

**VOORBLAD
SUBWAY TO
THE STARS**

'Because of what you have done the heavens have become a part of man's world, and as you talk to us from the Sea of Tranquillity, it inspires us to redouble our efforts to bring peace and tranquillity to earth.' On the 21st of July 1969 president Nixon utters these words from the White House over the phone when he addresses the astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, the first human beings who just set foot on the moon.

This miraculous landing on the so-called Sea of Tranquillity is a technological highlight of the 20th century and a confirmation of America's dominant position as a superpower. Yet the Americans do not seem to be able to control the situation on earth, as the daily TV broadcasts about the war in Vietnam reveal. Moreover, the military intervention seems a tragic and hopeless mistake that also leads to a profound division within America itself. Unrelentingly, the youth target the status quo. If there are no demonstrations against the war, there are protests against the discrimination of blacks and women. Although Afro-Americans finally received equal civil rights in 1965, they are still being discriminated against economically. A wave of race riots floods the ghettos of the cities, just when the self-confidence and can-do optimism of the Americans has already been afflicted by the assassinations of president Kennedy, reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and senator Robert Kennedy.

In the seventies the atmosphere becomes even grimmer. Due to the oil crisis of 1973, the spectre of inflation goes on the rampage, causing the American economy to fall into recession. The confidence of the average citizen is further undermined by the Watergate scandal, which leads to the resignation of president Nixon. Eventually, in 1975 the last Americans are forced to retreat from Vietnam, which amounts to the heaviest military defeat in the history of the U.S.

Even New York does not escape the all-encompassing misery. The Big Apple resembles some rotten fruit affected by unemployment, poverty, corruption, crime and an alarming deterioration of the infrastructure. Although the city just escapes bankruptcy, the lights go out on the 13th of July 1977. During the electricity blackout that lasts more than 24 hours total anarchy reigns and looting and arson occur on a large scale. The estimated costs amount to more than 300 million dollars. Those who can afford it leave the inner city and move to suburbia.

Both the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the transport company that exploits the New York Subway and the municipality, combat graffiti as a symptom of degeneration in the sixties and the seventies. Graffiti-painters like Steve Ogburn alias Blade on the other hand, regard their tags on the subway trains as art. Or to be more precise, as a means to rise above the degeneration and the never-ending earthly

struggle. After all, art is a kind of space travel, art always contains some ecstatic quality that dances above this world. Nevertheless, this transcendence can only be attained when the artist, like the heroes of old myths, first descends into the darkness of the underworld.

Sharp as a blade his name cuts through New York, and floats over one of the largest subway networks of the world. Starting from the north for example, in the Bronx, where he lives, over the Harlem River and through the rumbling tunnels under the avenues of Manhattan. Even when he sleeps, his name is tirelessly on the move. Twenty-four hours a day. With a speed that varies from 40 to 60 miles an hour. On several local lines, express and shuttle services. As a town grows bigger and her inhabitants dissolve into the crowd, their urge to stand out also increases. Anonimisation and the cult of fame go hand in hand. Steve Ogburn also has to hold out against the daily parade of idols populating the mass media. I am not like everybody else, Blade says. I am not exchangeable, I am ineradicable. And he is right: his name disappears only underground to reappear gloriously overground in a suburb. Under the sun or the clouds, on the stage of an elevated subway viaduct the letters and colours cry out and rejoice in their resurrection. Wallowing in their elusiveness, derisive and defiant, they also lay bare the raw essence of artistic calling: an artist does not create art to save the world but primarily to save himself. This is why the trains on which he painted his name are continuously involved in a battle on a 230 mile-network stretch. Not only with the police and the washing machines of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, but foremost with all those other names that colonize the public arena: McDonald's, Marlboro, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Wal-Mart, Macy's, Andy Warhol and so on. The fact that this struggle is not without danger only elevates it to the level of a real mission. Two of Blade's brothers in arms even give their lives for it. While writing on a bus in a garage Tuzo I gets squashed between two busses. And when Stim jumps off a train because he is caught in the act by the police, he is killed instantly by an onrushing express train.

