

The only way forward is back

Internationally renowned Koen van den Broek woos Belgium with two shows



Koen van den Broek has risen to fame in the past 10 years, although he has attracted more attention abroad than in Belgium. Two exhibitions should readjust that. In Antwerp, you'll find his works on paper and in Ghent's museum of contemporary art, SMAK, are the paintings from the last decade that have made him famous.

Before even entering SMAK's exhibition *Curbs & Cracks*, I was floored by a huge wall

painting. It's a first for the artist, and it's by far his largest work ever, 8 x 12 metres. Although based on a pedestrian bridge in New York, it also looks like two looming skyscrapers, on the verge of collapsing.

"It was hard to find an image that could be integrated in the museum," he tells me. "The SMAK is almost symmetrical, and I've played with that by placing the painting a bit more to the right." The deal was that the painting is a SMAK exclusive, to be destroyed after the exhibition. "I must say that now I have regrets," Van den Broek says.

The title *Curbs & Cracks* refers to the Antwerp-based artist's favourite visual themes: borders of pavements, bridges, a gas station, cracks in the road. It looks like the remnants of human existence, a world sucked dry of people.

"Why would I paint people?" he asks. "I'm much more interested in traces they leave behind. Such paintings are often psychological. I love architecture, and I almost construct my paintings as technical drawings; you don't see people on those, either. It's a scientific approach. The most important architectural artefact is probably a road. The first feat man accomplishes on an untouched piece of land is finding a way to cross it. Only then, when he's able to move from A to B, does he start thinking vertically."

So "The Farm" comes as big surprise: we see a pig, a goat and other animals. Or do we? "In 1999, I visited the Bronx, and in a front garden I saw animals – not real ones but cut out of wood. So what looks like living things are, once again, architectural objects. I took a picture of them – quickly, because it wasn't a time where you would want to draw attention to yourself in the Bronx. The image was blurry, out of focus, and that's how I painted it."

Van den Broek's paintings are often, though not always, based on the heaps and heaps of photos he makes on the road. "Never digital," he explains, "because that leaves you with too many choices." But the paintings are far from photo-realistic since it's no use repeating what has been done before. He is also strongly inspired by cinema.

His subjects give Van den Broek the chance to explore the fine line between abstraction and figuration. But even if the paintings look abstract, like "Orange & Black Border", the title clearly links with reality.

Verbiest, Christophe. "The Only Way Forward is Back." *Flanders Today*, February 17, 2011.

"Is it still possible to make abstract paintings?," he ask. "Look at some of the big shots of contemporary American art, like John Currin or Elizabeth Peyton: they are very figurative. Probably because during the second half of the 20th century, their artists, from Donald Judd to Robert Morris, have strongly opted for such radical abstract art; they bumped into the boundaries of abstraction. So the only way, I think, to go forward in painting is to go back."

The exhibition, put together by the reputed British curator Andrew Renton and SMAK-man Thibaut Verhoeven, is not a chronological overview of his work, Van den Broek stresses. "The question of how an artist's oeuvre has evolved is often irrelevant," he says. "It certainly is with mine, since I go back to the same elements over and over again."

That repetition sometimes gives him pause: "In starting a new painting, qualms of doubt come over me. Even after finishing it, I can wonder for a long time if it deserves a place between my other work." A lot of paintings never even leave his studio. "A year ago, I destroyed 300 paintings. I just bought a new studio, and when I move, I can imagine destroying some more."

And throwing away a lot of money, one might say. Flemish daily De Tijd recently disclosed that a Van den Broek painting costs €20,000. "They threw some figures together and made an average," he smiles. "I always say it varies from the price of a small car to the price of a big one."

But the prices could be much higher. "Four years ago, my gallerist wanted to raise them, but I found it irrelevant to sell my paintings for like €100,000. I'm only 36. Museums, but also people I like, wouldn't be able to buy them anymore. And it's more important to be in the right collection than to make as much money as possible."

Curbs & Cracks

Until 16 May

Museum of Contemporary Art (SMAK)

Citadelpark, Ghent

www.smak.be

Preview in Antwerp

In the Prentenkabinet (Print Room) of Antwerp's Fine Arts Museum hangs a small but interesting collection of Van den Broek's recent work on paper. No drawings, but acrylic paintings (although they look like gouaches). They were selected by Nico Van Hout, a famous Rubens specialist.

"It was the first time, he said, that he worked with an artist who wasn't dead yet," Van den Broek jokes. But then gets serious: "He made the selection, and he hung all the works without consulting me." The artist doesn't feel himself out of place amongst the old masters. "I'm extremely interested in Tintoretto, El Greco and Rubens."

Based on the title Preview, some visitors think these works are studies, but they aren't, says Van den Broek. "Anyway, I don't think many artists make studies. I think, and in some cases I know for sure, that so-called studies are made after the fact – because it's easy money. The photos I take are my preparation. It might happen that one image lead to a work on paper and one on a canvas, but in that case they're equal."

Van den Broek hadn't worked on paper for 10 years. "I couldn't do it; it was always a mess". But he tried it, as an exercise to free his mind when he was staying in Los Angeles for a while, and, to his own surprise, he succeeded. Repeating the effort in Belgium turned out to be much more difficult. But, asked if the title Preview suggests there's more to come, he answers: "That might be the case."

Until 28 February

Fine Arts Museum

Leopold Dewaelplaats, Antwerp

www.kmska.be

Verbiest, Christophe. "The Only Way Forward is Back." *Flanders Today*, February 17, 2011.

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