

Painter Koen van den Broek, with new work in New York and at the Flanders Opera

By Els Maes

Even as a lapsed art student, Belgium was too small for painter Koen van den Broek (42). His canvases depict urban landscapes that are just as much at home in Seoul, London or New York. For the first time, human figures are starting to enter his frame. “You don’t realize how conservative the art world can be until you start taking radical steps.”

“Walks in the woods?”

The words are met with hilarity, around 2 o’clock at night.

“He really said that?”

He really said that. Fourteen hours earlier, during the formal part of the interview. I’d asked Koen van den Broek how he manages to stay sane while commuting between 5 galleries on 3 continents, a studio in Antwerp, a house in Korea.

Mostly, by trying to spend a lot of time with his family, he said. Just getting away for a bit. To the ocean, with the kids. And for walks in the woods.

“Koen hates going for walks,” laughs Femke Vandenbosch, Koen van den Broek’s girlfriend and studio manager. “But it’s true that we try to find a balance. Sometimes there’s family life and tranquility. And sometimes there’s this.”

This is a crowded table in a Greek restaurant in New York. A cluster of friends and acquaintances – art collectors, architects, gallery owners, opera directors, journalists. An evening filled with hugs and drunken speeches and glasses of red wine that tumble into the lap of Geert De Proost of Flanders House. This, this is ending up in a hotel bar with a narrowed down group, popping a few bottles of champagne. And trying to find a late-night burger and fries.

Some pressure needs to be relieved. Tomorrow is D-Day, the opening of his new show, *The Light We Live In*.

We’d started the interview earlier that afternoon, at the Albertz Benda gallery in Chelsea, Manhattan, where I was given a preview. “It feels like I’m standing here entirely naked and exposed,” says Van den Broek. “Just before, a reporter from *Artforum* came over [*an authoritative international art magazine – Ed.*]. He stood looking at some of the pieces for twenty minutes. No idea what he was thinking. It’s so nerve racking.”

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To lead with the breaking news: Koen van den Broek has painted human figures. And that's a milestone. "I know, I made grand declarations about how I'd never add people to my paintings. That's something I need, radical statements like that. But in the end, you need to keep things interesting for yourself."

Over the past fifteen years, van den Broek has created an impressive body of work consisting of pared-down, nearly abstract pieces. His paintings zoom in on curbs, cracks in the pavement, the shadow of a vehicle. Images we pass every day but no longer really see. They're based on snapshots he takes on the road, mostly in the US. His works are unoccupied: without place, without action, without people.

In his retrospective in SMAK in 2010, there was one single piece that included living creatures. I remember that piece, because it moved me, after rooms filled with concrete and stone. The Farm, an early work dating from 2001, depicts sheep and a pig, which seem to float in a field. "Human flesh doesn't interest me," he declared at the time.

"I needed to give myself that restriction," he says now. "Painting means making choices, delineating a domain, finding focus."

Getting used to the pain

In recent years, that focus has also come from outside. Van den Broek accepted a commission to work on communication for Kunsthuis, the merger of Opera Vlaanderen and Ballet Vlaanderen. He'll provide one piece for each production. "I didn't feel much of a connection to opera or ballet," he admits. "As soon as I'd agreed, the agony began. Opera is drama, sex, violence, emotion. Way beyond my comfort zone. My work has always been desolate, empty, cinematic. It gave me a huge amount of stress, but I like being pulled out of my familiar confines. If that doesn't happen, you don't evolve."

He and Aviel Cahn, the opera company's director, have become friends. "By immersing himself in opera, Koen's work has become more personal," Cahn tells us later. "More emotion has crept in."

Like a commanding director, Van den Broek guides our gaze through the five rooms that hold a dozen new paintings. "I'll get nervous if people start walking in different directions tomorrow." The former control freak says that he's learned to let go.

But not today. Sunset is the first – and for now only – painting to be revealed here that will be used by the Vlaamse Opera. Google the final scene of the movie *Paris, Texas*, and you'll recognize the orange sunset, the night-blue sky, and the green glow of a street light. An empty parking lot, a lone figure who has parted from his wife and child.

