



Pieter Vermeersch (1973–)

How to Stop Time

The first time I saw a painting by Pieter Vermeersch I was transfixed. Time was suspended – or so it seemed. Conveying indeterminate depth, the sublime canvas was like a portal into the fourth dimension, infinitely expanding the moment. Its heart-breaking beauty also derived from the sense of a certain something just beyond one’s grasp. While the gap between meaning and meaninglessness lies within each viewer, the artwork itself hovered at the threshold between perception and emotion, meaning and desire, seeing and feeling, abstraction and figuration. In this sense Vermeersch’s painting, emanating rays of pure colour mingling imperceptibly as one, embodied unrequited love.

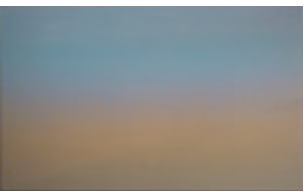
Perpetuating the dialogue on representation versus abstraction, Vermeersch recalls Jef Verheyen in paintings such as *Untitled*, 2015, which mirrors Verheyen’s *Urbino: L’Espace Idéal*, 1978. Verheyen’s composition evokes a dreamy, featureless landscape at dusk with a golden ground dissolving into a moody blue horizon; Vermeersch’s engulfing canvas, almost twice as big, overturns a nearly identical progression of hues as if zooming in on a cluster of ominous clouds overwhelming a small, luminous patch of blue. The subtle, complex chromatic gradation lends a spatial depth and realism that hints at a real sky. What is most interesting about this ghostly dialogue is the conceptual reversal: Verheyen adopted the painterly techniques of Van Eyck to craft purely abstract compositions invoking nature, whereas Vermeersch takes photographic details of nature and blows them up to abstraction, lending a surreal lens on the interstices of reality while stirring in us subliminal feelings of recognition. This uncanny duet, conversing across time in the artistic continuum unleashed by the modern quest for universal expression, illustrates the impossibility of art remaining abstract once subjected to the mechanics of the human subconscious and culture.

Like Yves Klein (1928–1962), Vermeersch uses the sky as a medium, not least as a symbol of the

void, touching on so many levels of signification and sensation that it is almost impossible to articulate what is happening. His immersive installations move the device of colour off the canvas in hues painted or projected on walls that fade into piercing fluorescent white, effectively erasing the surface; colours that intensify into corners, deepening them; freestanding panels leaning against walls that evoke both dead-ends and potential openings; and geometric plinths whose painted ‘shadows’ suggest fulgent doors into outer space. By confounding light, colour, and space, Vermeersch disrupts time and propels us into a spatial non-space where the absence of certain qualities equates all dimensions, unveiling the liberating potential for the manipulation of time. The sense of unlimited possibility induced by these negative spaces can bring on *horror vacui*, even the sort of confrontation with the self that has been known to elicit violent responses, such as canvas slashing, from gallery-goers. The paradox and wonder of abstract art is in its reflection of the vagaries of perception, and we are left to fill in the blanks.

