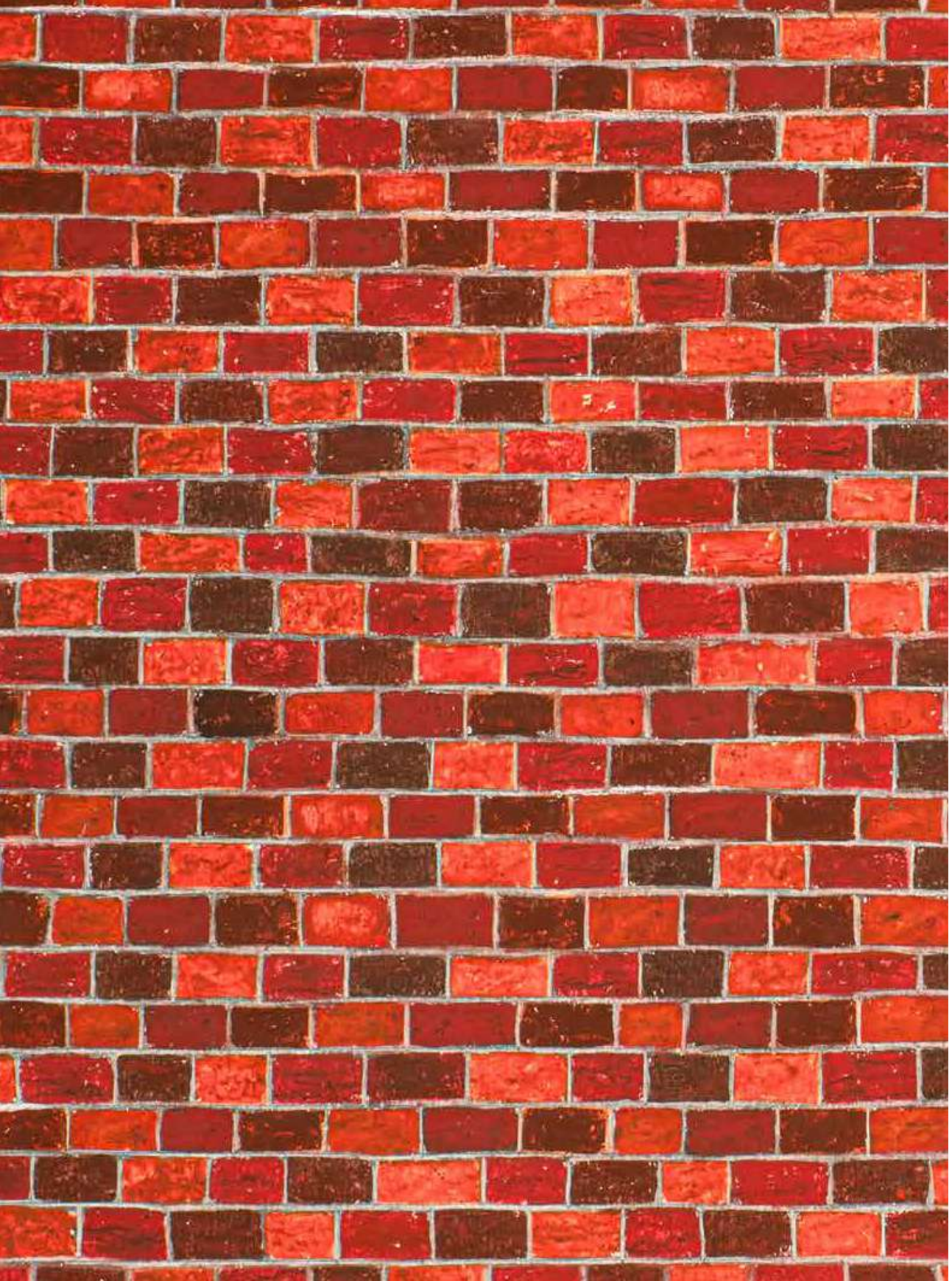

Privaat Domein
Beppe Geerts




Privaat Domein
Beppe Geerts

Privaat Domein

[Private Property]



Beppe Geerts

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Privaat Domein
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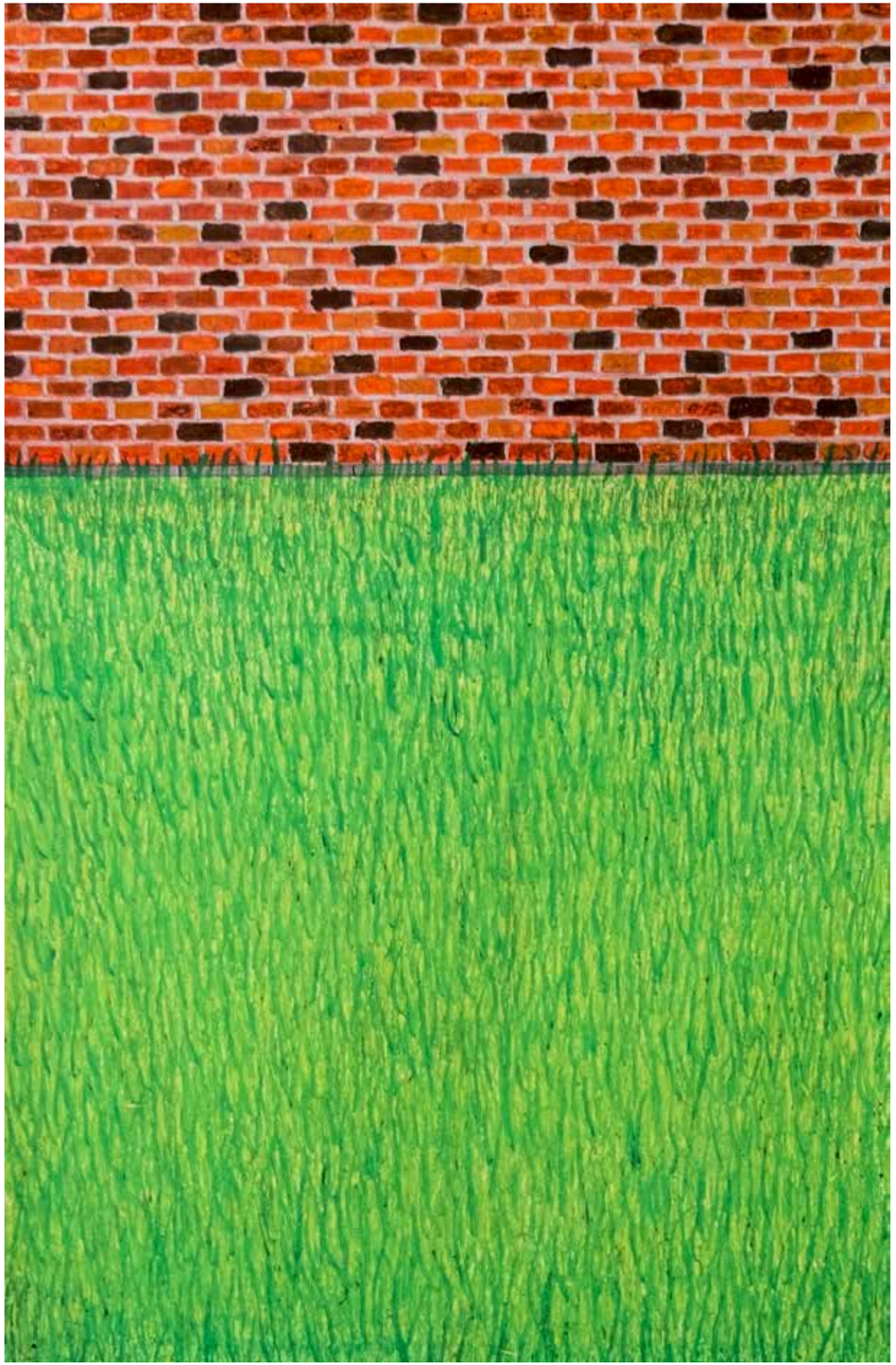
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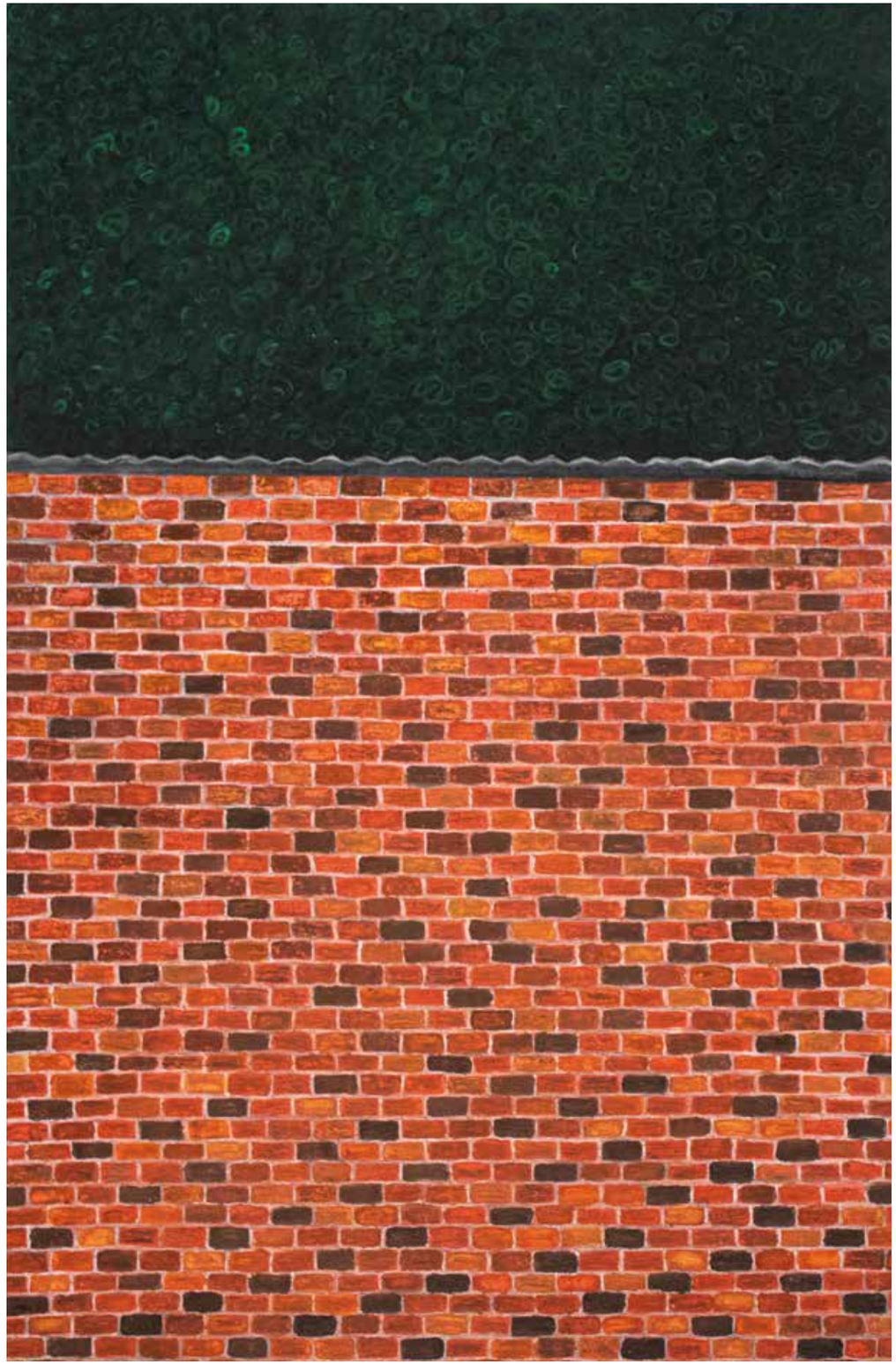
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Privaat Domein [Private Property] refers to a place where outsiders do not feel welcome. I experience the Flemish landscape as a closed landscape, this reflects itself not only in the view, but also in the psyche. Privaat Domein is a research on the contemporary version of the mediaeval enclosed garden, Hortus Conclusus, which is very present in Flanders. Furthermore, I investigate how religion affects the spatial arrangement of a place. To fully complete this research, I decided to interview nine different artists, including myself, that work around this theme for their artistic practice.

PRIVATE PROPERTY



Beppe Geerts, *Triptych from the perspective of a Flemish garden ⅓*, May 2024, oil pastels on paper, 40,6 cm × 63,2 cm



Beppe Geerts, *Triptych from the perspective of a Flemish garden ⅔*, May 2024, oil pastels on paper, 40,6 cm × 63,2 cm



Beppe Geerts, *Triptych from the perspective of a Flemish garden ⅔*, May 2024, oil pastels on paper, 40,6 cm × 63,2 cm

The Flemish territory is mainly privatised. Not only the residential, agricultural, industrial and recreational areas, such as plots, fields, parks, playgrounds, tennis courts, ... can be privately owned, even forest and nature reserves can be privately controlled. My grandfather, Jos Jacobs, used to own a forest. He bought this forest purely for preserving the natural environment and protecting it from the impact of human activities, such as deforestation, urbanisation and industrialisation. In 2023, there was a total of 107,668 hectares of a so-called natural area, that was under effective nature management, in the Flemish Region. That is about 10% of the total area of Flanders. One-fifth of that is owned by third parties with a management plan (het netwerk Statistiek Vlaanderen van de Vlaamse Overheid, 2024). Originally and completely untouched nature can no longer be found anywhere in Flanders.

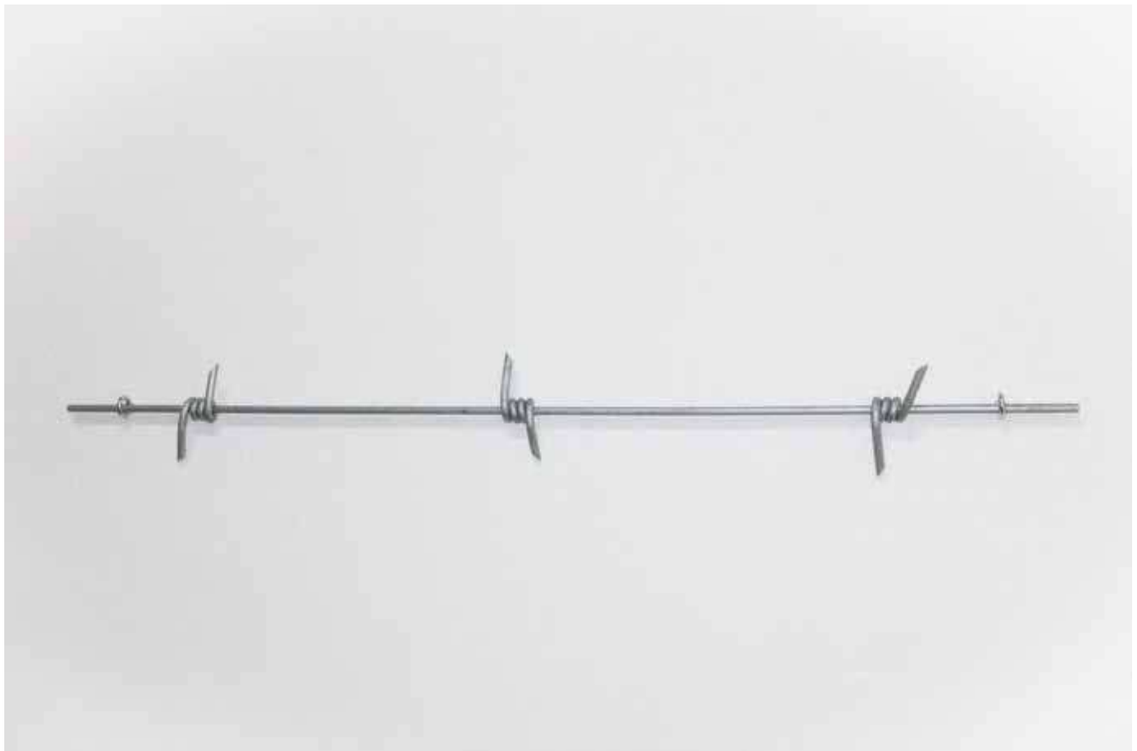
There are different ways to protect the private property, through fencing, walls, ... but also by the sign *Hier waak ik, betreden op eigen risico* [I am on guard here; I guard this yard, you enter at own risk; warning, beware of the dog]. This is mostly done for privacy or safety reasons.

