

Taking Root

Jurriaan Benschop, writer and curator

Should we call a plant in a pot in the studio “nature”? In that case, we could say that Liesbeth Piena’s work springs from nature.

But more than that, it seems to come from a fascination with the complexity of forms, and with growth. While observing her environment, the artist finds fragments that she isolates as a motif to paint, such as leaves of a plant, or the shadow it casts in the studio. Such forms become the placeholders in her paintings. But then her attention also goes to what is between the leaves, the negative space coming to the front.

“I look at forms, structures, colours, shadows, and composition, and how these change under the influence of light,” the artist has written. While in her drawings there is a broad interest in all kinds of visual phenomena, for her paintings the artist tends to prefer natural motifs, and she works toward reduction. In the resulting pieces, there is great clarity, as well as a push and pull between fore- and background, between flatness and depth, between recognition and abstraction.

A point of interest in Piena’s paintings is the moment where a motif loses its straightforwardness and instead becomes open to different readings. To reach this stage, the motif has been moved around, reshaped, inverted, or extended, until there is a constellation that has both balance and ambivalence. Piena’s work fits into a type of (abstract) painting that originates in nature, going back to Henri Matisse, over Ellsworth Kelly, to a contemporary like Jonas Wood.