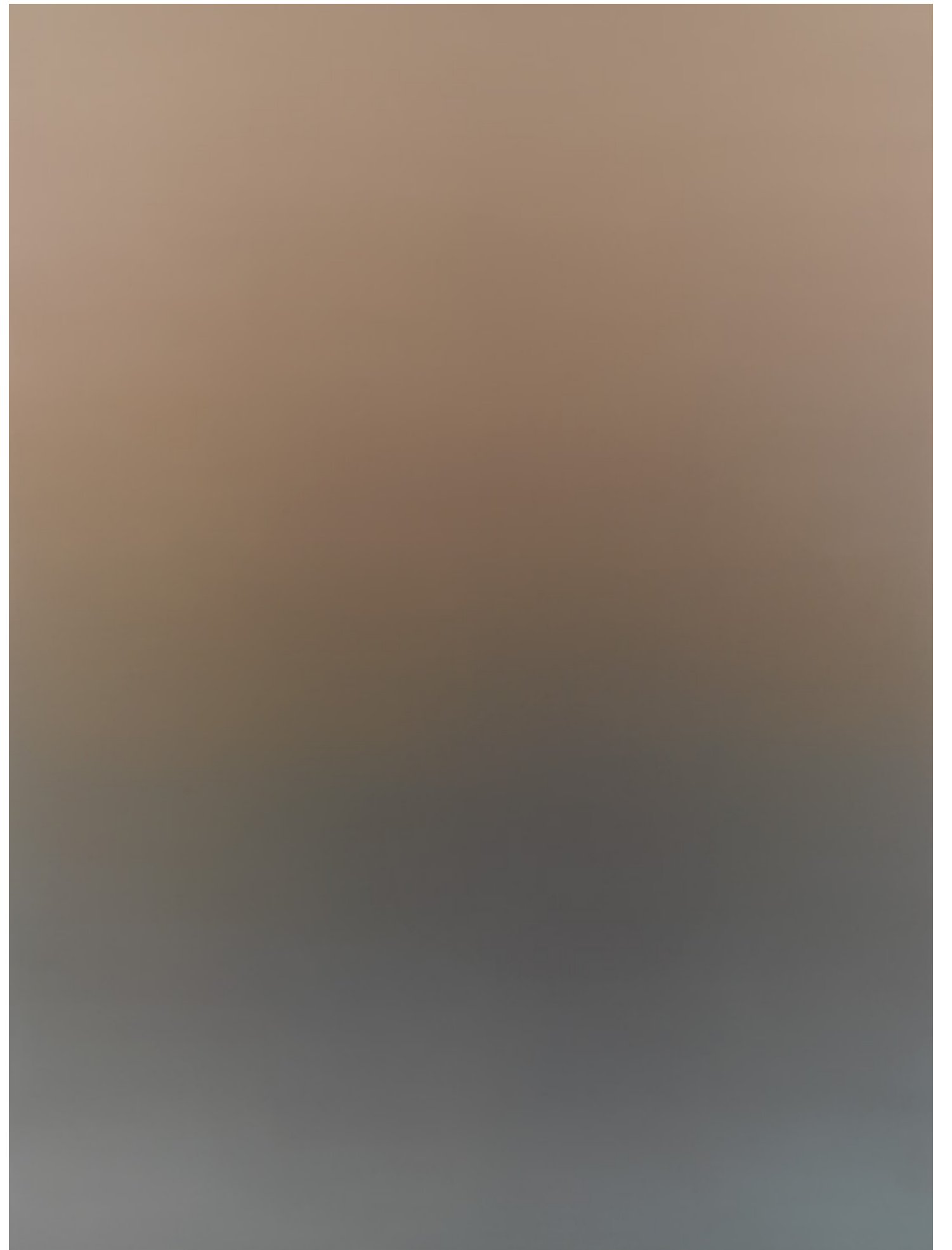
Altogether different from Vermeersch’s prior work, *Untitled*, 2014 – luscious dabs of bright colour applied to a slice of marble – explores the qualities of a natural material that embodies a record of geological time, its intricate veins evoking the meta-structure of space behind the scrim of our perception. On another level, the sumptuous painting alludes to period architectural ornament and reveals the previously elusive hand of the artist. Yet the mesmerizing interplay between Vermeersch’s anarchic splotches and the baroque surface pattern induces a frenetic dance that conjures two melodies in harmonic counterpoint across time, eluding the fascist sovereignty of meaning. As Verheyen might say, *Listen with your eyes*.

Cathryn Drake is a freelance writer and editor focusing on art and culture.