> *"Privacy was an important issue from the outset. The first building regulations dating from 1909, gave it considerable attention. For many of the houses, the architect also designed the garden wall. The house itself was not allowed to occupy more than half the site area so as to ensure a suitable distance between neighbours (and to achieve embedding in the landscape). Plantations of trees, shrubs and hedges served to block any intrusive views that might still be possible from one dwelling to another. In contemporary Flanders, site planning is still typically dominated by concern for the privacy of individual plots* (De Meulder et al.,1999, p.102-105)*."*

A plot could be described as a territory or an area, where residents have certain rights and through which they define their identity (Verlaak, 2019, p.22).



Filip Dujardin, *Fictions*, 2007-2014 (series of pictures/photobook, p.82-83)



Xander Vertenten, *Privaat domein, verboden toegang*, 2023, Iron, 150 × 10 cm



Roger Raveel, *Vanuit mijn tuin* [From my garden], 1949, Oilpaint on paper on multiplex, 57,5 × 56 cm

THE FLEMISH PSYCHE



Beppe Geerts, *Een gesloten blik (diptych) ½*, June 2024, oil pastels on paper, 10 cm × 15 cm

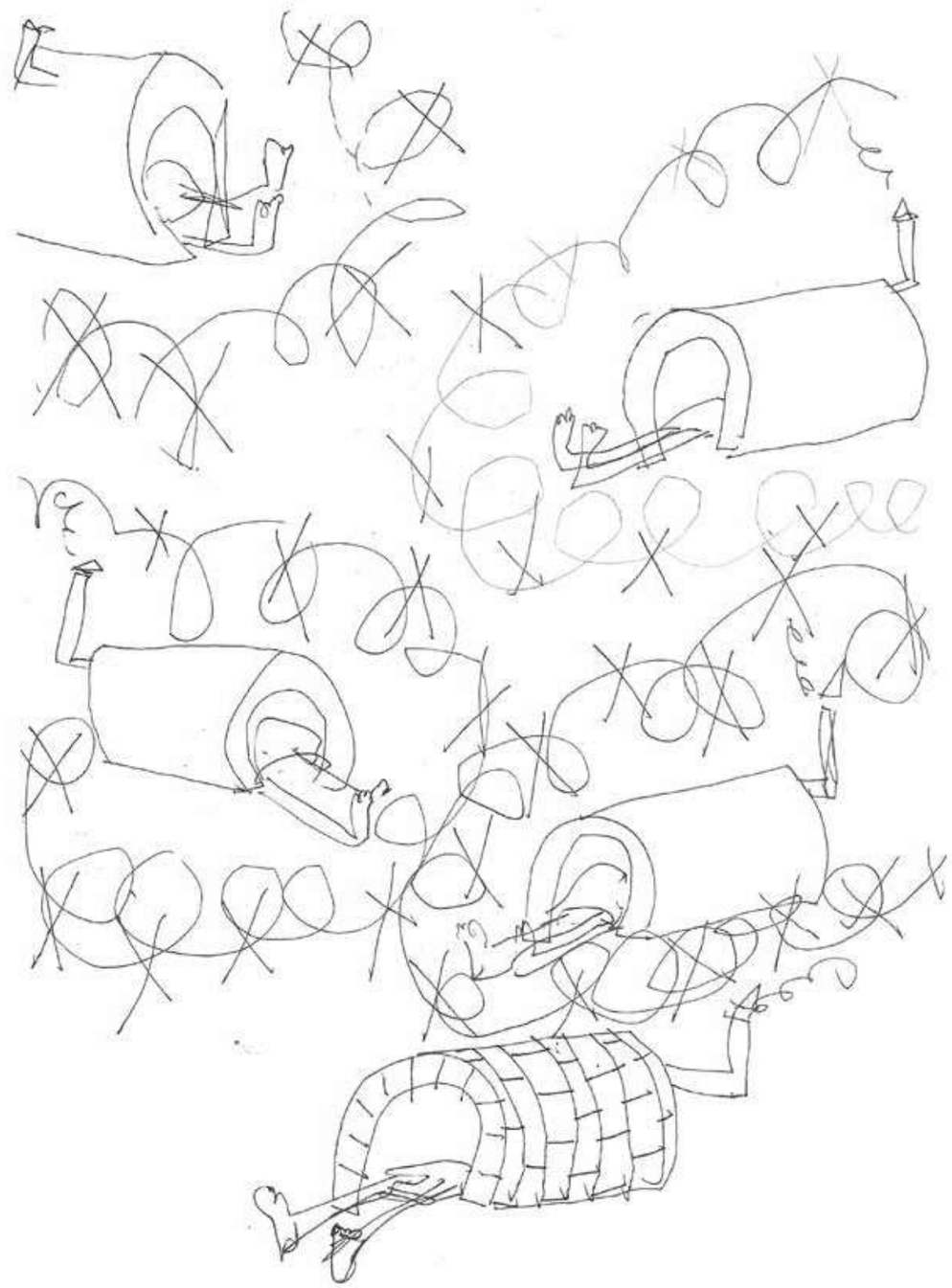


Beppe Geerts, *Een gesloten blik (diptych) ½*, June 2024, oil pastels on paper, 10 cm × 15 cm

The Flemish psyche is the state of mind of Flanders and the behaviour of the inhabitants, the Flemish people living there.

Genius Loci is the idea of "how a person identifies with a site – his home, his local surroundings, his nationality – some of which can be tangible, such as smell, sound and above all language. Places can be, we might say 'inhabited' in profound ways. Sometimes it is simply that certain places usefully activate parts of ourselves that we had not realised before or elsewhere. We acquire a sense of place through a variety of conscious and unconscious contacts – what we read, what we see in art or photography, where we go, or even what we miss in a given site – and by comparisons that we make between places. We rely on a miscellany of ideas and associations (Hunt, 2022, p. 9)."

Belgitude "is a feeling of almost constant ambiguity. The awkward moment when you do not know what language to say hello in when you meet someone (Harding, 2022)."



Philippe Vandenberg, Uit de reeks *Molenbeekse tekeningen* [From the series *Molenbeekse drawings*], 2005-2007, balpoint pen, oil pastel, colored marker, ink and blood on paper, 10 cm × 15 cm

The Flemish Psyche is ...

... the silent nod with a very subtle smile as a greeting, while you pass somebody in the street, most likely in the countryside.

... living in your own social bubble (the noise cancelling headphones were a great hit in Belgium).

... my neighbour across the street, in Meise, had his windows tinted, so no one could look inside. But at the same time, he likes to look inside other people's homes, because he is aware of almost every movement that happens on the street.

... when my grandmother calls me and starts whispering while talking about her neighbour next door.

... the blinds of my neighbours, in Ghent, that do not seem to open when they are waking up. They are always closed.

... speaking negatively about the country, with self-deprecation. For example modernist architect Renaat Braem, who described Belgium as the ugliest country in the world in 1968 he published a pamphlet *Het lelijkste land ter wereld* [The Ugliest Country in the World]. This thin booklet is one of the worst and most famous attacks on the chaos in Belgian urban planning and owes its fame largely to its provocative title (Laureyns, 2013, p.178).

... not understanding why somebody would ever visit Flanders or Belgium as a tourist, but being offended if somebody would say Flanders or Belgium is not worth a visit.

... disliking the way the Dutch language sounds and listening more to English music.

... wishing you were born elsewhere, for example a country with a warmer climate and less rain.

... having no interest or connection with the Belgian and Flemish culture, except for our summer festivals, chocolate, waffles, beers and fries.

... knowing so little about where you live and grew up, because of, as earlier mentioned, a lack of interest.

... staying loyal to things like your friends, grocery store, hairdresser, dentist, ... and for instance to your local frituur [frieshop] and ordering mostly the same snack, sauce and drink with your fries for me that would be: Chickenwings with fries, joppie sauce and a sparkling Lipton ice-tea on the side.

... not knowing things like the national anthem, for example the former prime minister, Yves Leterme, sang *La Marseillaise*, the French national anthem, instead of the *Brabançonne*, the Belgian national anthem, when asked by a TV reporter to sing the national anthem on Belgium's national day (Harding, 2022). Most Belgians do not know the lyrics of the Brabançonne (Harding, 2024).

... being offended when foreign people shit on our culture.

... **met een baksteen in de maag geboren worden [To be born with a brick in the stomach]** This phrase means that Belgians highly value owning a home, and preferably building or reconstructing it as well.

... the sense of humour, that reflects in our architecture, where 'koterijen' and Ugly Belgian Houses are the perfect example of.

Koterijen [kennels, sheds] can refer to two things:
1. many small houses next to each other.
2. annexes as supplementary buildings of a house or outbuildings next to the house. The supplementary buildings are attached to the house, to create extra space for a scullery, a bathroom, a washing room, a conservatory and/or a dovecote. The outbuildings are separate buildings on the same property, which serve various functions such as storage/garden sheds, workshops, or guest houses.

... having an individualistic way of living life, such as the way our houses are built.

... "The most sought-after form of housing is almost universally a detached house on its own plot of land (De Meulder et al.,1999, p.80)."

... to show individuality and uniqueness, the neighbours facade almost never looks the same, it seems like there always has to be something slightly different. *"The strong focus on the individual plot is striking. Practically everywhere, privacy goes before context. Nobody even thinks of taking a landscape-oriented approach instead of a plot-by-plot structure. The boundaries between distinct morphological systems are consequently neither designed nor exploited. Identity and cohesion are the last words one would choose to describe the result* (De Meulder et al.,1999, p.111)."

... my neighbour telling me on a daily basis to close the roller shutters at night, because the neighbourhood we live in (Ledeberg, right outside of Ghent) is, according to him, not the safest.

... my Italian partner asking me to speak louder, because he does not understand me. While I explain something, according to him I speak at too low a volume. Especially when speaking about a person closeby. Afterwards I get frustrated because he is loudly repeating what I have just said. And I assume the person closeby heard it.

... when you think about laws as optional, negotiable and not obligatory.

... that there is a surprise around every corner. As Michell Heyndrickx told me during the interview on the 2nd of april. He clarified this with the example that you can drive on the bicycle lane for 500 metres and in the next street you are risking your life on a cobblestone lane (M. Heyndrickx, personal communication, April 2, 2024).

... emotional suppression and a feeling of guilt that comes from Catholicism

... talking and complaining about the bad weather when you do not have something else to talk about, for example as a small talk to your doctor, neighbour, cat, family members you see four times a year. And aligning your emotional state automatically with the weather situation.

... the way I felt, this strong sense of disapproval, when the mayor of Kortrijk, Vincent Van Quickenborne, spoke with enormous pride about his city during his speech on the opening night of the exhibition *Draad*, in which I participated. He proclaimed how Kortrijk has what it takes to become the cultural capital of Europe in 2025.

... the gossiping, the rumours, the suspiciousness, the backbiting, and the dishonesty. And sometimes to my greatest disgust, the racism and sexism, this of course depends from person to person, but when living in the countryside this is pretty common. During the interview with Michell Heyndrickx he gave me another example from this type of behaviour. In his street, in his village in Bazel, there are new neighbours with a Syrian identity, the woman wears a headscarf, and this already caused racist rumour and then he also overheard backbiting about the children staying up too late. I think villages are generally speaking more narrow-minded, but to me this backbiting is a good example of what the Flemish psyche is about (M. Heyndrickx, personal communication, April 2, 2024).

... playing the national sport 'avoiding to pay taxes', the cause for that will certainly be the fact that Belgium has one of the highest tax burdens in the World.

... that this list of things will be rather negative then positive is another perfect example of the Flemish psyche.



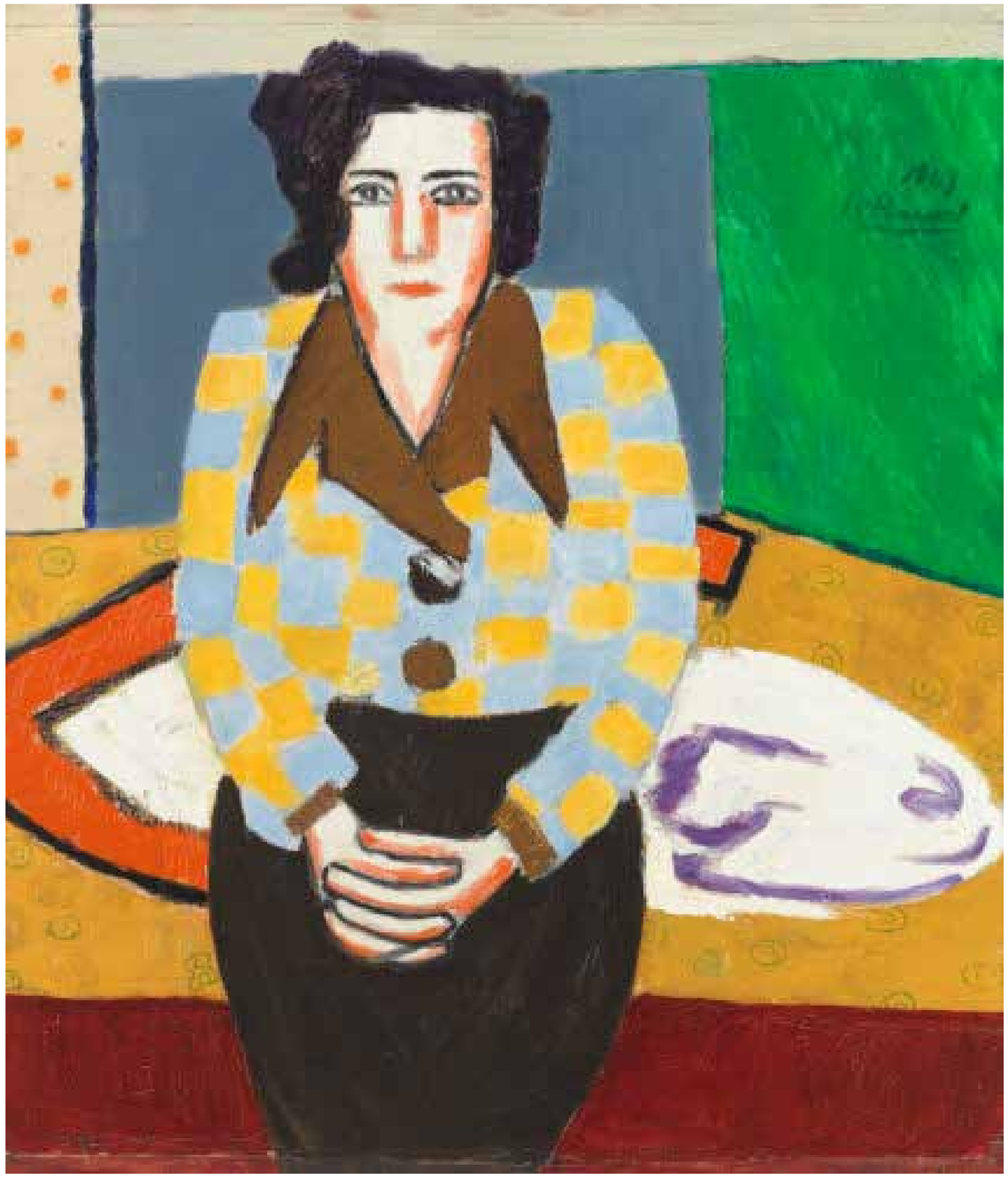
Inès van den Kieboom, *Lucrèce, Inès en Fabienne*, 2022, pencil, acrylic and collage on cardboard, 38,3 × 33,1 cm



