man for centuries.

The first landscapes in European art history appeared as backgrounds in religious pictures. In the seventeenth century, nature took over and the narrative element disappeared. You could argue that the landscape was born as an independent genre because it forced itself into the foreground. This aspect is continued in Caspers' work. It ignores classical themes such as the passing of time and weather changes that we know from the seasons of Pieter Bruegel the Elder or the almost meteorological canvases of John Constable, who noted the weather conditions and date on the back of his paintings. The Impressionists later rehashed it all, trying to show the weather changes themselves by painting series of the same landscape at different times of the day. Caspers' works show an interest not in the transitional but in the elementary.

Caspers may draw on historical methods but her vision is rooted in the Anthropocene. Her landscapes tell of the erosion of natural materials, and of their slow history that is returning to art—via fossilisation—as a pigment, as a *colour*. In Caspers' panels, colours are far from lush, they're not shiny smooth, but porous, granular, and layered - almost possessing a tangible substance and depth. The dimension of that depth becomes most apparent in the golden panel. When you stand in front of it you see yourself reflected, your movements animating and filling the golden surface. The beholder's reflection *in* the image evokes contemplation.

But there's more. This image is not limited to the size of the panel but moves in our direction. The intention of Caspers' panels is nowhere more pronounced than here. The golden reflection throws itself out of the image and onto us. It touches us—literally. Beholders are not just 'in' this golden vista, but its reflection penetrates the gallery space and bathes it in golden light. Like a real landscape, we step into it. But what Caspers shows is that not only do we penetrate a landscape, but a landscape also penetrates us. This magic is what Caspers wants to convey, and is what makes landscape into a landscape.

Charlotte Caspers (Ghent, 1979) is an artist who makes use of historical painting techniques and materials in a contemporary way. Central to her work is the subtle communication of materials, of human beings as makers, with nature as the basis of everything. She connects these themes with her specific form language and with her clearly recognisable aesthetics. Caspers studied Art History at Radboud University in Nijmegen and took the postgraduate course in painting restoration at Stichting Restauratie Atelier Limburg in Maastricht (SRAL). She specialized in historical painting materials and techniques and has made historical reconstructions for numerous museums and institutions, including the Van Gogh Museum, the Rijksmuseum, Tate Britain, Princeton and Duke University, and Dutch television. For ten years, Caspers has been a guest lecturer in historical painting techniques at the Department of Conservation and Restoration at the University of Amsterdam.