The classic by Wim Wenders continues to be a source of inspiration for Van den Broek. "But this painting might also be telling a different story. It's about distance, loneliness, letting go. To me, it could also be a soldier, gazing out at trouble in the distance." And so Sunset will be the campaign image for the ambitious upcoming opera production about WWI by Luk Perceval. A battlefield of human relationships or of war, the viewer will decide what he or she wants to see. As a painter, he only wants to provide images, not to impose too many words.

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Look, there's another human. Hood shows a woman on the hood of a Dodge Challenger. A holiday snapshot that Van den Broek took during a trip around San Diego. "I've never painted as quickly or as freely." The woman on the hood is the painter's sweetheart. But you don't really need to know that. "It's a universal mood. The romance of escape. The freedom of being on the road. The America of True Romance [a movie by Tony Scott, based on a scenario by Quentin Tarantino – Ed.]."

An American art critic drew a comparison to Luc Tuymans, because both Belgians base their paintings on photography. "But Luc can give an entirely different explanation and meaning to each of his paintings. Condoleezza Rice's face, everyone can find something in that. But if I paint figuratively, or paint a person, all that matters is the composition. Light and shadow, that's all."

Perhaps he's noticed that I've been trying not to stare at him. During our conversation, Van den Broek can hardly hold his head up straight. It pulls towards his left shoulder, cramped. "Things got out of hand when Dimitri Verhulst and I were out carousing," he laughs.

Later that evening he'll explain that he suffers from cervical dystonia, a condition that affects the neck muscles and causes his head to pull to one side. It's likely that it will never pass. The cause – who can say – could be a cocktail of stress and genetic vulnerability. Maybe he truly carries too much weight on his shoulders. It doesn't restrict him from painting. But the pain takes getting used to, and even more so the feeling that everyone's staring at him. "It's tough," says Vandenberg, "For someone who is really quite shy." He brushes it off. Pain is what pills and shots are for.

And he's in treatment with physical therapist Lieven Maesschalk, a lone artist among star athletes.

Rebel

In his new work, Van den Broek also seems to sample some of his own classics. A bridge, a curb. But while he used to paint with precision and control, his new works seem to be more free, more adventurous, even cheerful.

"You don't realize how conservative the art world can be until you start taking radical steps," he says. "If you head into a new direction, collectors rush to buy an old, recognizable piece. It might have been safer and more commercial to keep repeating myself. But I don't ever want to become predictable."

He's no stranger to being slightly rebellious. At the age of 27, Van den Broek was at the top of the art charts, when he was picked up by White Cube in London, just about the world's most influential gallery. But along with prestige came a total loss of control.

"It became a factory, and I felt like a pawn. Meaning no longer carried any weight." Not without pride, he says: "I was the first artist to ever leave White Cube. That was just not done."

So is there any truth to the story that he once destroyed 300 of his works? With a big grin, Van den Broek shows me a recent video on his phone. A kind of IS execution video, with a piece of art as the victim and a gallery owner as the executioner. "Of course they hate it, seeing tens of thousands of euros being wiped out. But I just didn't think the work was good enough."

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A large diptych closes the show, “like a split screen in a Tarantino movie.” Furnace Creek Washington Rd, we read. And so the exhibition ends where it all began for the painter, on a trip through Death Valley.

“The sunrise over Badwater, that can’t be surpassed. The bright sun, the hard shadows, the endless salt flats. You can never capture that magic in a photograph.” It was then and there that he decided: I’m going to be a painter.

“Isn’t Belgium good enough for you?’, people ask me. But it just doesn’t trigger me.”

One of the paintings in this show is Car, it’s of his own car in a garage in Ghent. He’d never painted his own surroundings before. “I need distance. What I paint, is a dreamlike image. More illusion than reality. It’s like the vision I had of the United States when I was a teenager, shaped by movies and TV shows. In the same way that Roman Polanski, Wim Wenders, and Alfred Hitchcock viewed America as outsiders.”

“Movies, especially from the 90s, continue to be an endless source of inspiration. The Coen brothers, Tarantino, David Lynch, Kusturica. That visual language is still so influential.”

Jetsetter

During our tour of the show, the references keep coming – “that neon green, that’s the 80s, New Order and Kraftwerk.” But nothing ever touches on the artist’s inner life. Van den Broek steers clear of sentiment and psychobabble. “I don’t paint my personal issues or pain. The work needs to transcend the artist. Make no mistake, I do of course have a big ego. But in my work, it’s not about me. The artwork is more important than the artist.”

