

Art in America

Down on the Street: the Art of Koen van den Broek

Antwerp-based artist Koen van den Broek specializes in huge photo-based paintings of the unnoticed surfaces that lie beneath us as we travel from place to place. Taking a self-reflexive turn, his latest body of work, which will soon be on view in his second solo show at New York's Friedman Benda gallery (Apr. 25-May 24), is based on his own previous paintings of shadows and cracks found on sidewalks and roads. Awkward yet slashing mechanical shapes in black and bright colors move across the surfaces of these nearly abstract paintings.



Van den Broek, 40, is also a trained architect and has had solo shows at London's Marlborough Contemporary (2012), at Berlin's Figge von Rosen (2011, 2010, 2008) and at galleries in Korea and Spain and museums in Antwerp and Ghent. The artist discussed his new studio and the work in "Apex," his upcoming show, with *A.i.A.* via e-mail.

ELISABETH KLEY Please tell us about your new studio. Does it differ from previous work spaces?

KOEN VAN DEN BROEK I often work at different locations, including L.A., Paris and New York City, but I've always had studios in and around Antwerp. The structure around my work has become more specific, and demand for my paintings has increased. I need a place that provides a sort of frame where I can function with clear borders, to concentrate and develop my practice. Now I am based in Merksem, an Antwerp suburb. Rather than being a perfect museum space, it's a warm, sometimes annoying, even impractical space with a will of its own! Which makes it my studio.

KLEY You often find your images in overlooked places like sidewalks, curbs and roads. Your idea of continuously looking down is distinctive.

VAN DEN BROEK Edward Hopper, Wayne Thiebaud, Richard Diebenkorn, Gerhard Richter, Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari have all painted the street. And then there are the four big M's: Manet, Matisse, Malevich, Mondrian. Mondrian began with landscapes of trees and oceans before his work became abstract. By the end in New York, with *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and *Victory Boogie Woogie*, he really was painting the street! Later, in the '50s, there was Rothko, Motherwell and Kline. At the Denver Art Museum, I discovered an entire Motherwell series called "Open," inspired by *Porte-fenêtre à Collioure* [1914], the amazing Matisse that looks abstract but is actually a regular night view. And Aaron Siskind photographed the rough walls near the street.

KLEY But you are the only one that concentrates so strongly on the ground.

VAN DEN BROEK The ground is how architecture began: going from A to B. After that, it is time to build. At the movies, I look at non-places found between "important" scenes-trees, skies, floors and streets. In the opening scene of *The Cotton Club*, we see the gutter, pebbles, reflections and black-and-white abstractions

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before the camera moves up to show people coming out of a distant jazz club.

KLEY The shapes in your new paintings resemble strange flat war machines or the shadows cast by helicopters across airport landing fields.

VAN DEN BROEK I was thinking of *Apocalypse Now*.

KLEY Portions of your new paintings are reminiscent of Clyfford Still's thickly painted abstractions. I also think of Ellsworth Kelly's early use of accidental outdoor shapes and Andy Warhol's enormous shadow paintings.

VAN DEN BROEK My work is connected with history. I make direct references to Kelly, for example, in *Still-Kelly* [2013], a painting derived from an image of the shadows of a railing at the Clyfford Still Museum in Denver. I also love Warhol's unconventional attitude towards composition and Christopher Wool's images of street trash.

KLEY Speaking of trash, forbidden substances like spit, urine and feces are often found on dirty streets and floors. Does this enter into your thinking about your subject?

VAN DEN BROEK There is the floor. There are things happening on that floor. My painting *On the floor. Thanks to Lou Reed and Metallica* [2012] refers to a 2011 CD made by those artists. To hard-core fans, this project was almost an attack on their religion. Lou Reed fans appear to hate Metallica and vice versa, so these artists were doing exactly what their fans would hate most. Similarly, people expect me to paint landscapes-it's only recently that my paintings have been understood as conceptual. In my collaboration with John Baldessari, *This an Example of That* [2008], I painted directly on his photographs, something I could otherwise never do. John destroyed almost all his paintings in the late '60s, so I was giving him the paint he couldn't have himself. We both did things we're not allowed to do. This is what art is about.

PHOTO: *Birds* (2013), oil on canvas, 104¾ by 157½ inches.