Inès Van den Kieboom, *De Zusjes [The sisters] (Inès & Fabienne)*, 1973, Tim Van Laere Gallery



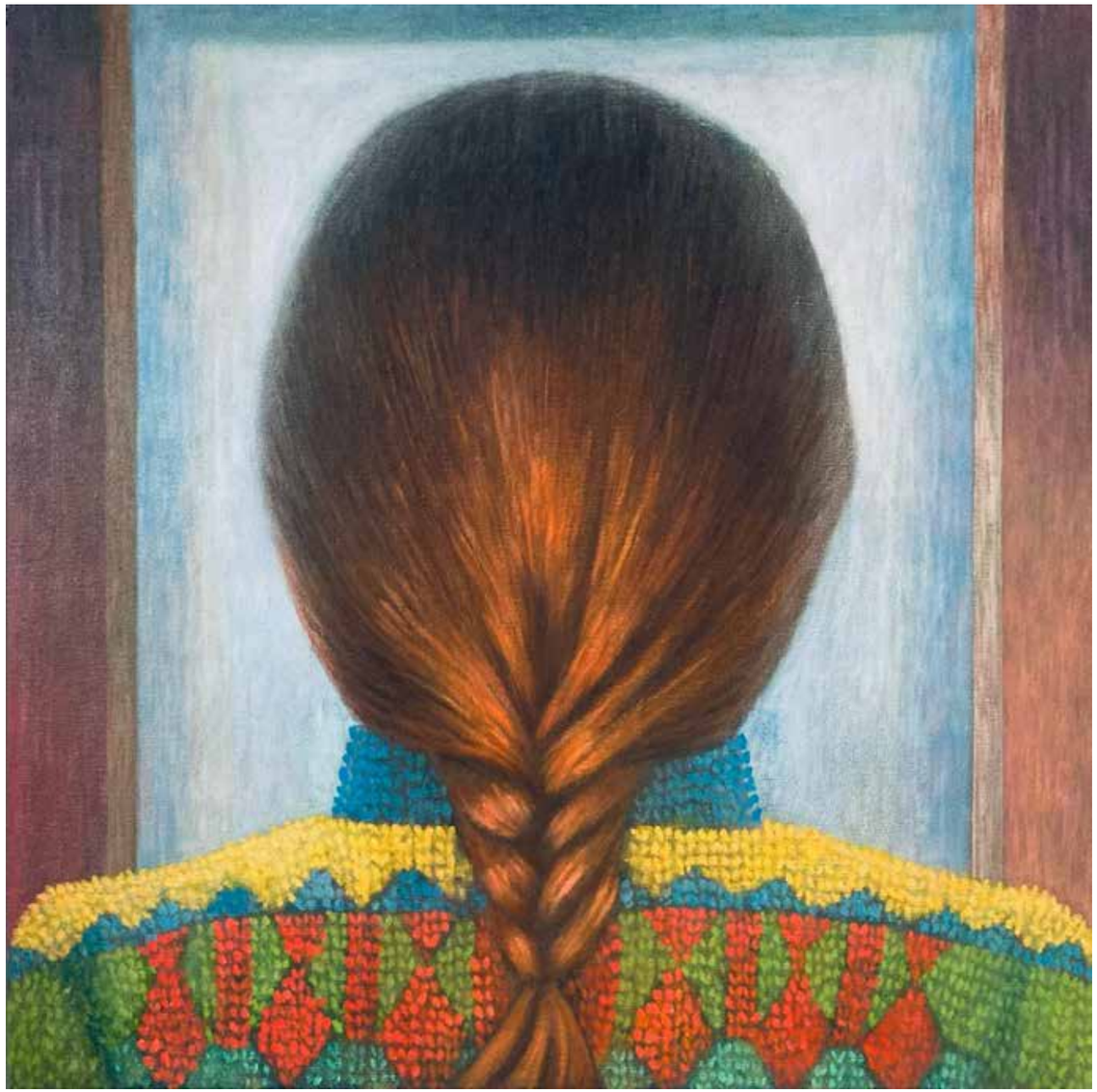
Roger Raveel, *Kaartlegster [card reader]*, 1952, Oil on canvas, 117 × 97 cm



Roger Raveel, *Vrouw* [wife], 1949



Lin Vermeulen, *storm at Pukkelpop in 2021*, 2023, olie op doek, 80 × 100 cm

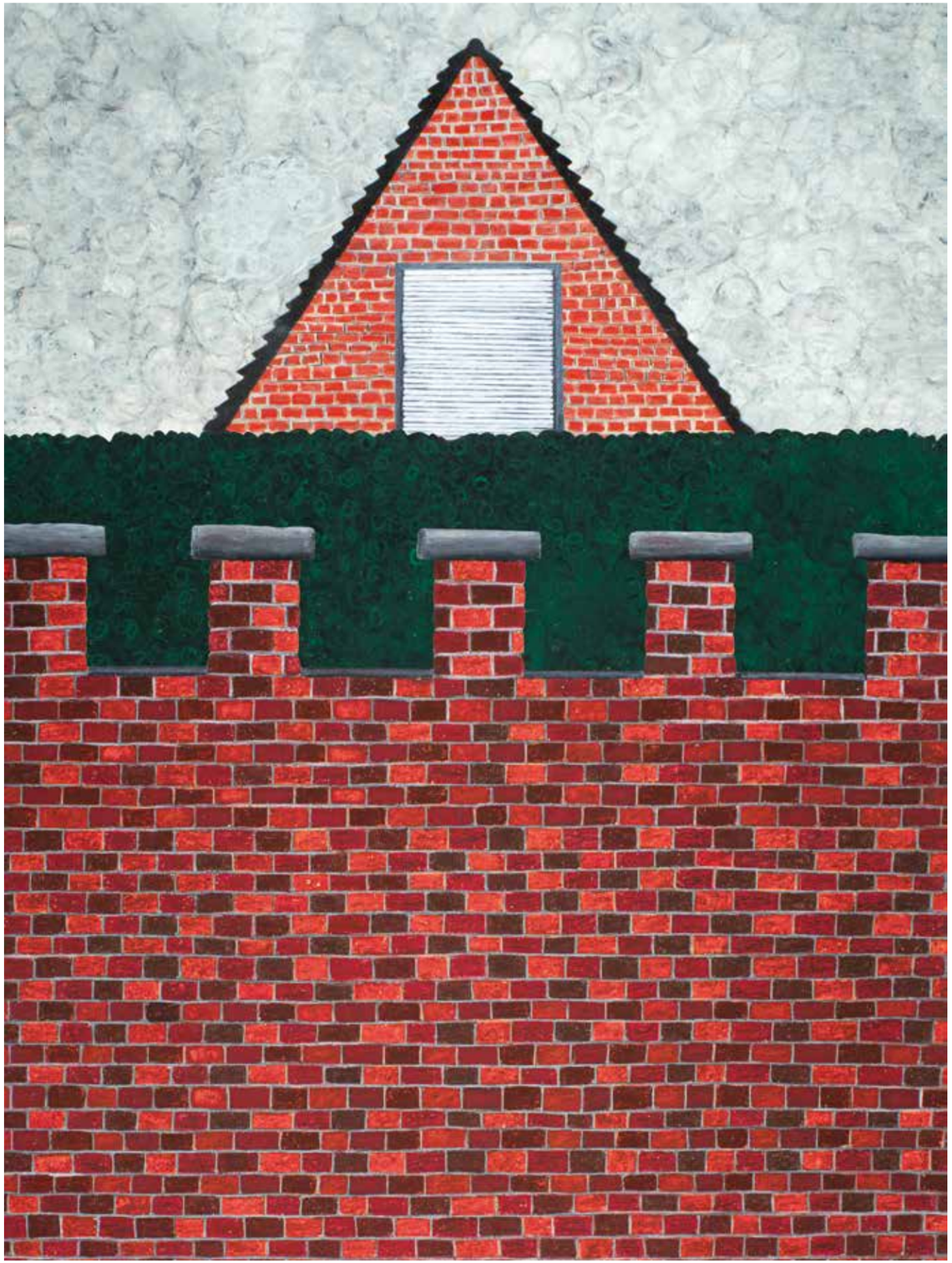


Lin Vermeulen, *selfportrait*, 2023, oil on canvas, 70 × 70 cm



Floris Van Look, *Tree Hugger*, 2023, Oil on canvas, 109 × 82 cm

HORTUS CONCLUSUS
(IN FLANDERS)



Beppe Geerts, *Verboden toegang*, 2024, oilpastel on paper

Hortus conclusus [enclosed garden], the paradox of manifestation of the landscape in all its complexity by shutting out the landscape. It is simultaneously outside and inside (Aben & De Wit, 1998, p.247).

Hortus conclusus is described by Patrick Verlaak, painter and art teacher, as a walled room without a roof, like a garden or courtyard, offering a sense of being enclosed. Etymologically, the word "garden" originates from the idea of an area demarcated by a woven fence, as found in the mediaeval illuminated manuscripts. According to architecture theorist Norberg-Schulz, the fundamental quality of nature is its infinity and openness, while a human-made place is defined by its boundaries. The painting by Fra Angelico, *the Annunciation*, depicts an enclosed courtyard, with a similar paradox. It captures the infinite within a finite space.

By enclosing and isolating a piece of nature, the space draws attention to the earth, emphasising its importance and unique identity. While the walls block the horizon, the gaze is forced upwards, towards the sky, creating a connection between the earth and the cosmos, which can be described as a cosmic orientation of the landscape.

This sense of enclosure is experienced as pleasant, while the vast openness of nature can be seen as frightening, because of its apparent infinity (Verlaak, 2019, p.207).

Hortus Conclusus is the Latin name for an enclosed garden. This type of garden originates from the Middle Ages, but is still present in today's landscape, both rural and urban. During the Middle Ages these gardens arose out of a need for protection. The fields and gardens were used for food production and medicine. They were surrounded by hedges, walls, and ditches to protect them from harsh weather, wild animals, and other intruders, including attacking troops. This need for protection has influenced modern landscapes. Generally speaking, hedges are more common around gardens in the countryside, while walls are more prevalent in urban areas. Although in Flanders, there may not be the same level of coherence, the resulting chaos is evident not only in housing but also in garden fencing (The gardens trust, 2023).

In the Middle Ages, enclosed gardens were exclusively found at palaces, castles, abbeys, monasteries and fortified castles. They had a practical and orderly design. The shape of the garden was either a square or a rectangular shape. The garden consisted of plants with paths in between the different types. These plants were categorised according to their function. Edible plants, utility plants, medicinal plants and herbs were grouped separately. Different types of gardens emerged, each with its own function and appearance. There were useful gardens, such as vegetable gardens, herb gardens or vineyards. At castles and palaces, other types of gardens, such as ornamental or pleasure gardens were also common. Ornamental gardens were intended for relaxation, for strolling or for showing off. Pleasure gardens were considered the place where lovers would meet secretly. The windows of the buildings back then only overlooked the courtyard or the enclosed garden. A window that gave a view of the countryside was usually not there (The gardens trust, 2023).

The landscape has changed significantly over time. In the past, there was much more untouched nature. Similar to the landscapes I saw in the paintings of Flemish master Dieric Bouts, during my research for the *New Horizons Festival* in Leuven. During that time, this pristine form of nature was considered dangerous, as it had not yet been tamed by humans. This perception contrasts sharply with contemporary views and ideas of nature. Much of nature has been tamed by humanity, and people now seek out the wilderness. In contemporary thought, wilderness is often equated with paradise.

The enclosed garden is not exclusive to the Flemish landscape; it can be found worldwide. In South Africa for instance homes are often protected by high walls and sometimes covered with a razor wire or an electric fence. South Africans tend to build these walls around their property for security and privacy reasons (Dési, 2009). In the United States, many spaces are privatised as well, but in Belgium, nearly everything is privatised, with physical barriers, poles, and fences everywhere.

When travelling through the landscape in Emilia-Romagna in Italy, I noticed that not all gardens are closed off by physical borders. The Italian gardens that are enclosed often have low, transparent decorative fences or are surrounded by trees. In the Italian countryside, people generally live much farther apart from one another. They do not have as much *lintbebouwing* [ribbon development] in Italy as we have in Belgium. In the cities, there are not so many houses with gardens, there are more apartments and parks.

> *"In the ribbon, the relation to the perimeter block finally evaporates altogether. The provincial main roads, originally exclusively conceived as fast interurban connection, have almost universally fallen prey to ribbon development, as every reasonably accessible patch of ground is automatically treated as a potential building site. Piecemeal development and incomplete saturation, generally unequal on both sides of the main road, result in strips of terrace-type housing alternating with detached houses and vacant plots, and structures of every other kind roadside shops, filling stations, carwashes, supermarkets, factories and offices. The provincial main road absorbs everything* (De Meulder et al.,1999, p.100)*".*

> *"Environments ranging from a perimeter block in or around the inner city to shreds of ribbon development along a provincial main road with intervening carpets of housing development, form the 'daily' context for a variegated juxtaposition of urban terrace-type houses in the countryside and 'rural' farmettes in the urbanised periphery. These typical, everyday pieces seem indeed to be unravelling are representative for the Belgian urbanisation praxis* (De Meulder et al.,1999, p.110-111)*."*

Although enclosed gardens are not exclusive to the Flemish landscape, I do feel like it does really stand out in Flanders. Wondering why that is so, I thought about different reasons for it. Maybe for the fact of its chaotic look in housing styles in Flanders or for the fact that neighbouring gardens often do not have the same garden fencing? Or perhaps for the layering happening in the demarcation, that it is most of the time not one element to indicate the physical border of the garden? Or it could be for the fact that Flanders is flat and you have a greater overview of the gardens, while for instance being on the train? Or for the fact that everyone wants to be the owner of their house and property? Or for the fact that Flanders is very small and everybody has to live close to each other?

I am not the only one that questions this. As a matter of fact, Jeroen Laureyns questions whether *Staged Memory 2* by Hans Op De Beeck is a typical Flemish-Belgian view and work, because of its garden being a flat terrain and the self-mockery contained in this image. Those garden walls made of concrete panels are very recognisable for many Belgians such as Laureyns and Op De Beeck himself. They grew up living in the city in a terraced house with a garden enclosed with those types of grey walls and the sad atmosphere. Op De Beeck enlarged the sad atmosphere with a dead tree, a pathetic pond and a boring lawn. Laureyns describes the work as an anti-landscape.

For Roger Raveel his garden was one of the biggest sources of inspiration. He painted it on a regular basis and later on, he made installations with elements based on his garden. *Tuintje met karretje om de hemel te vervoeren* (1968) is the perfect example of this (Dewulf et al., 2003).