When the MTA eventually starts using subway trains with a graffiti-resistant coating, Blade is forced to resort to a different medium. Since the train no longer functions as his canvas, he transforms his canvas into a vehicle, allowing himself to be launched into the air and even into space. There, among the clouds, the birds and the stars, he finds the harmony that cannot be found on earth, as can be observed in *Electrical harmony* (1991), for example. Especially the cosmic night is an ideal scenery, allowing the name Blade to shine like a neon sign. Moreover, the design of the letters brings all sorts of associations to mind. In *Invis Scene Production One* (1984), for instance, the fluorescent burgundy and azure blue name is reminiscent of a

spaceship or a fish that is too big to be threatened. The five letters seem to feel nowhere better at home than among the stars. From now on the beauty of the extra-terrestrial cosmos will be emphatically present in his work. It is striking how often Blade evokes this sublime world, equipped to perfection, to escape gravity. 'My desire is to feel above the worlds nonsense and to float', is the significant title of one of his paintings from 1992.

Perhaps the suggestive *Beyond the wall* (1984) gives us an indication about the origin of Blade's longing. The green letters of his name are conspiratorially grouped together in a claustrophobic courtyard. Although the blank spaces within the letters may evoke singing mouths, the atmosphere remains ambiguous. Obscure shadows are lurking between and behind the letters, a pair of spooky eyes suspiciously peers around. The wafer-thin strip of blue sky does not seem sufficient to offer a way out. Yet, in *Flying High* (1987) a small figure resembling Blade is seen gliding through a nearly cloudless sky hanging from a parachute. In the first place, an artist is primarily an escape artist. Apparently, Blade seems to have succeeded in escaping the oppressive walls, imitating Dedalus, the first artist in Greek mythology, who managed to get away from the labyrinth by means of self-made wings. In *Universal Visions* (1991) he even manages to reach the highest peaks. After all, his name figures on a mountaintop. Undeniably, Blade refers to the famous monumental sign that adorns the hills around Los Angeles, the enormous white letters that spell the word Hollywood.

Likewise, Blade's paintings can be regarded as letter monuments that ought to withstand the ravages of time. The letters of his name not only strike us as monumental because of the large format of his canvasses, but also because of the space they occupy in the image surface. In *Light Years* (1983) and *Sweet is the Evening* (1983) they fill at least two-third of the canvas. In the latter work the monumental nature is also emphasized by the fact that the name, consisting of connected letters, has the appearance of a grey rock face. At the base of the letter E small figures have placed a ladder and one of them clammers up to what looks like a cave. While the letters elevate themselves like ancient natural stone here, elsewhere they convey an architectural impression. In other words: they are as solid as a rock. Or like a wall, as in *The Wall* (1983), where brick letters are erected. In *Manifestation* (1988) they are abstracted so much that they resemble a modernist building that reflects the sky. And in *Electric currents* (87-88) the pitch-dark letters evoke associations with an armoured stronghold, the sort of low-rise in which intelligence services and command posts conduct their secret and even sinister practices. In order to survive in the jungle of a modern metropolitan you need a name of stainless and bulletproof steel, as can also be seen

in *This is Art Another Blockbuster Production* (1989). Against the background of the New York skyline a grinning gangster empties his machine gun on Blade's letter monument. To no avail, even though he acts on the authority of the establishment, and consequently also on behalf of established artists like Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons. It is clear that the graffiti artist refuses to consent to the fifteen minutes of fame the future holds for everyone, according to Warhol.

Although the typography often looks unruly and angular, and therefore masculine, the name is also composed of female curves, like the white breasts and buttocks in *Blade* (1989). However, it is not a matter of a strict separation of the sexes. In *Blade* (1983) the lipstick-red letters form an erotic combination of both angles and curves that affectionately and coquettishly rub together. The letters frequently express their mutual affinity in an anthropomorphous manner, they lean on each another or dance enthusiastically, or even frantically, against each another.