He’s an artist who wants to paint himself out of the picture, wants to be a blank canvas. “Which might make me a thankless subject for the press.”

I read him a quote from the February 20th interview in De Morgen that Jan De Cock did with Chantal Pattyn, his ex-wife. ‘These days, the only way an artist can get any attention at all is by acting like a pop star,’ Pattyn mentions in the piece. “That just depends on the kind of attention you’re seeking,” says Van den Broek. “I get offers for the craziest things: reality television, photo shoots. But I have more admiration for someone like Martin Margiela, who remains a total mystery.”

“You know, that Goudvis documentary by Canvas created a myth. It made me look like a jetsetter, someone who just lounged around in expensive hotels. But that’s only one side of the story. It’s really very simple: I need daylight to take photographs and paint pictures.”

As soon as it’s dark, it’s time to eat, drink and party.

“For me, travelling is working. Renting a convertible and driving through the desert. Going to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago to look at work by Philip Guston. Yet another visit to the Matisse room at MoMA here in New York. Discovering new artists in galleries. I’m preparing an exhibition in Seoul, with beautiful work by the ‘forgotten’ painter Philippe Vandenberg. An artist should be concerned primarily with art.”

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Living in a Magritte

Which terms to use to describe that his career is flourishing? We could write that his smallest canvas here costs at least 30,000 euros. We could mention that Elton John has one of his works on the wall, as does the king of Malaysia. That following London, Brussels, Cologne, and New York he also has a gallery in South Korea. And that the gallery owner gave him a house there. Really. “Things are going well there. I love the energy of the place, the sense of progress.”

Van den Broek shows pictures of his modern house, in a green oasis, on an island. The design was inspired by The Castle of the Pyrenees, the floating rock painted by Magritte. “They’d already spoken to a top architect, everything had been arranged. It allows me to spend time there more often.” Perhaps the exotic locale will inspire him to work. “Like Gauguin in Tahiti.”

No, an artist doesn’t have to waste away in an attic, living a life of destitution. Van den Broek had a studio built in Merksem, with offices for his assistants and his own screening room. Perfect for when you want to watch Paris, Texas for the umpteenth time and take pictures of freeze frames. “I have absolutely no interest in money. But I’m happy that I was able to buy a beautiful house built in the 70s [in Schilde, by architect Eddy Posson – Ed.], because I love architecture. As an artist, your eye is trained to beautiful things, shapes, materials. I’d rather buy a beautiful sweater by Margiela than by H&M. And I’m fortunate to be able to look after the people I care about.”

Comfort doesn’t kill creativity. “Quite the opposite. I employ two people, so that I don’t have to work on emails or paperwork. To be able to paint, I need a day of total concentration. Which means I’m not accessible. If I have a meeting at 10 in the morning, my whole day is screwed. No, I’m not easy for the people who live with me.”

Bluffing his way in

Does he ever worry about a time when everything won’t be as good? “I’ve already lost everything once. Several times, actually.” He dropped out of architectural engineering, got kicked out of art school and worked in a factory to get by. But: “In Belgium, there’s always someone who will make you a Nutella sandwich.”

His self-made attitude has an American edge to it. Midnight Cowboy is what his friend, the artist Guillaume Bijl calls him. “But without having to be a prostitute.”

In his early twenties, van den Broek bluffed his way to New York. He told a couple of businessmen that he was about to break through. If they wanted to get their hands on his work at an affordable price, they’d have to buy now. “It wasn’t entirely true,” he says. “I needed the money to buy a plane ticket. But as soon as I arrived, I made my first connections and the train started rolling.” Bluff, and guts. “In the US, that’s rewarded. If you tell someone here that you’re a painter, they’ll say: ‘That’s amazing’. In Belgium it’s: ‘Oh, but can you make a living doing that?’”

“I never wanted to be a big fish in a small pond, someone like Raveel. Yes, people think you’re arrogant if you say that. But becoming a star in Belgium means you’ll get stuck there and grow stagnant. For an artist, that’s fatal.”

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Not everyone finds his bravado charming. Which he might have contributed to, just a bit, in the euphoria of his first success. Aged 27, he used the first money he'd earned at White Cube to buy a lavish BMW, "that I'd double park in front of the gallery, with lights blinking. That might have been over the top."