Raveel's installation shows how neither the landscape nor the spirit of that time invites a loving and lyrical portrayal of the land. While this might be seen as a loss, Raveel's work is a truthful depiction of modern, subdivided Flanders, with its neatly trimmed lawns, white concrete posts marking private property, and concrete slab fences around private gardens (Laureyns, 2013, p.152).



Martin Schongauer, *The Virgin and Child in a Garden*, German, 1469-91



Hans Op de Beeck, *Staged Memory 2*, 2000, wood, polystyreen, paint, cardboard, plexiglass, spotlight, 140 × 61 × 122 cm



Roger Raveel, *Tuintje met karretje om de hemel te vervoeren* [Garden with cart to transport heaven], 1968, oilpaint on wood + mixed media, 320 × 485 × 220 cm



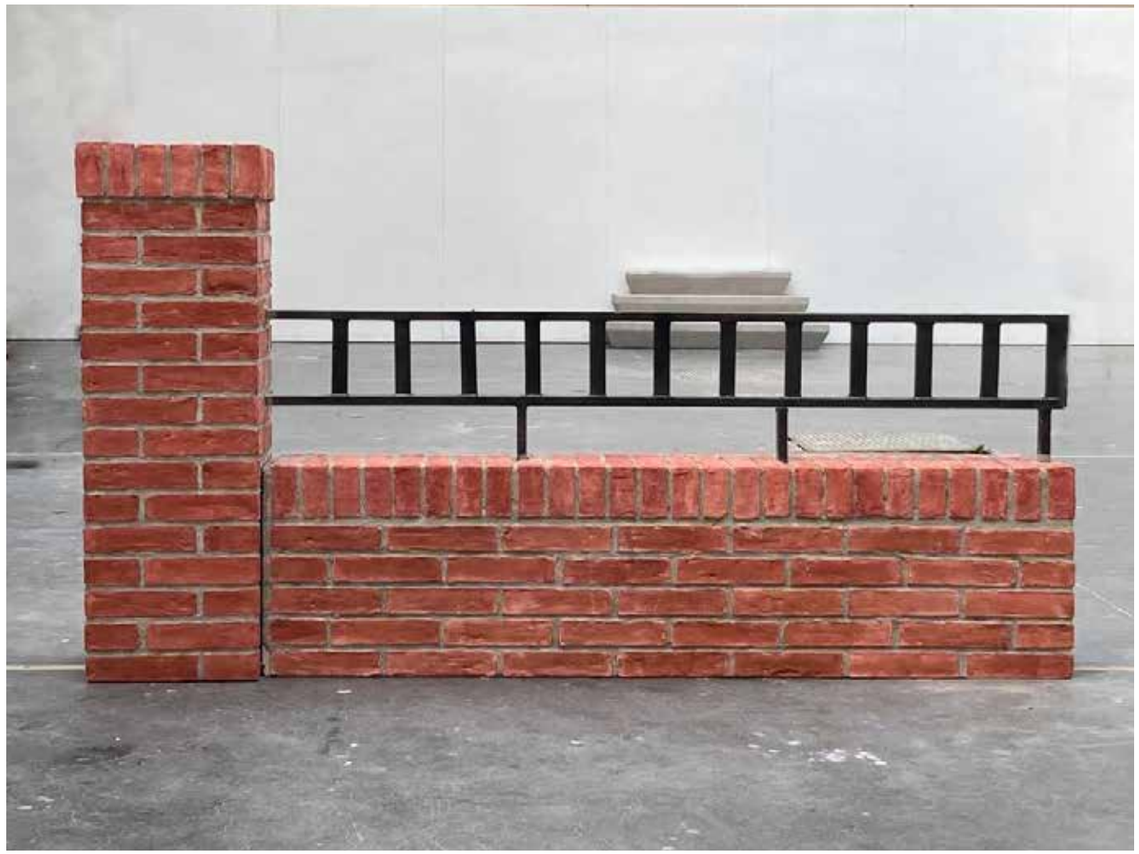
Roger Raveel, *Vier witte paaltjes in mijn tuin* [Four white posts in my garden], 1948, Oilpaint on hardboard, 48 × 50,5 cm



Lin Vermeulen, *Omheining* [Fence], 2023, olie op doek, 40 × 30 cm



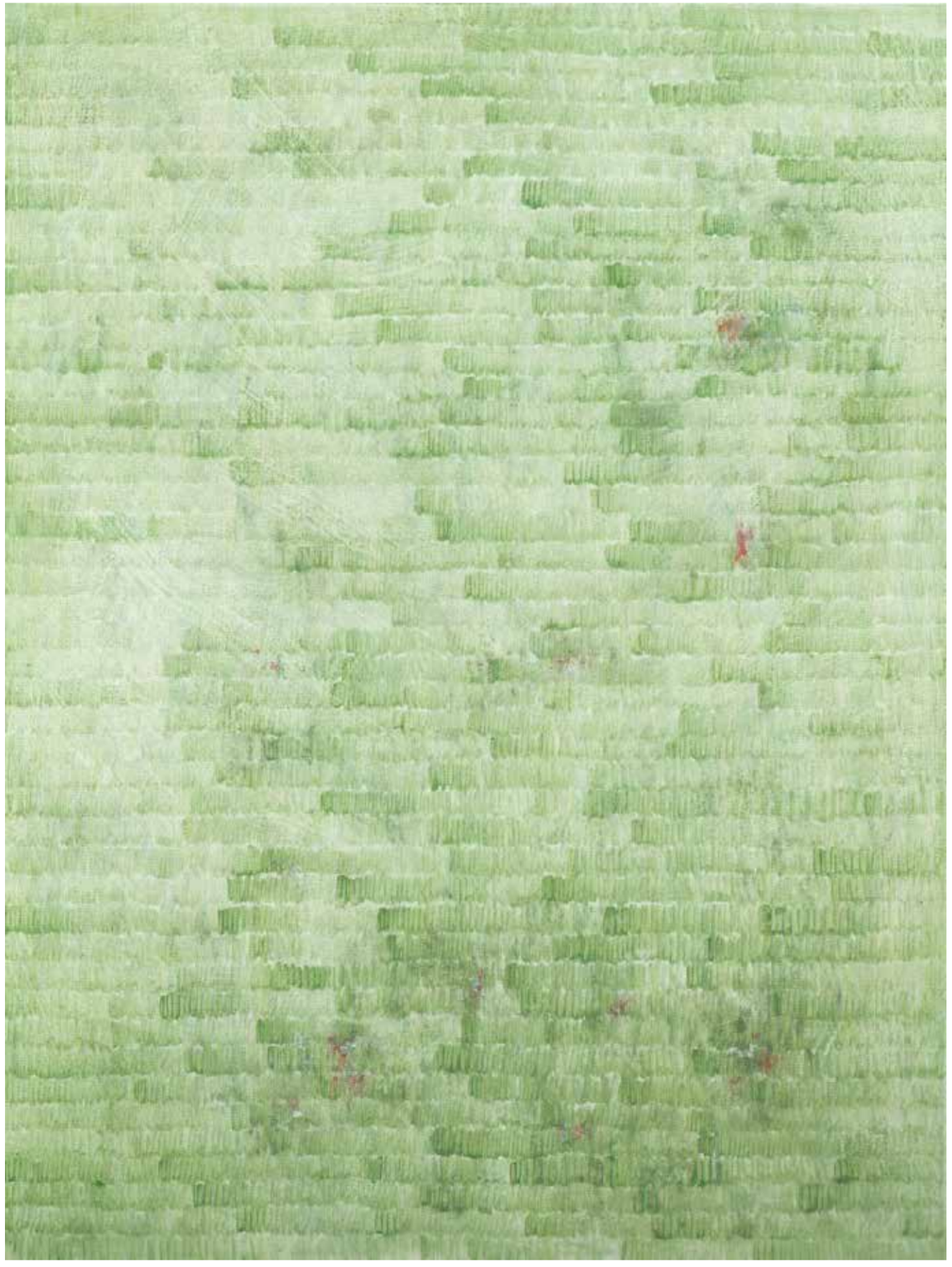
Klaaas De Baere, *Vlaamse Vormen* (installation), 2018



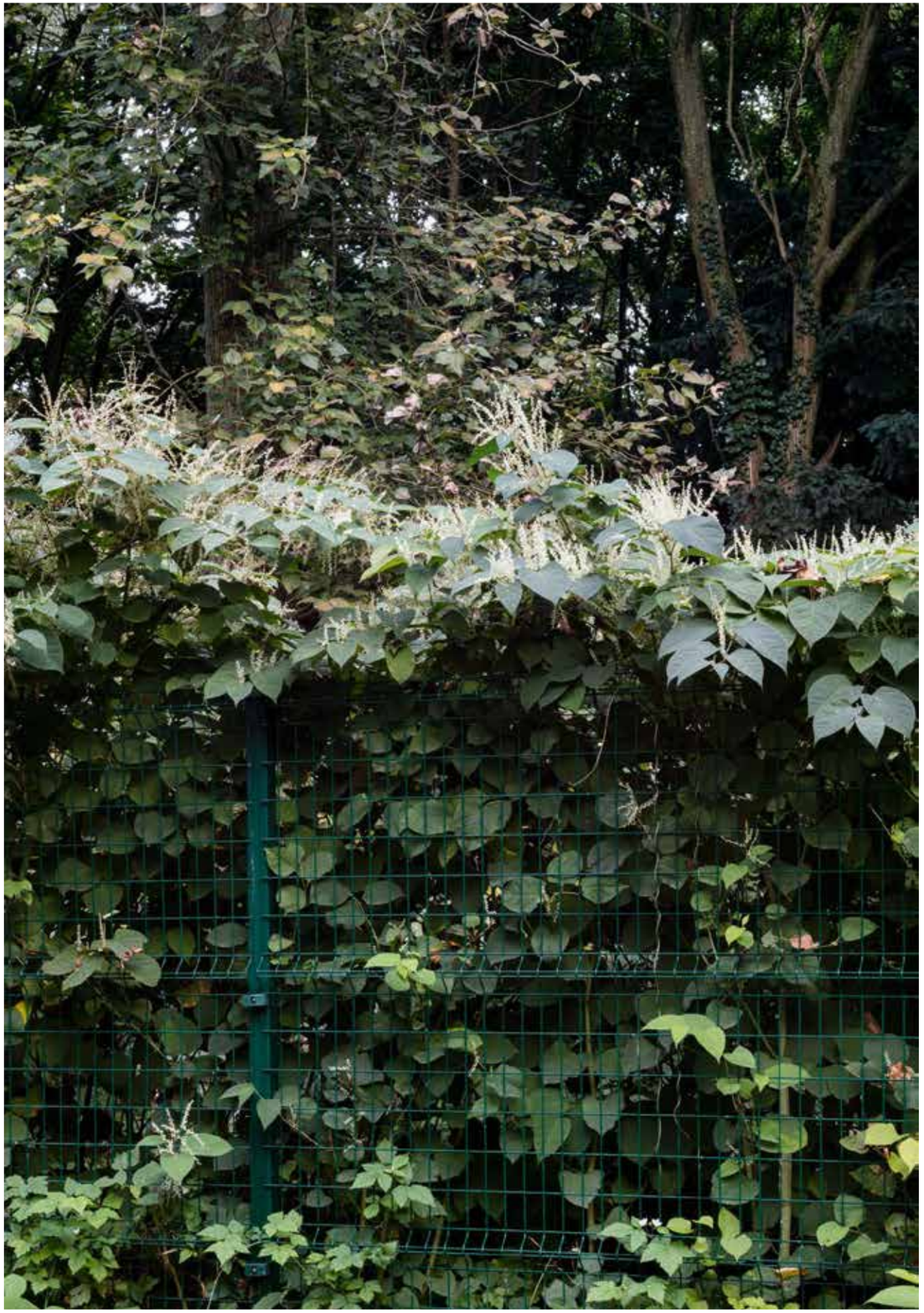
Mirte Vieren, *Didier,* 2023 190 × 35 × 120cm



Inès Van Den Kieboom, *Nottebohm Garden*, 2022, acrylic and pencil on wood panel, 40 × 40 cm



Patrick Verlaak, *Hortus Eremo*, 2011, oilpaint and beewax on canvas, 120 × 90 cm



Michiel De Cleene, picture of photobook *[Hij zwaait opnieuw naar de vrouw die nog steeds haar hond uitaat]*, 2022, p.58



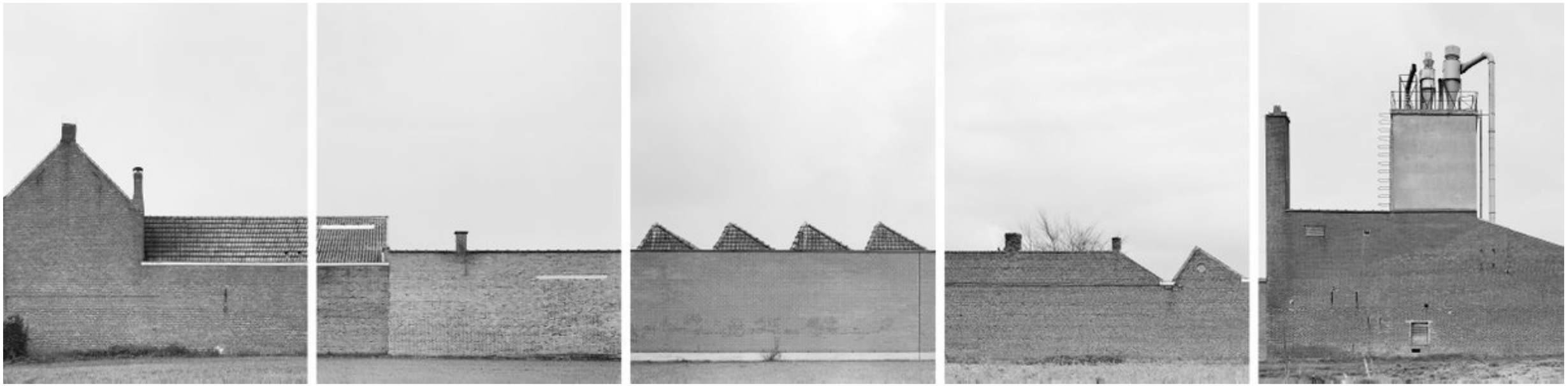
Michiel De Cleene, picture of photobook *[Hij zwaait opnieuw naar de vrouw die nog steeds haar hond uitaat]*, 2022, p.86



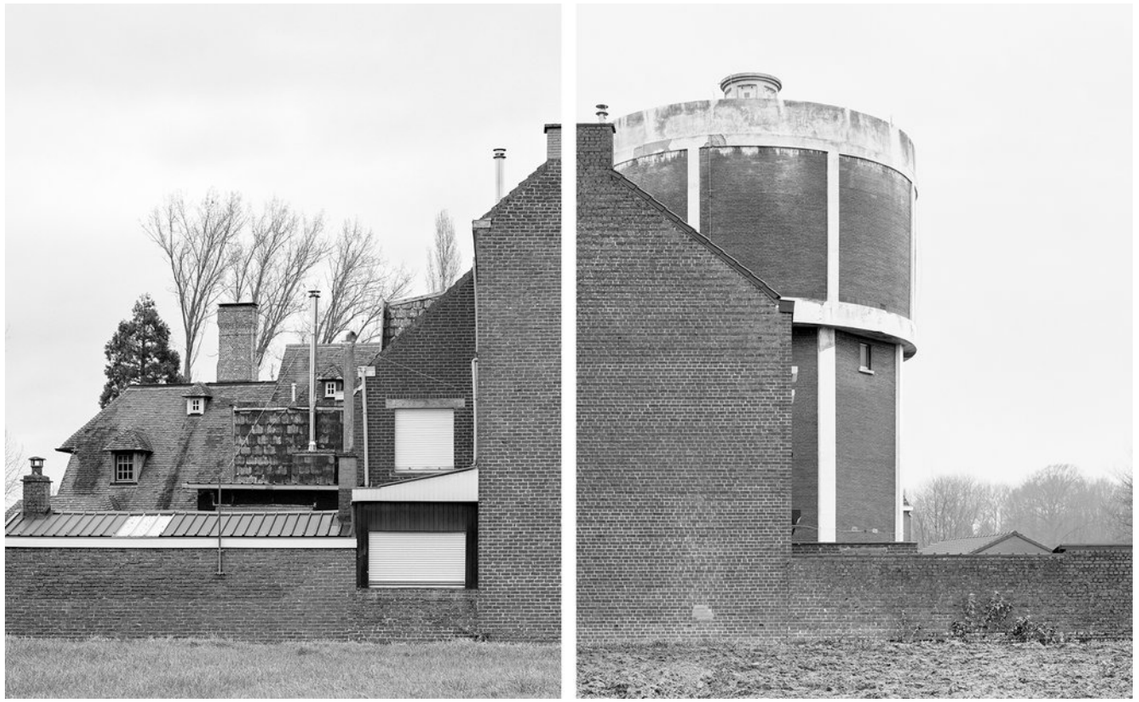
Roger Raveel, *Man met ijzerdraad in tuin*, 1952 - 1953, Oilpaint on paper glued on multiplex, 76 × 91,5 cm

(EN)CLOSED LANDSCAPE

(EN)CLOSED LANDSCAPE



Dieter Van Caneghem, *B-23008790960085538970*, Inkjet print, five times 50 × 40 cm, 2022



Dieter Van Caneghem, *B-95067170*, Inkjet print, two times 100 × 80 cm, 2022

As I mentioned before in the introduction, I experience the Flemish landscape as a closed landscape. This is visually noticeable, especially through architectural and landscaping elements such as blind walls, fences, hedges, shrubs, ...