Abstract and figurative, geometric and organic, two- and three-dimensional pictorial elements are having a constant dialogue. Take a layered painting like *Further Reachings* (1986): the canvas-filling letters are composed of fluorescent cobalt blue triangles against a purple grid background that allows the universe to shine through. Here and there small, coloured and weightless triangles and semi-circles float around. Likewise, in *Suspended in Time* (1986-87) the almost unrecognisable, abstracted letters offer panoramic vistas to the cosmos, where a complex structure of geometric forms attracts the attention. Blade's fixation on his own name obviously does not make his world smaller, it equally well creates a gate to infinity. A fine example of this is *Travelling to the End of the World in my Mind's Eye* (1995). Against a background of a hazy blue sky the letters, composed of diagonals, lean against each other. Within their contours a white speckled cosmic night reigns. Subtle colour accents, like a red planet, provide additional sensual titillation.

The eternal cycle of day and night is also a theme in *Abstragraft* (1994). From the white canvas, or to be more precise, from the white coloured name Blade, a black spiral spreads across the surface of the canvas. The illusion of depth that is thus created is strengthened even more by the fact that the white surface is broken up into blueish squares with clouds and birds, as well as into polygonal cutouts of the cosmos. Consequently, a layered and dynamic representation of day and night images dancing around each other has come into being. Essentially, it is an impression of a cosmic dance that originates from the name Blade. This is reminiscent of an old Hindu myth in which the creator of the world is called Self, since the universe would have come into being through a so-called self, in a human form.

Without a doubt, Cosmic Splash Abstragraft (1995) is one of Blade's most complex paintings. From the lower edge a lava-red funnel rises upwards, gradually losing colour strength, becoming orange and then aquamarine, and finally dissolving into ethereal blue. Above this, from the right-hand side of the canvas, an outpouring occurs, a cosmic rain of coloured particles falls from a black semi-sphere that seems to be filled with shapes that resemble a mixture between prickles and eyelashes. And above this all, a cube, a triangle and a circle interlock in an indescribable way, while at the top left-hand side a kind of galactic haze can be seen. As the title indicates the eternal appearance and disappearance of manifestations is visualized here, the disintegration of one form into many forms and the creation of new connections. Obviously, this natural phenomenon is so overwhelming and inhuman, that every reference to mankind has vanished from the picture, except for the geometrical forms. Surprisingly enough even the painter is so impressed that for the first time his name is nowhere to be seen. And even though in the next works it reappears frequently, a precedent seems to have been established after all.

As it happens, the signature is also absent in The Diamond in Space (2005) and Under God's Microscope (2007). Presumably because here the awe-inspiring nature of creation and the mystery of light and darkness are represented once again. With some effort, the name

can be discerned in the horizontal The Colors of Spirit (2008), but Blade does not really manifest himself. He rather hides himself in the decorative jumble of confetti-coloured signs that whirl on both sides of the arrow that is launched like a rocket. In The Rhythms of the Universe (2008) there is an upward movement as well which is emphasized by the vertical format of the painting. A phallic obelisk reaches for the full moon, as if it would like to arrive at the female planet, just like Armstrong and Aldrin did. Although the stone is embellished with ornaments that are unmistakably derived from Blade's particular pictography, the creator remains just as anonymous as the ancient Egyptian sculptors.

Has Blade come to rely on his unique style so much that he considers his name unnecessary? Or are there yet other reasons as to why he leaves it out? In order to answer this we should perhaps step back to the nineteenth century. The cultural movement that is known as romanticism is characterized both by the cult of the self-conscious individual and by a strong orientation to the infinite and the sublime. On the one hand, the romantics sought magnificent natural sceneries to experience their own individuality more intense, and on the other hand, they wanted to yield to its grandiosity and to become fully absorbed by it. Blade the romantic seems to recognize himself in this ambivalence. He is probably just as much driven by a yearning for an unambiguous identity as by a longing to be delivered from it.

Rogier Ormeling