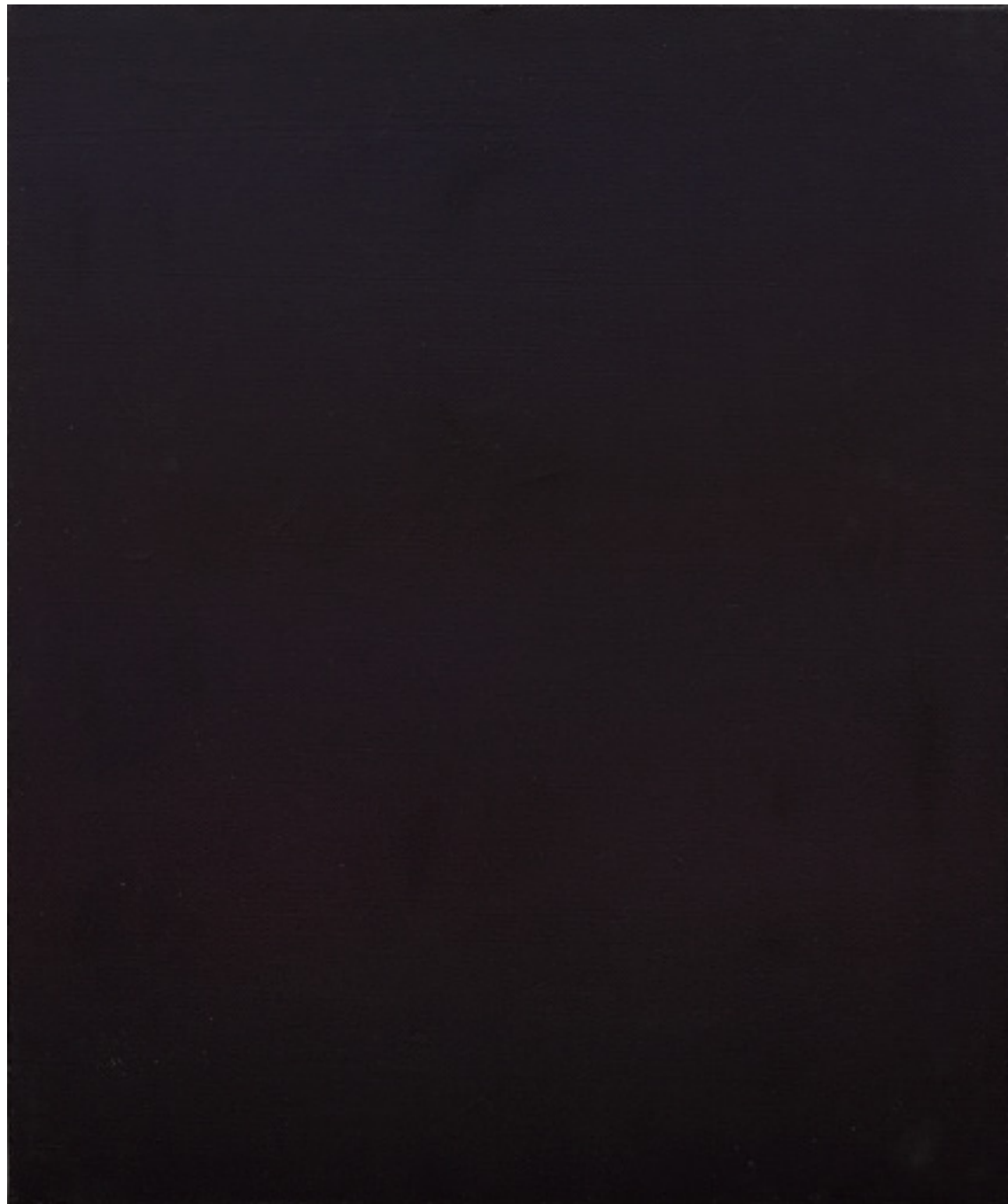


Jef Verheyen, *Urbino: L’Espace Idéal*, 1978
Matte paint on canvas
110 × 177 cm (43½ × 69¾ in)









Untitled (Monochrome), 1967. Oil on canvas, 60 × 50 cm (23¾ × 19¾ in)



Monochroom Blauw Morgen, 1969. Oil on canvas, 80 × 80 cm (31½ × 31½ in)



Jef Verheyen (1932–1984)

Light-Motif

A visual artist with poor vision, Jef Verheyen sought to express the ineffable physics of perception, the mechanics of light, through incandescent paintings that appear to float in space. Indeed, his working method embodied the contradiction inherent in attempting to portray the immaterial in the material. He applied numerous layers of different coloured glazes that ultimately obscured the transitions between various hues and obliterated the physicality of the paint. This elimination of the three-dimensionality of a surface produced a paradoxical illusion of indeterminate depth. In his principles of 'Essentialism', Verheyen defined space, the essence of the cosmos, as being without colour, white or black; and yet, defining seeing as feeling, he recognized the perception of colour as subjective. Hovering between the physical and metaphysical, means and meaning, Verheyen's canvases become fertile fields of conflict that resonate with incorporeal iridescence.