The Flemish landscape has definitely been overshadowed by urbanisation, and still is, but it has not completely disappeared just yet (De Meulder et al.,1999, p.112). The increasing urbanisation has so far not turned into a solid wall of buildings around the fields. However, terraced houses on narrow plots ended in the characteristic blind walls mixed with open, unbuilt spaces (De Meulder et al.,1999, p.99).

A blind facade or blind wall could be described as a facade in which there are no window openings; usually it is a front facade, a waiting facade or a facade of a building whose neighbouring building has been demolished. (Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten & De Vree, n.d.).

It is not a Belgian phenomenon, I already spotted a blind wall in France and Italy as well, although it is quite remarkable in the Flemish landscape. Different artists include those walls in their work or are inspired by them, such as Jean Brusselmans, Dieter Van Caneghem and Filip Dujardin.

Jean Brusselmans was a Belgian painter from Brussels. He is now well known for the presence of the blind walls in his work. Back then, he must have been the only one who saw the charm and the poetry of those walls. The reconstruction after World War I brought some new architectural rules, such as buildings had to align with the street and the number of floors were regulated. Besides that, houses were built side by side, often with a blank wall waiting for the next house, a so-called blind wall. This led to one of the distinct features of the Belgian landscape.

However, the post-war ambition was not always fulfilled. Tens of thousands of homes were left alone in the landscape with an ugly, windowless facade who never got a neighbour. After the second war, a new phenomenon emerged: apartment buildings with a blind wall that also remained without a companion. Later, those walls were used for advertising with billboards (Vrt, 2019).

Another artist I stumbled upon, Dieter Van Caneghem, has created an archive of black and white photographs of blind walls. He is "a photographer whose main interest is the constructed landscape. He uses photography to create reflections on the conception, planning and construction of space (Van Caneghem, n.d.)."

The photographer's fascination with those facades arose during a study of single houses between the village centre and the city outskirts in Belgium. The walls that do not ask to be admired draw his attention. He creates new landscapes and architectural constructions by combining his pictures. For this reason, Dieter Van Caneghem considers himself somewhere in between the world of photography and the world of architecture.

He shoots on film with an analog camera. Shooting analogic requires time, it is a longer process. But it also gives the photographer enough time to take the right distance from his work.

Dieter Van Caneghem generated a set of rules for himself. Luckily, he lives in Belgium, because he always photographs in the same cloudy, grey weather, which is ideal for architecture photography. He takes the same distance from each facade and always photographs from the same height. The pictures result in abstract shapes that go in dialogue with each other. With his photographs, Dieter Van Caneghem invents non-existing buildings. The exhibition, Wachtgevels, that took place in *De Singel*, in Antwerp in September 2023, reads like a new interpretation of the architectural landscape (Festival van de architectuur, 2023).

I discovered his work, while preparing my interview with another Belgian photographer, Dieter Daemen. In June 2022 they had an exhibition together in *M.ARS Mechelen*. The title of the exhibition, *Prive*, reflects on the inaccessible Flemish landscape, that can be found in both Caneghem's and Daemen's work.

I wonder if Filip Dujardin is inspired by blind walls as well, because of the way his photographs look. Filip Dujardin's photographic book, *Fictions*, from my point visualises the Flemish psyche translated in architectural manipulated photographs. The way he creates his images can be compared to how a farmer constructs a shed. He enlarges this *bricolage* [do-it-yourself] look, that is part of the Belgian identity. His pictures capture how I imagine the Flemish landscape in a contemporary way. He brings awareness and comments on Belgian architecture.

He started his career as an architecture photographer. In 2003, he photographed a series of sheds, in the countryside of Flanders. He was not the only photographer that did so. In 2022, Servaas Van Belle, another photographer published a book, *STAL* [SHED]. He photographed mainly vernacular animal sheds. Servaas Van Belle was interested by the sculpturality of animal sheds, that are obviously not created by architects but purely functional, mostly with low-cost material. The way that Van Belle and Dujardin create these images you feel their admiration for the artist couple, Bernd and Hilla Becher. This couple currently still has a big influence on photography (Van Belle, 2022).

Dujardin photographed many architectures, for different assignments. Therefore he got in touch with the contemporary architecture scene. After a while, he photographed a serious collection of buildings, with whom he started creating his cityscapes. A cityscape is a view or image of a city (Cityscape, 2024). He gained a big interest in architectural structures and started to build and invent new architectural structures with his photographs. He did this mainly through using photoshop. For this reason he is naming these manipulated images fictions.



Filip Dujardin, *Memorial II*, 2018



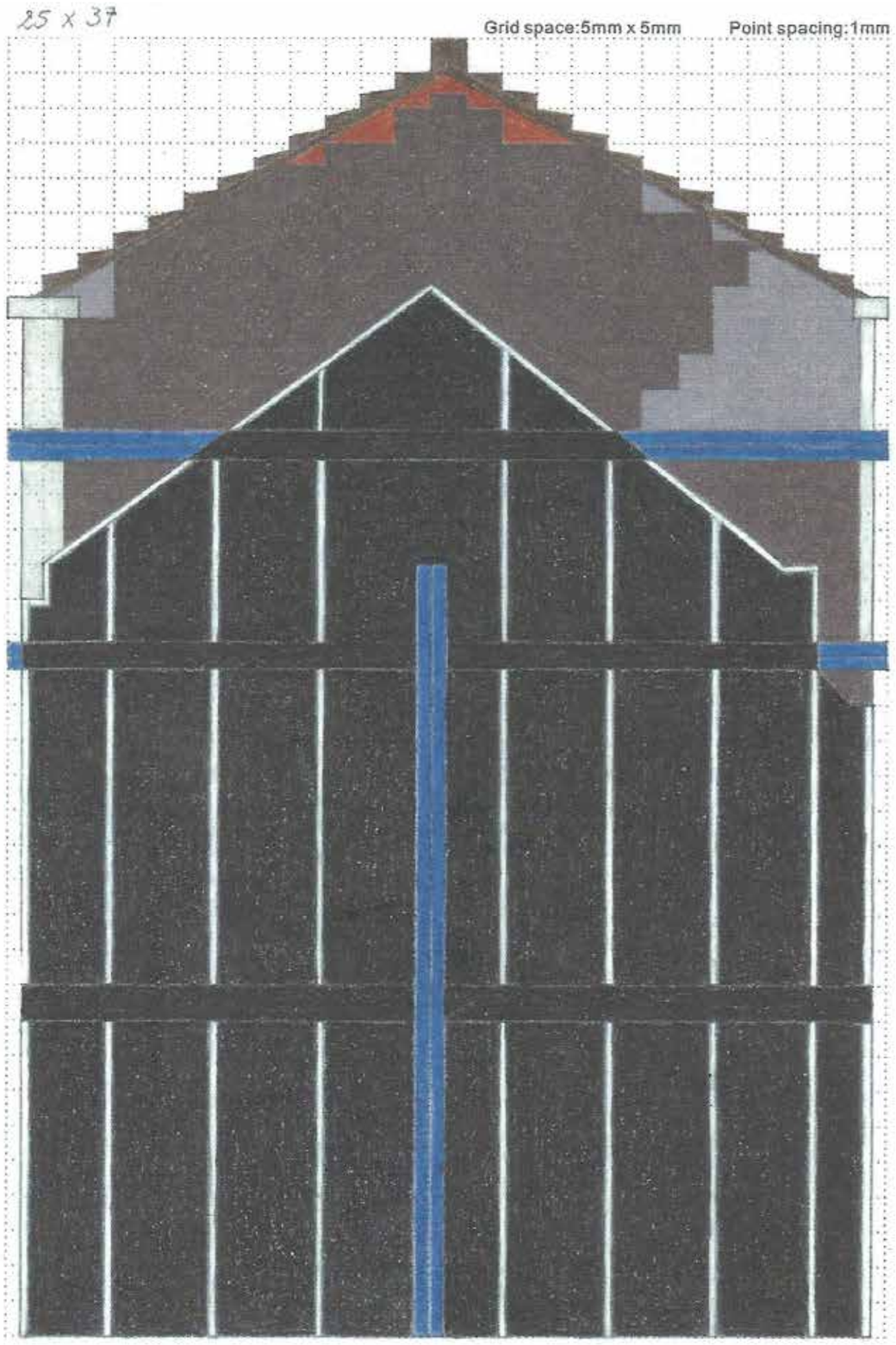
Filip Dujardin, *Fictions*, 2007-2014 (series of pictures/photobook, p.29)



Jean Brusselmans, *Zonnig Brabants Landschap*,1940, Oil on canvas,

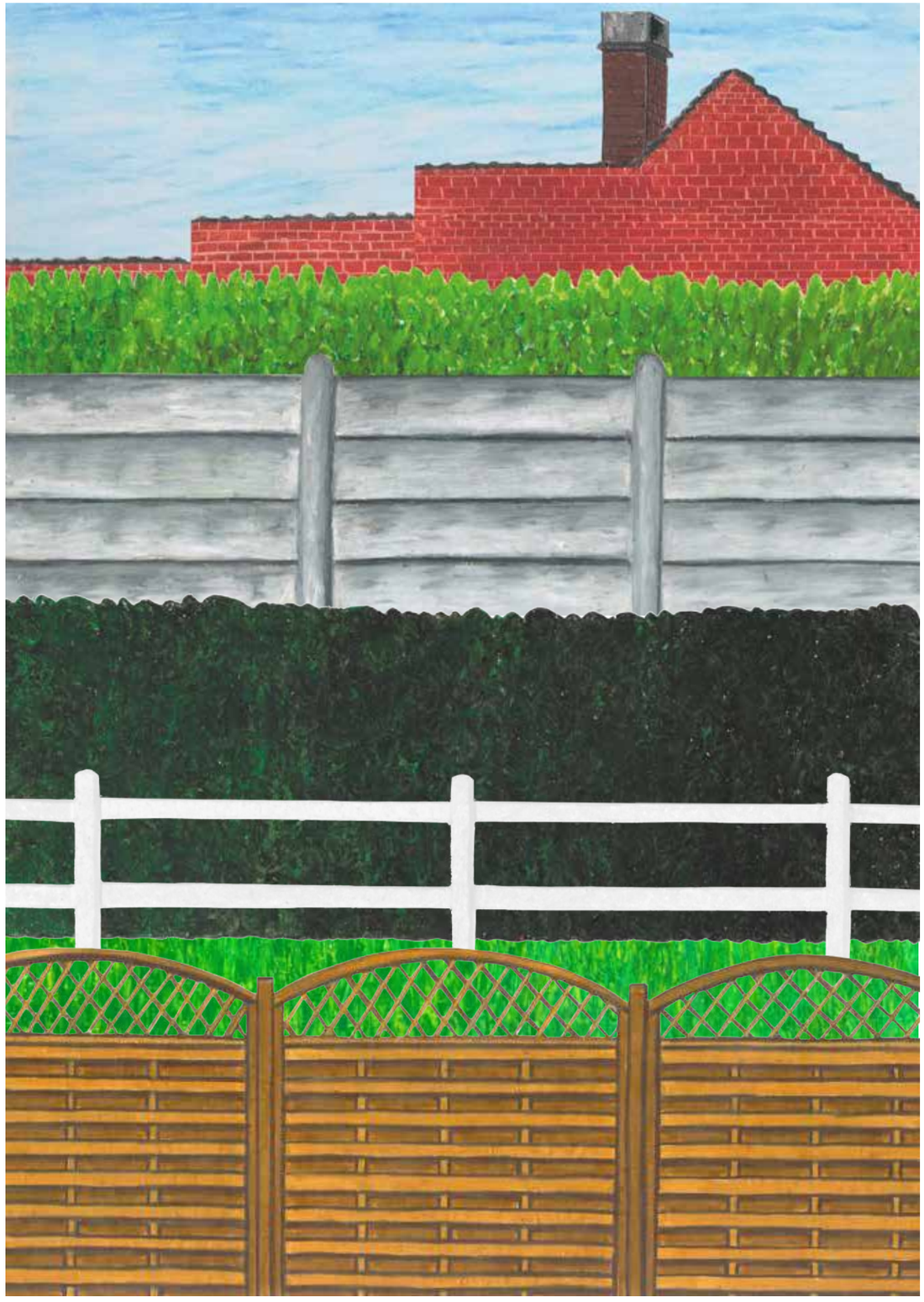


Jean Brusselmans, *Zonnig landschap*, KMSKA collection



Jade Hermans, *Wachtgevel*, colour pencil, 134 mm x 205 mm (postcard graduationshow LUCA)

THE CHAOTIC AND NONCHALANT BELGIAN URBAN LANDSCAPE



Beppe Geerts, de *Hortus Conclusus van Vlaanderen*, 2024, oilpastel on paper

I wondered why the Belgian landscape appears so chaotic and nonchalant. It mainly comes down to a lack of urban planning rules, as explained in Patching up the Belgian Urban Landscape by Bruno De Meulder, Jan Schreurs, Annabel Cock, and Bruno Notteboom. The chaotic result from thousands of individual decisions clearly started with the Belgian government (De Meulder et al.,1999, p.90).

1830

Belgium inherited a dense network of cities and villages from the middle ages. After gaining independence in 1830, these areas became self-governing. Having endured centuries of foreign rule, Belgians naturally distrusted government control, which stimulated local development (De Meulder et al.,1999, p.81).

1874

The Ministry of Railways introduced cheap season tickets for workers, making travel affordable and encouraging people to spread out into the countryside, starting a strategy to balance the workforce distribution in rural areas (De Meulder et al.,1999, p.81-83).

