

OFFICE BAROQUE

Elisa Schaar, 'Guy Mees', Artforum, October 2017

ARTFORUM



Guy Mees, *Van het blauw van de zee (From the Blue of the Sea)*, 1980-90, pastel and pencil on paper, 52 3/8 x 60 1/4

Belgian artist Guy Mees's paper cutouts—elongated, irregular scraps of colored paper pinned directly onto the wall—are at once transcendently beautiful and strikingly material. *Verloren Ruimte* (Lost Space), 1992, to take one notable example, consists of two slivers of different reds flickering by. The work, which is drawn from the 1983-93 series of the same title, seemed to flash at a higher realm of experience. Yet one of the paper scraps protrudes subtly from the wall—a powerful remnant of the artist's process that stops the work from transporting the viewer somewhere else.

Over the course of a forty-year career, which started in the abstract-painting scene in Antwerp and amid the wider European Zero network of the 1960s, Mees (1935-2003) created a diverse oeuvre that ranges across media and modes, from early, often humorous variants of Minimalism and Conceptualism to the later, highly decorative paper-based work with color and form. This show made it clear how the artist's dissimilar-looking bodies of work are in fact consistently focused around questions of the relation between real and pictorial space.

Mees's reuse of the title *Verloren Ruimte* reveals this thematic continuity—he had already employed the name for a series of wall- and floor-based objects from 1960 to 1967. Made from wooden frames covered with white industrial lace, these works tease at the modernist notion of purity and, not unlike the later colored-paper cuts, appeal to another state of consciousness without delivering it. *Verloren Ruimte*, 1964-67, a cube with a soft-blue neon light radiating from within, evokes a sense of depth, yet the tightly stitched lace reveals nothing, drawing attention instead to the surface. In addition to creating works such as this and more modular chrome-and-Plexiglas pieces—which the artist invited visitors to move around the gallery space at the initial exhibitions in Antwerp in 1970—Mees also engaged with space on a conceptual level. His black-and-white video *Portretten* (Portraits), 1971, or the photographs from the series "Niveaoverschillen" (Differences in Levels)—in which three people of different heights alternate positions on a pedestal in all possible combinations, spelled out in tables next to the photographs—challenge notions of spatial hierarchy.

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A large but sparse and poetic pastel drawing on paper, *Van het blauw van de zee* (From the Blue of the Sea), 1980-90, barely alludes to its ostensible subject matter. Just a few colored dots accompany the handwritten title: The tenuous juxtaposition links the earlier notated Photoconceptualist work to later paper-based work with color and form. Mees's notion of "lost space" describes a situation that evokes, but does not deliver, an experience of transcendence, leaving the viewer in limbo. At the same time, his work refuses to fully embrace the industrialized world—despite the attention it draws to material surface. Compared with better-known Minimalist practices, his art appears more artisanal than industrial and more ironic than cool. Mees offered a body of work that, even at its most decorative, can never fully be experienced or consumed.