Is there an element of revenge to that, for the guy who was asked to leave art school? "Not revenge. But the sense that you need to work extremely hard and fight to accomplish anything. I take nothing for granted. There's a continuous search and uncertainty if you're taking the right steps. I've made my first sculpture; I'm not yet sure how that will turn out. I could go in any direction. But that kind of freedom can be extremely challenging."

Tough as nails

From gallery to hotel lobby, from water to wine. From a conversation about art to talking about family and children and the dog. How it isn't always straightforward to be travelling the world as a newly blended family, co-parenting two sons aged 7 and 11. And how challenging it can sometimes be for a couple to work together.

Femke Vandenbosch left her job as the director of the Museum of Fine Arts Ghent to run Van den Broek's studio. "Yeah, that brought on some impassioned responses. But not working together is entirely unthinkable," she says. Another round of wine, and photos are passed around of the dog, who was named after the artist Robert Mangold and recently peed in the gallery.

As cool and impersonal as his work may seem, his friends unanimously tell me that he's the most loyal, generous person. "Whatever you might say about him, the opposite is true as well. He abounds in contradictions," says Vandenbosch. A misanthrope who can't stand to be alone, is the most fitting description I hear. "I'm tough as nails," he claims, but it sounds like a little boy shouting 'I'm a knight' from inside a plastic suit of armor.

Thursday, gallery night. All that is beautiful, rich, extravagant, and hip is fluttering between the dozens of galleries in Chelsea. It's hard to poll opinions, since everything here is 'fabulous'. The Armory Show is on, and collectors from across the world have flocked to New York. There can't be a better moment to be pushed to the forefront by your gallery. "Without a doubt, Koen is one of today's most important European painters," says gallery owner Thorsten Albertz.

Belgians are on a roll in New York. There's the big Broodthaer retrospective in MoMA. New work by Cindy Wright, a friend and former classmate of van den Broek, is up at De Buck Gallery, a few streets over. And Berlinde De Bruyckere at Hauser & Wirth. Does the good fortune of 'the Belgians' – there's Tuymans and Borremans, too – pull others forward? "No, their styles are too dissimilar for that," says Albertz. "There isn't such a thing as 'the Belgian school'. Interest for Koen mainly comes from collectors who focus on abstract art. Especially on the West Coast, where people are interested in seeing a European's fresh perspective on California."

The following day, Artinfo lists Koen van den Broek as one of the five must-see shows: "A visual poet of curbs, gutters, and roads," their description reads.

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Over dinner, after the vernissage, the mood is clearly relieved. There's laughter and gossip. The pastrami at Katz Delicatessen is discussed, and sex, and the connection between the two – which eludes me for now. I've long put away my notebook.

The gallery holds an after-party at Mr Fong's, a club in the heart of Chinatown. We flag a yellow cab and go off into the New York night. It's just after midnight. Time for a restorative walk in the woods.

The Light We Live In, thru April 9th at Gallery Albertz Benda, New York.

UNGENAU, SMAK-collection in cc De Werft in Geel, thru June 5th.

Images at the opera

Opera Vlaanderen has been working with artists for their campaign visuals for a few years. Maybe the current poster has caught your eye, featuring a larger-than-life Othello in bondage gear – the work of artists Maurizio Cattelan and Pierpaolo Ferrari. "The most important thing is to grab attention and trigger a dialogue," says opera director Aviel Cahn. Earlier collaborations include photographer Carl De Keyzer. Next season, van den Broek will be the first painter to receive the honor. Both existing and new paintings will be used to illustrate all of the dance and opera productions that are part of the season's Borderline theme. "Our aim isn't to spell out the themes. We want to stimulate the imagination," says Cahn. Artists participate without remuneration. The program and accompanying images will be released from April onwards. (EM)

BIOGRAPHY

1973, born in Bree

Lives and works in Antwerp

2001: First solo show at the White Cube Gallery in London

2003: Part of the group exhibition *Matisse and Beyond: A Century of Modernism*, SF Moma

2010: Retrospective *Curbs and Cracks* in the SMAK in Ghent

Galleries in Cologne, London, New York and Seoul. Represented in Belgium by Galerie Greta Meert

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