1889

The first Belgian Housing Act focused on encouraging individual home ownership, particularly in rural areas where land was cheaper. This act relied on the support of local communities and traditional networks to help build homes, but was criticised by urban liberals as favouring the countryside (De Meulder et al.,1999, p.83).

Early 1900s

Progressive thinkers – such as Emile Vandervelde, a socialist leader – were inspired by the garden city movement, which began by advising for policies that would encourage people to leave the cities and settle in rural areas. Vandervelde suggested using transportation strategies to promote de-urbanisation (De Meulder et al.,1999, p.86-87).

1922

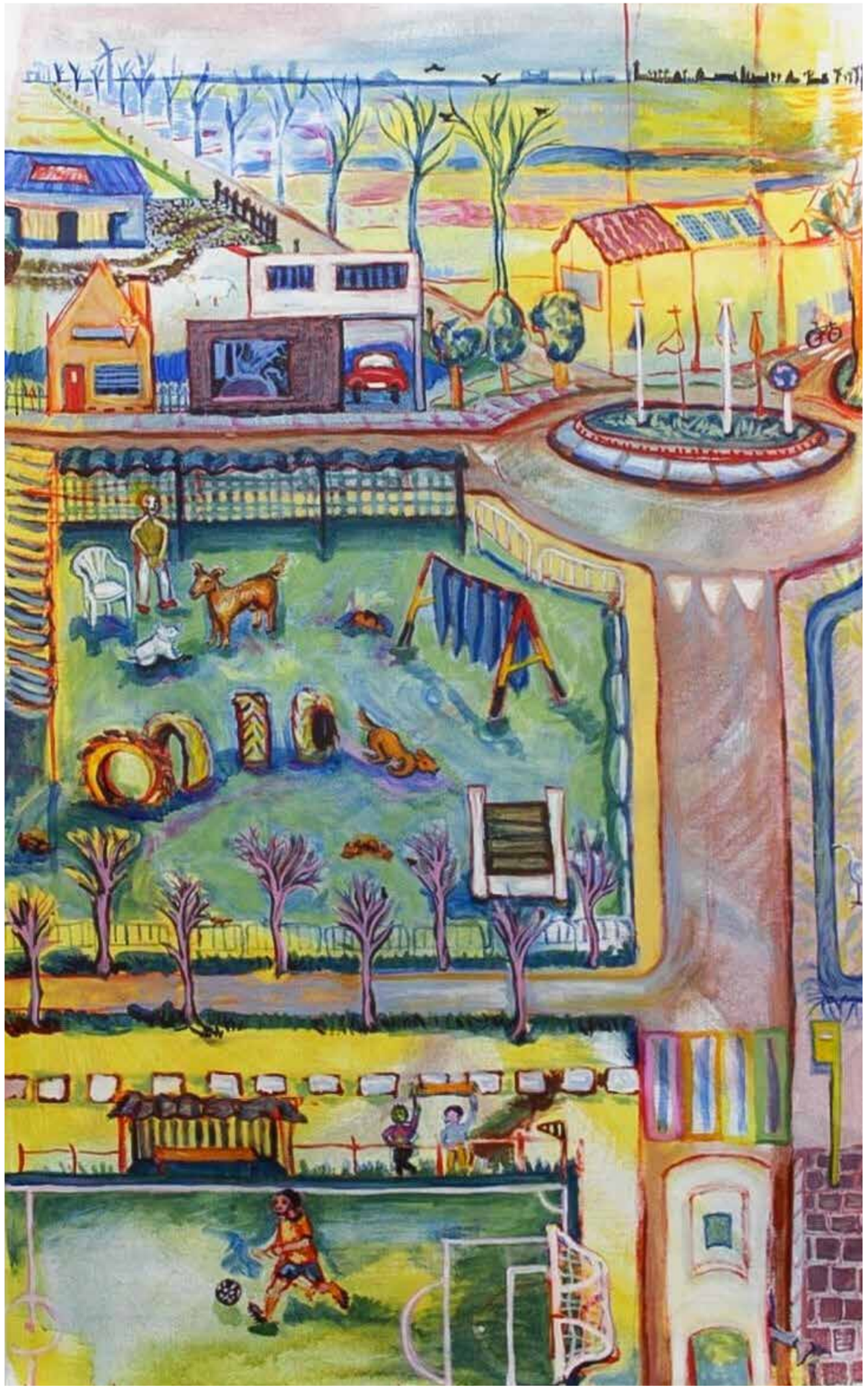
The Moyersoen Act made the government return to basic financial support for housing, with a focus on making homeownership affordable through low-cost loans (De Meulder et al.,1999, p.88).

Late 1930s

Influenced by socialist ideas, the government established the Nationale Maatschappij voor de Kleine Landeigendom [National Society for Small-scale Land Ownership] in 1936, which aimed to help unemployed city workers move back to the countryside (De Meulder et al.,1999, p.88).

1948

The De Taeye Act confirmed the government's focus on promoting individual home ownership through subsidies and favourable credit. This policy aimed not only to address housing issues but also to boost economic growth and employment in the construction sector (De Meulder et al.,1999, p.90).





Ever Meulen, *My fucking countryside*, in: Merian Magazine n°9/4, Hambourg, 1991, drawing



Walter De Mulder, *Oudenaarde*, 1961 (scan from photobook "Land en gezicht in Vlaanderen 1960 – 2000)



Filip Dujardin, *Fictions*, 2007-2014 (series of pictures/photobook, p.20-21)



Klaas De Baere, *Vlaamse vormen* (installation), 2018

THE LAYERS OF THE LANDSCAPE

There are different ways of dividing a landscape in layers. From my background in graphic design, I think in different layers, in the same way *Adobe* programs function – such as *Photoshop*, *Illustrator* and *Indesign* – when you are creating a type of artwork or collage.

I divide the Flemish landscape into different categories: The highest layer, the sky; the middle layer, the architecture; the layers in between, such as fences, streets; the natural layers, such as hedges or trees; and the bottom layer, the ground.

The landscape is the depiction of a part of the earth's surface, through spatially ordered natural elements against the background of an explicitly or implicitly present horizon (Bakker, 2004, p.31). A painting is not considered a landscape painting if it lacks a horizon, this is especially the way they approached landscape painting in the 15th - 16th century (Verlaak, 2019, p.22) .

The landscape reflects the perspective of urbanised humans, who have become disconnected from nature, viewing it as outsiders. Urban architecture has played a key role in shaping landscapes, both in terms of content and form. Architecture can be seen as a kind of observatory, an instrument that organises, measures, and interprets nature, making it a landscape in itself (Verlaak, 2019, p.30).

Over time, the landscape has evolved into an autonomous genre, free from the need for a narrative subject. The background of a bigger painting, which often was a landscape, used to be made by the assistant, while the master artist focused on the figures (Verlaak, 2019, p.30).

The landscape is an expression for orienting oneself in time and space and identifying with the magic of a place. It is an identification that is constantly changing. Just like a contemplation, the landscape is a snapshot in time, only to resume the action of daily life. It is an expression of being on the move and standing still. A dynamic that only comes to rest beyond the horizon, in the infinity of an escape point where there is no more time (Verlaak, 2019, P.258).

Nature represents natural reality and landscape represents the image that humans make of that natural habitat.

A landscape is nature portrayed by man. Trying to get a grip and make nature legible (Verlaak, 2019, p.21).

The work, the layers of the landscape is a deconstructed landscape. If you puzzle all the elements together you can create different types of landscapes. For instance, the cover of this book, Privaat Domein, is created with those elements.



Jean Brusselmans, *Lente*, 1935, KMSKA, olieverf op doek, 151 cm x 151 cm

The sky is “the space above the earth that you can see when you look up, where clouds and the sun, moon, and stars appear” (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.).

The sky is vast and shared by everyone, playing a crucial role in determining the climate, weather, time and season of a landscape. While the sky itself cannot be controlled by humans, our actions do influence it. For example, we impact the climate and Earth's temperature through activities such as burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and livestock farming (DG CLIMA, n.d.).



Jean Brusselmans, *winterlandschap (sneeuwlandschap)*, 1925, Mu.ZEE, Kunstmuseum aan zee, olieverf op doek, 81 cm x 98 cm

The Belgian weather, low, flat, wet, grey and sad

The weather is something you will more likely discuss during a small talk with somebody. Especially, when you have absolutely nothing else to talk about. In Belgium it is a topic to whine about strangers you pass on the street or your neighbours, who you normally just nod to as a sign of recognition.

Jasmijn Visser, a Dutch-German artist, defines talking about the weather as a cultural celebration. She claims that we are culturally intertwined with our climate and that talking about the weather is not confined to specific regions, but instead a universal human activity. She actively researches the relationship between climate and war (Jansen & Meertens instituut, 2023).

The Belgian weather has quite some mood swings. It is not unlikely to pass through all the different seasons in just one day. For this reason, people need to check their weather application on a more than daily basis, to make sure they are dressed according to the temperature. And to choose whether to cycle, drive, walk somewhere or to take public transportation.

While I looked at my weather application on the 22nd of April, it was 7°C at my current location (Ghent). I found myself comparing our weather forecast to the weather conditions in other countries. In my weather application, I have an overview of cities that I have visited and places where I have lived. Ghent, Belgium, the city where I currently live, study, and where I am at the moment, 7°C and cloudy. The second destination on the list is Mexico-City, Mexico, the city that I visited last summer with my friends from Los Angeles, 28°C and sunny. Meise, Belgium, my hometown, 8°C and partly cloudy. The fourth location, Cesena, Italy, the place where my partner grew up and lives, 16°C and partly sunny. In New York, New York, U.SA., that I visited two summers ago, where I reunited with my friends from Los Angeles, 16°C and partly sunny. Taormina, Sicily, where I went with a friend in September 2021, 17°C and sunny. Amsterdam, The Netherlands, a place I visit on a regular basis, 8°C and rainy. Paris, France, another place that I visit regularly, last time in August 2023, 9°C and partly cloudy. Stockholm, Sweden, where I went in November 2021, to pay a visit to a friend studying there, 1°C and cloudy. Los Angeles, California, U.SA., where I studied and lived for 4 months in 2019, 21°C and sunny. Urbino, where I lived and studied for 6 months, in 2022, 12°C and partly cloudy. The last location on the list is Bologna, the city I visited to escape from Urbino, 16°C and partly sunny.

I inherited this ritual of comparison from my father, who is forever analysing, predicting, and comparing data. He has a background in industrial engineering therefore, he loves mathematics and numbers. His weather application includes an overview of Valencia, a city in Spain, where he dreams of buying a house and working from a sunny terrace.

Belgium is well known for its grey weather. Raoul Blanchard, a French geographer described Belgium in 1906 as low, flat, wet, grey and sad in his book *La Flandre*. As Blanchard described it, the grey that Flanders is overlaid with, also has an emotional value. According to him it is a dejected grey. Thierry De Cordier turns these different shades of grey into paintings (Laureyns, 2013, p.37-38). The Belgian singer, Angèle, on the other hand, expresses her lack in relation to the Belgian climate *"Quand le ciel gris et la pluie me manquent, je vais mieux quand j'te vois* (2021)."

Even though I really enjoyed staying in the sun, during my stay in Los Angeles, I must admit that I missed the clouds and the rain, after a while. Los Angeles is located in California, which is also referred to as The Golden State. During my four month stay in 2019, I only experienced a few days of rain. It does not come as a surprise that last year, 2023, they experienced one of the driest years on record. California has been experiencing long periods of drought for years now. Those periods of drought escalate into wildfires (H2O ACTUEEL, 2023).



Thierry De Cordier, *Grisaille (étude pour un rideau de pluie)*, 1991, tempera, 35,5 × 26,5 cm

Bad weather is a human shaped term

Good weather is often linked with words like sunny, blue, warm and dry, while bad weather is more likely to be described as rainy, grey, cold and wet. Human beings have created these terms because of the feeling they have with this kind of weather, because of its impact on their mood. But for plants, for animals, for human beings and for the planet, the right amount of rain is necessary. If there would only be "the good weather", there would be a huge problem of drought, which is already the case right now in many places, because of global warming.

The weather does not only has an impact on somebody's mood, it also has a significant influence on the human activities and the behaviour they show (Liu, C., Susilo, Y.O., Karlström, A. 2017). Different studies have shown that someone's mood, concentration, optimism, self-confidence, aggression, and performance can be affected by the weather conditions (Sugianto, Huang, 2020). This statement reminds me of the summer of 2023, that I spent in Cesena, Italy, together with my partner, with an average temperature of 33 degrees. During that month I can assure you that there were a lot of conflicts, because of the warm temperatures. I remember that one day we decided to go for a hike in the mountains, where the temperature dropped, I would say it was about 20 degrees there. And that day was a day without conflicts, I do not think that this was a coincidence.

Weather is known to have an impact on human behaviour and decision-making. Factors such as temperature, precipitation, hours of sunshine, rain or snow fall, lightning, thunder, and humidity can influence these behaviours. Overall, weather plays a significant role in shaping human activities and behaviour, impacting various aspects of daily life (Brum-Bastos et al., 2018).