At first glance, Verheyen's *Untitled (Monochrome)*, 1967, seems to be a blind, solid mass of colour, textured only by the matte surface of the canvas. Yet, with longer contemplation, variegated layers of deep, turbid, almost glowing tones begin to emerge, from light to dark. It is physical exercise for the eye. There is the sensation of a light beam shining into a bottomless void and dimmed by a field of matter so dense that it illuminates only the carrier of the torch. Verheyen thus sheds light on the reciprocal nature of darkness and light, and on the nature of colour as light. There is something of the texture of a Romantic landscape painting here and in many of Verheyen's abstractions, such as *Untitled*, 1960, where shades of turbulent grey inhabit a stormy sky. In the foreground of *Monochroom Blauw Morgen*, 1969, a shadowy slope defined only by a fine line transforms the ethereal composition into a mountain landscape lit by a radiant horizon invoking the evanescence of a memory. These paintings also hint at the impossibility of producing truly abstract art. In the encounter with an artwork one can

never, as Gabriele Guercio writes in *Art as Existence*, escape the sense that 'someone is there', usually in the hand of the artist. But just as often it is you who become the subject.

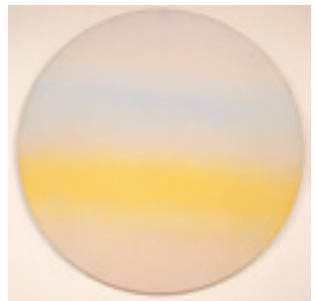
The void is infinite but not empty. Verheyen's vibrant sphere streaked with sky blue and bright yellow, *Untitled*, 1962, is a compelling counterpart to his fellow ZERO adherent Otto Piene's *Black Sun*, 1962–63, a full solar eclipse bleeding blackness all round. As composites of many colours evoking the same natural phenomenon, these two paintings, by appearing as opposites, bear out the deceptiveness of our perceptual limitations. For Otto Piene, one of the founders of the Zero movement, the sun represented zero, 'a zone of silence and of pure possibilities for a new beginning'. Verheyen's endeavour to create the impression of infinity in his paintings was shared by Lucio Fontana (1899–1968), whose literal slash in a canvas served to extend the work beyond the picture plane into an 'infinite dimension'. In their collaboration, *Möbius' Dream*, 1962, Verheyen painted a sky blue background with two circular nimbi, which Fontana then traced in perforations – twin embryos carrying the seeds of endless possible worlds.

Verheyen and Fontana also made *Le Jour*, 1962, comprised of a large gold painting made by the Belgian onto which the Italian, in a decisive gesture that captured a moment, punctured an arc of almost equally spaced holes. Creation is an act of faith, a leap into the void of a white surface. Verheyen went from defining the essence of space as achromatic to flaunting the spectrum of colours in a rainbow, creating the illusion of space, as in his *Vlaams Landschap* (Flemish Landscape), 1966–67. A matrix revealing the essence of reality, the *arc en ciel* (rainbow) is a portrait of light. Thus Verheyen succeeded in transcending the material in his manifestations of the lightness of being.

Cathryn Drake is a freelance writer and editor focusing on art and culture.



Jef Verheyen, *Untitled*, 1960
Oil on canvas
130 × 195 cm (51¼ × 76¾ in)



Jef Verheyen, *Untitled*, 1962
Matte paint on wood fibreboard
Diameter 120 cm (19 in)



Otto Piene, *Black Sun*, 1962–63
Oil and smoke on canvas
151 × 151 cm (59½ × 59½ in)



Jef Verheyen and Lucio Fontana, *Möbius' Dream*, 1962
Synthetic paint on canvas, perforated
100 × 150 cm (39½ × 59 in)