1.SKY

The highest layer

S1.1



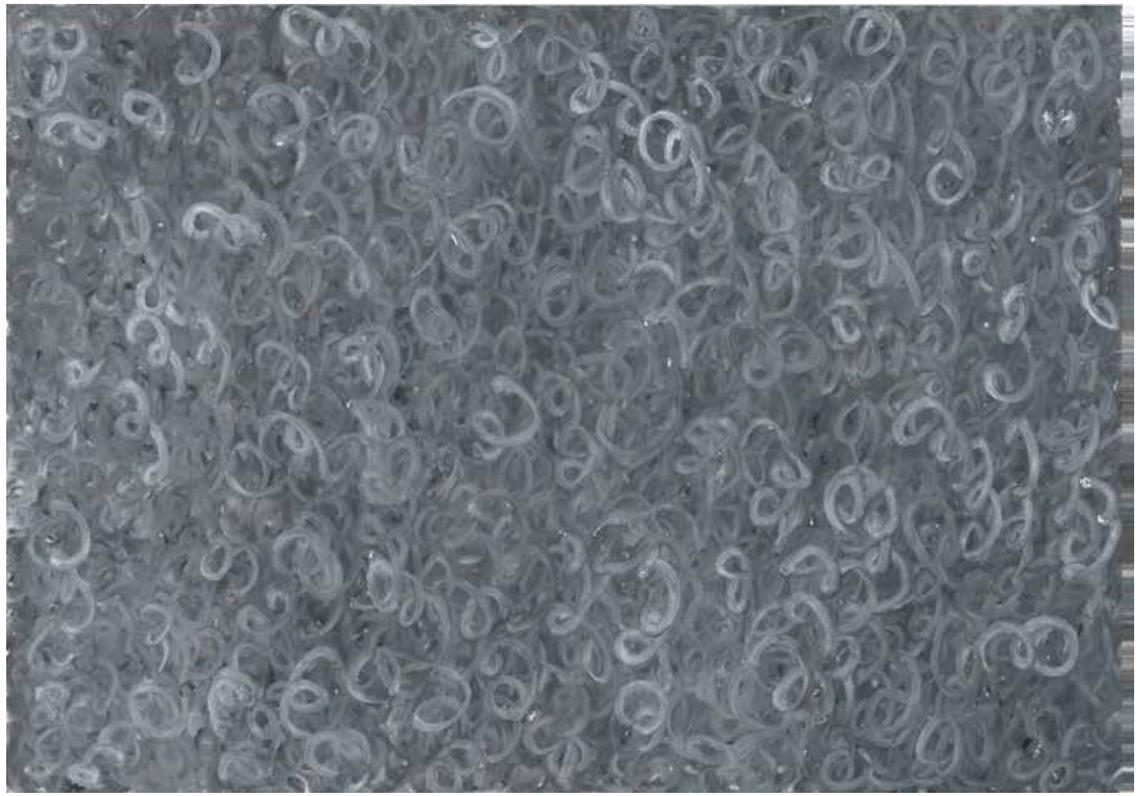
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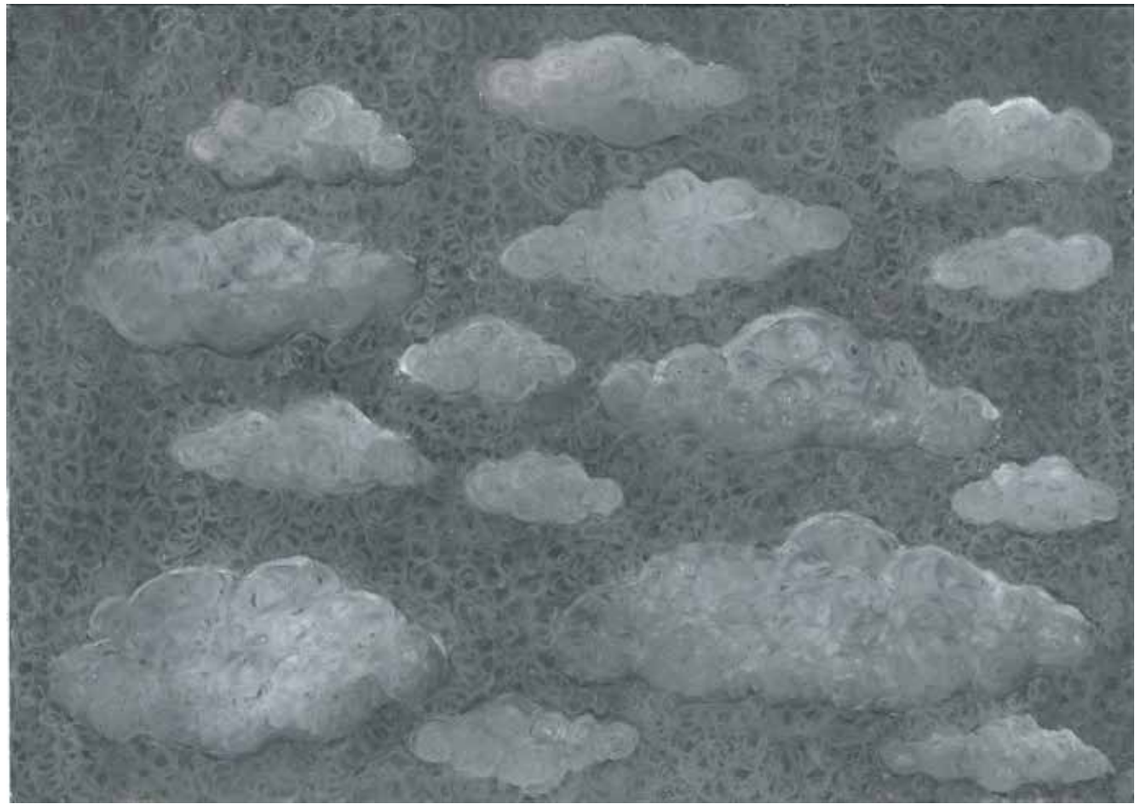
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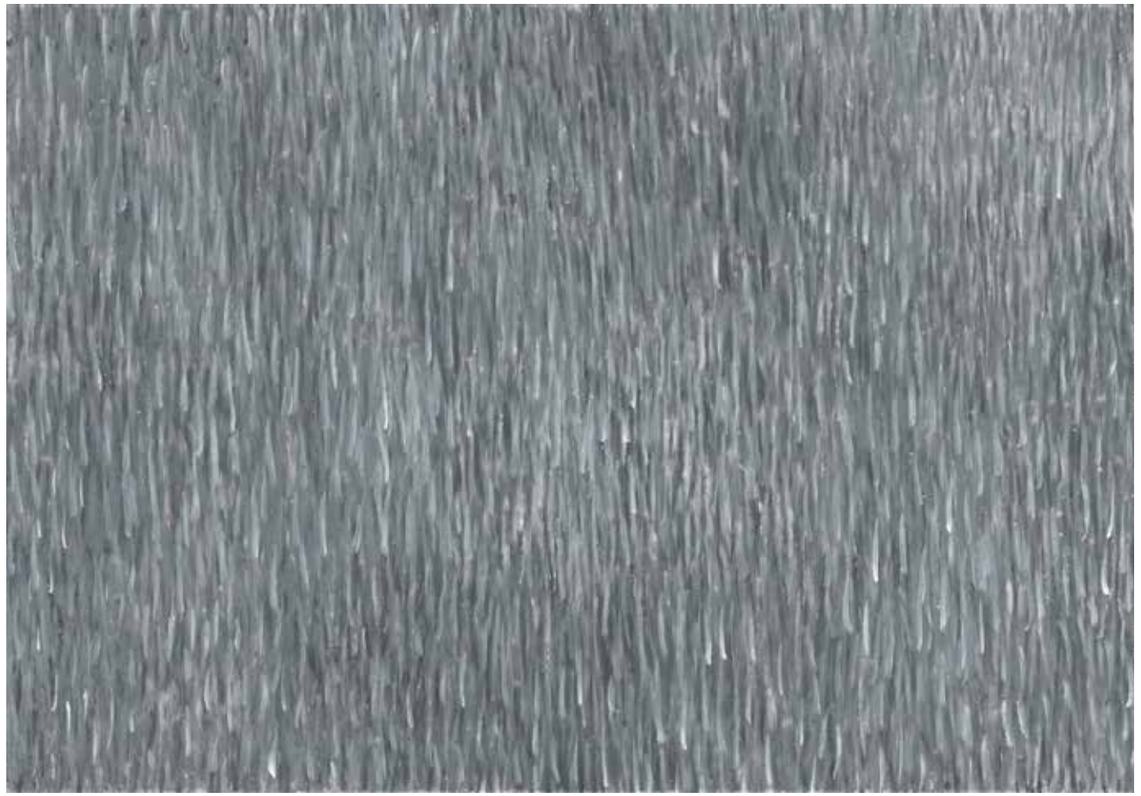
S1.4



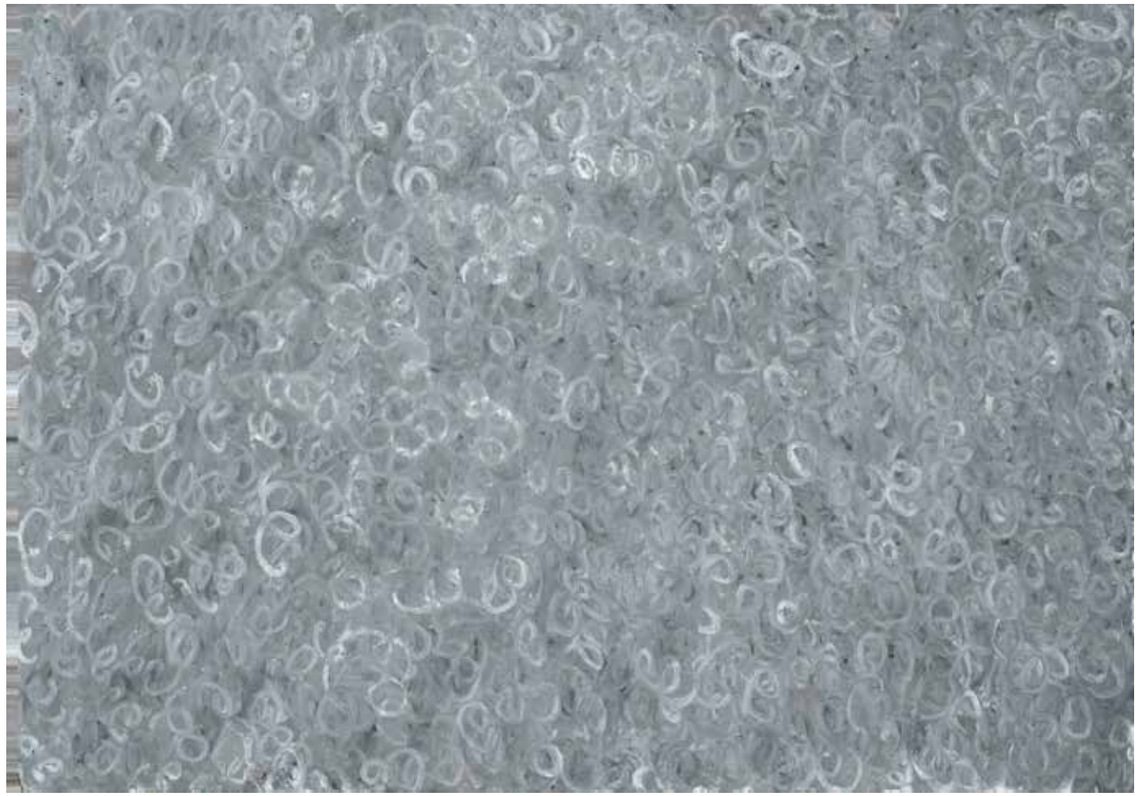
S1.5



S1.6



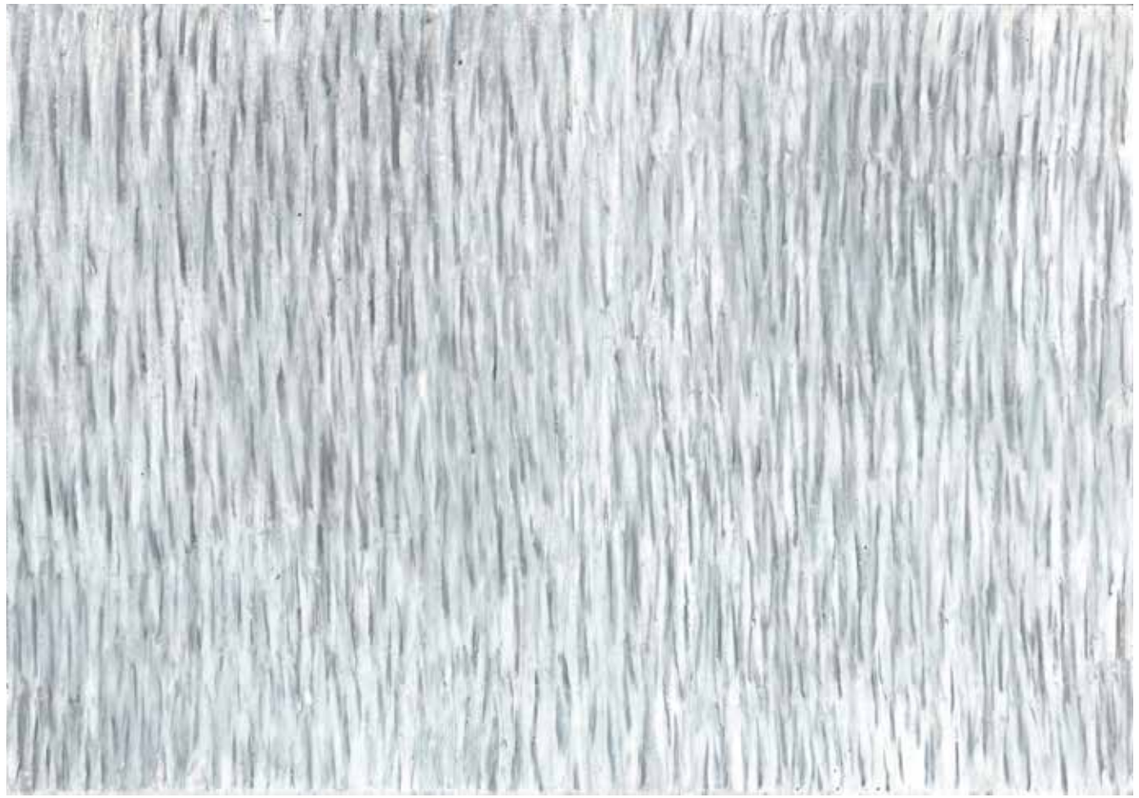
S1.7



S1.8



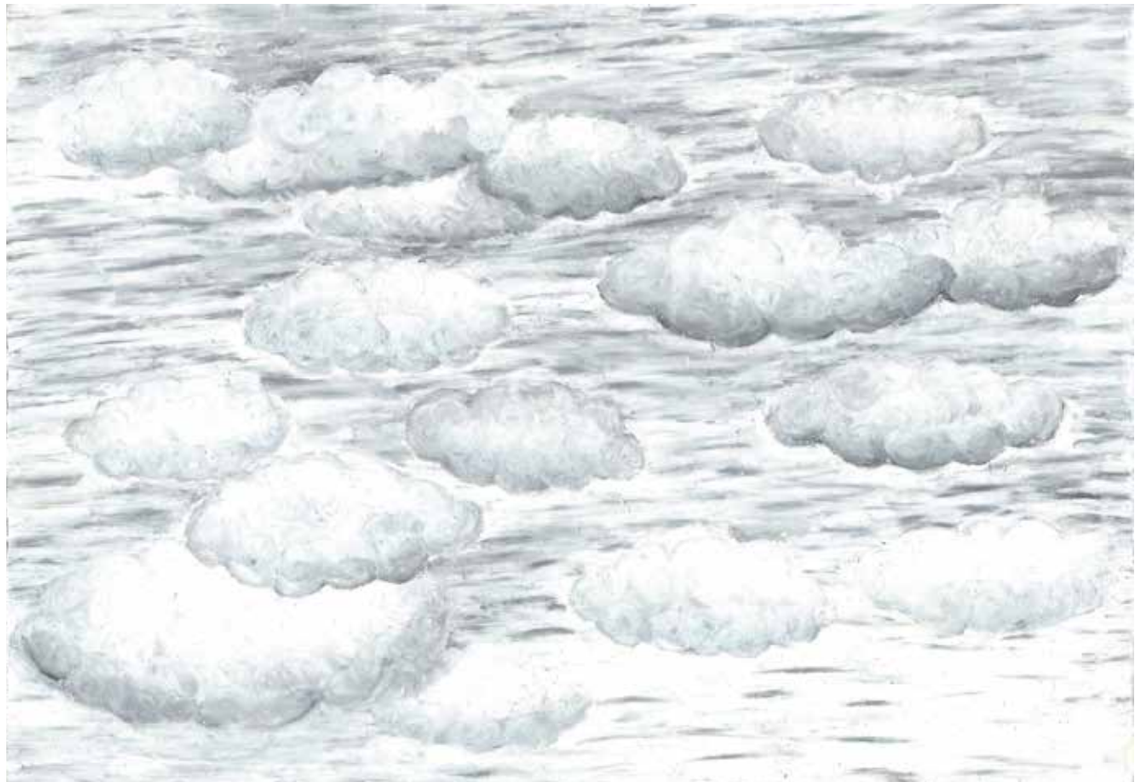
S1.9



S1.10



S1.11



S1.12



S1.13



S1.14



S1.15



S1.16



S1.17



S1.18



S1.19



S1.20



1.SKY

The highest layer



S1.1



S1.2



S1.3



S1.4



S1.5



S1.6



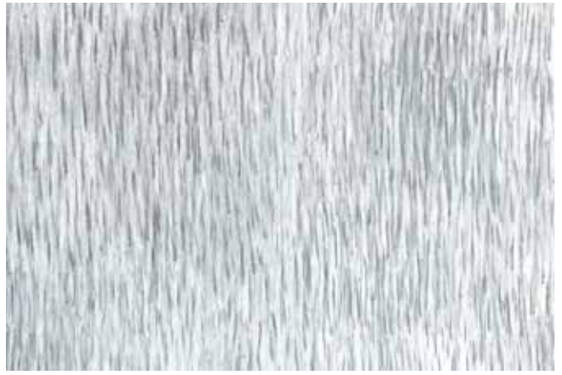
S1.7



S1.8



S1.9



S1.10



S1.11



S1.12

1.SKY

The highest layer



S1.13



S1.14



S1.15



S1.16



S1.17



S1.18



S1.19

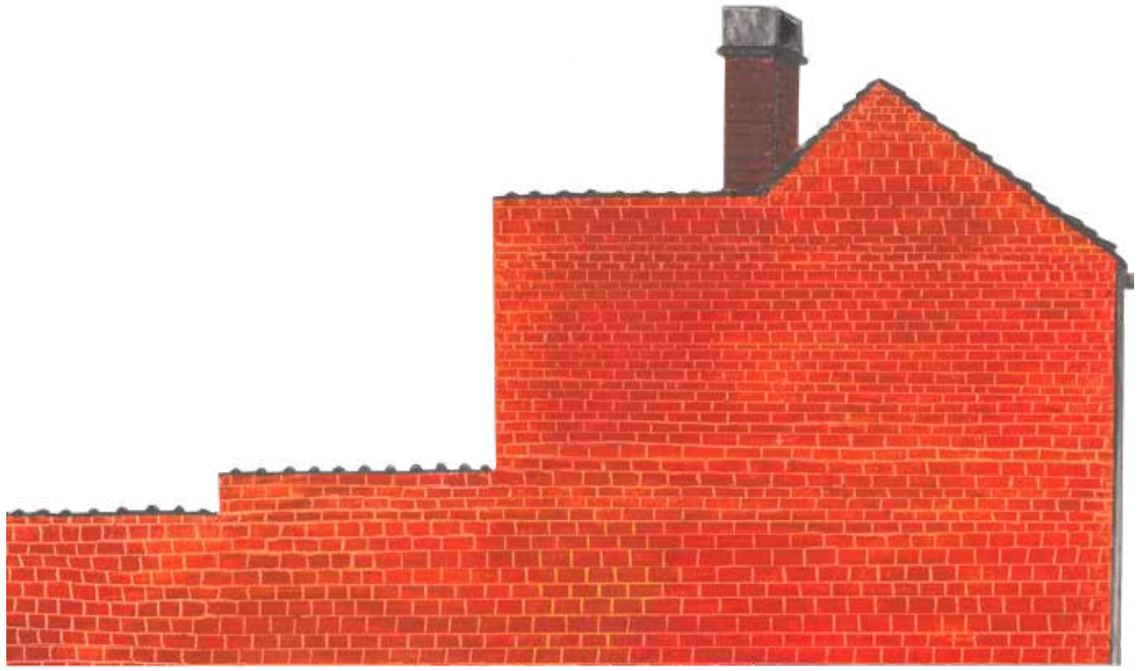


S1.20

2. ARCHITECTURE

The layer underneath the highest layer

A2.1



A2.2



A2.3





A2.4

2.
ARCHITECTURE

The layer underneath the highest layer



A2.1



A2.2



A2.3



A2.4

3. PHYSICAL BOUNDARY OF A PROPERTY

The layer in between

3.1. FENCE

The layer in between

F3.1.1



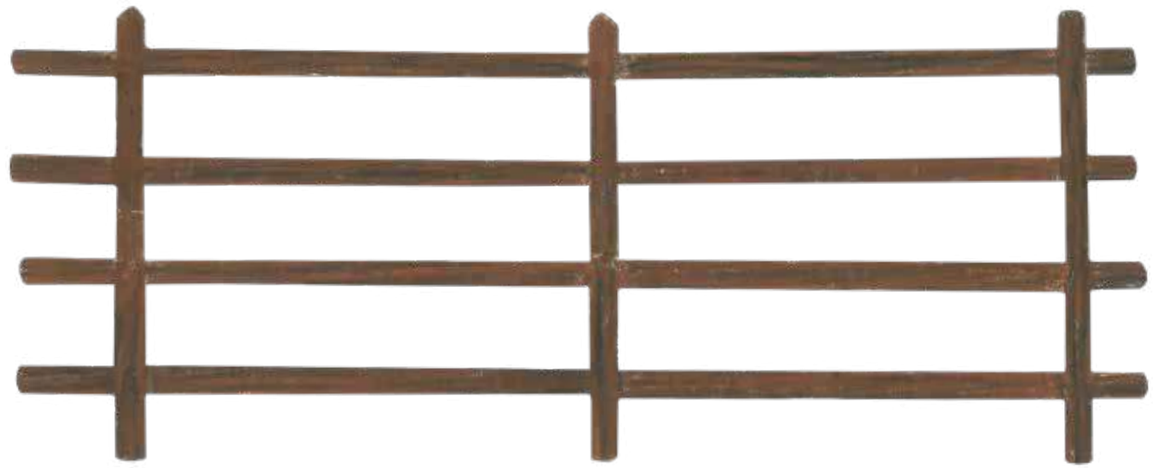
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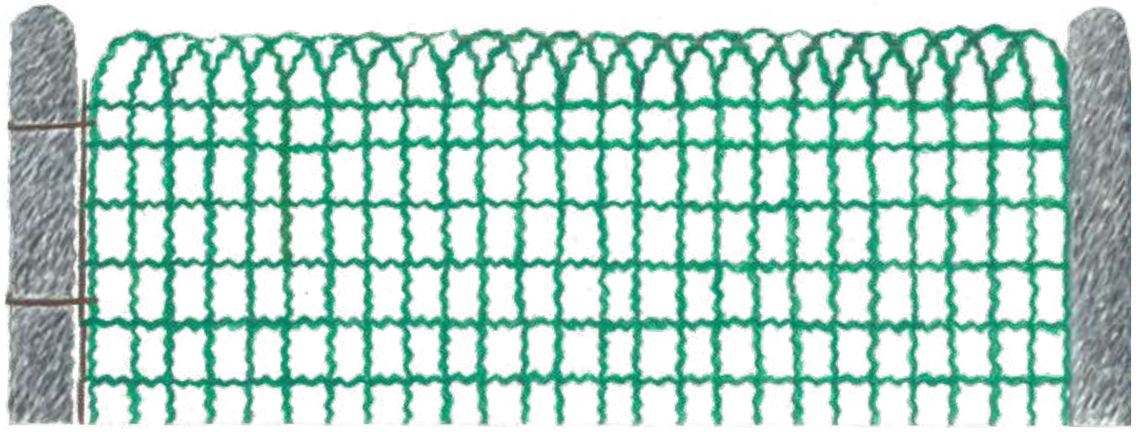
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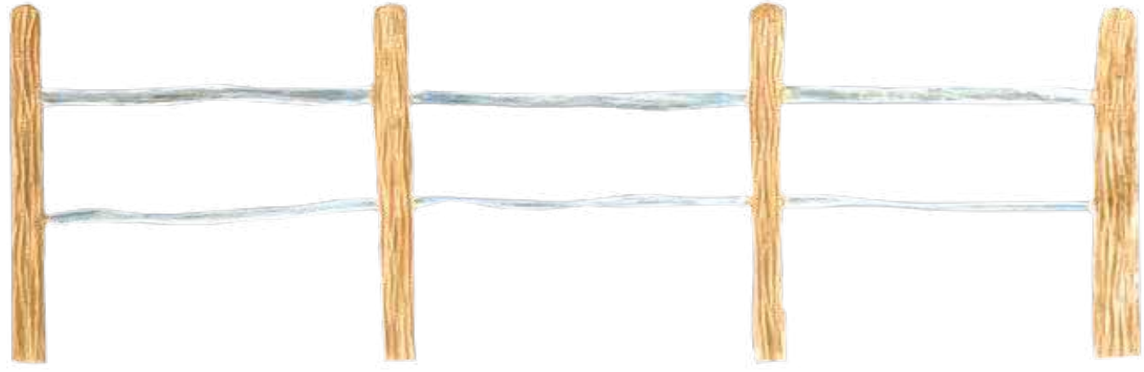
H3.2.4



H3.2.5



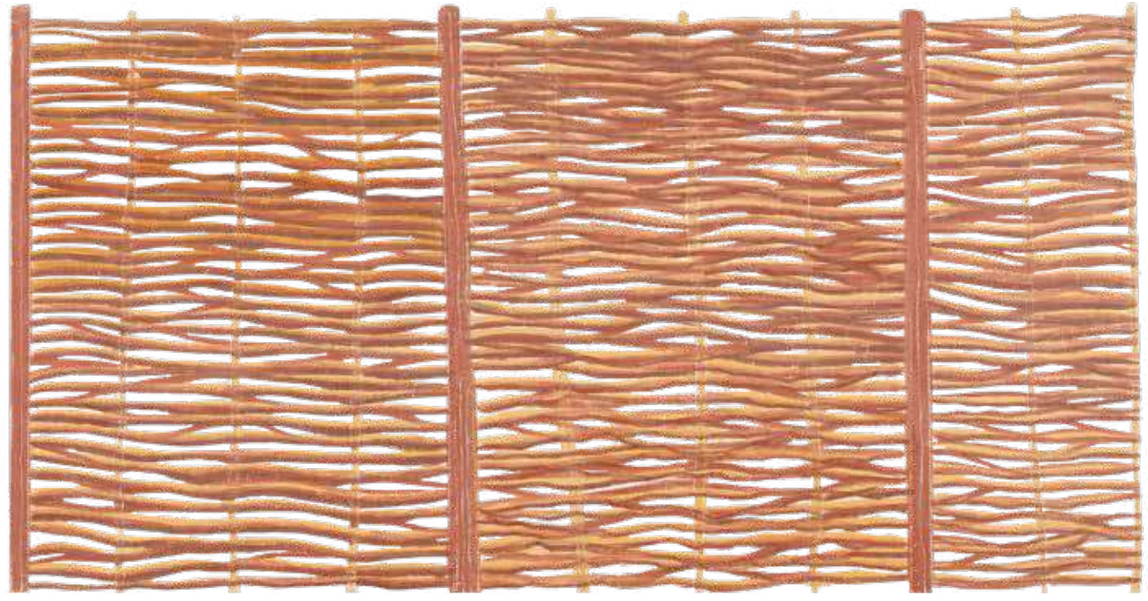
H3.2.6



H3.2.7

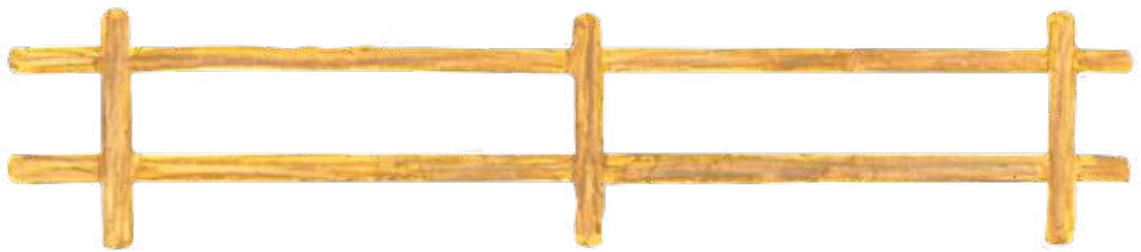


H3.2.8



H3.2.8

H3.2.9



H3.2.10



H3.2.11



H3.2.12



3. PHYSICAL BOUNDARY OF A PROPERTY

3.1. FENCE

The layer in between



H3.1.1



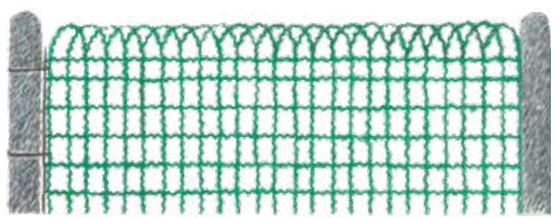
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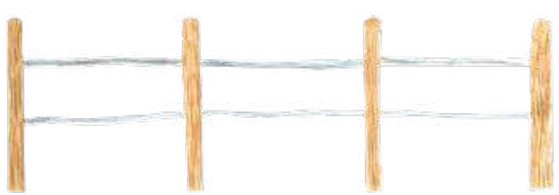
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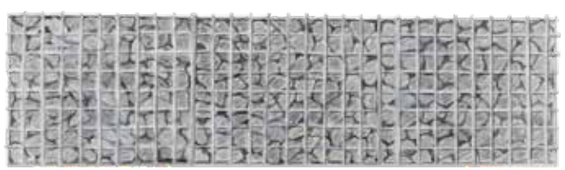
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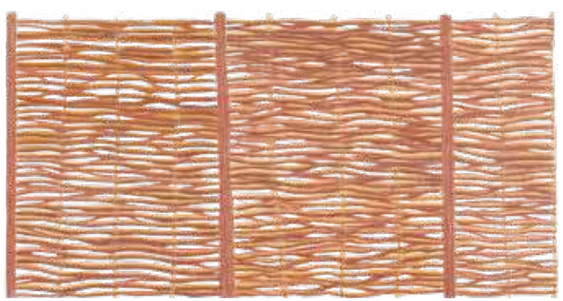
H3.1.5



H3.1.6



H3.1.7



H3.1.8



H3.1.9



H3.1.10



H3.1.11

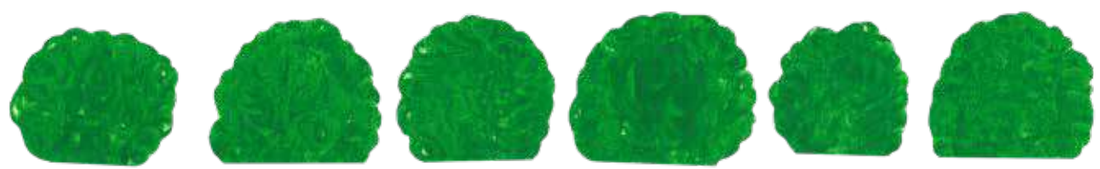


H3.1.12

3.2. HEDGE

The layer in between

H3.2.1



H3.2.2



H3.2.2



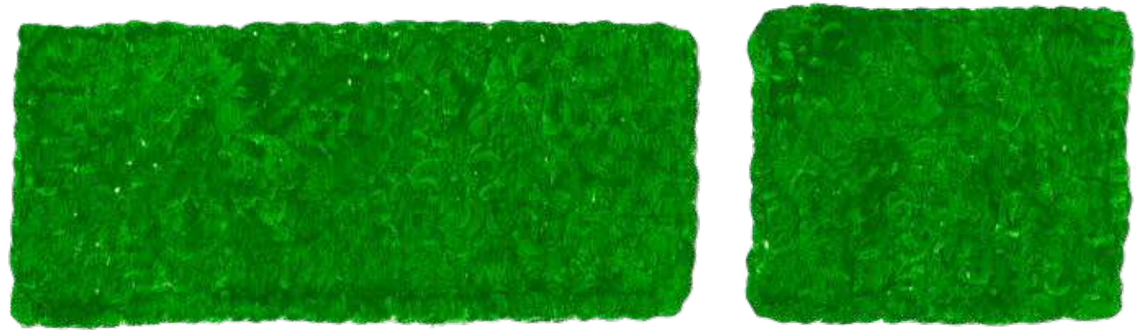
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H3.2.4



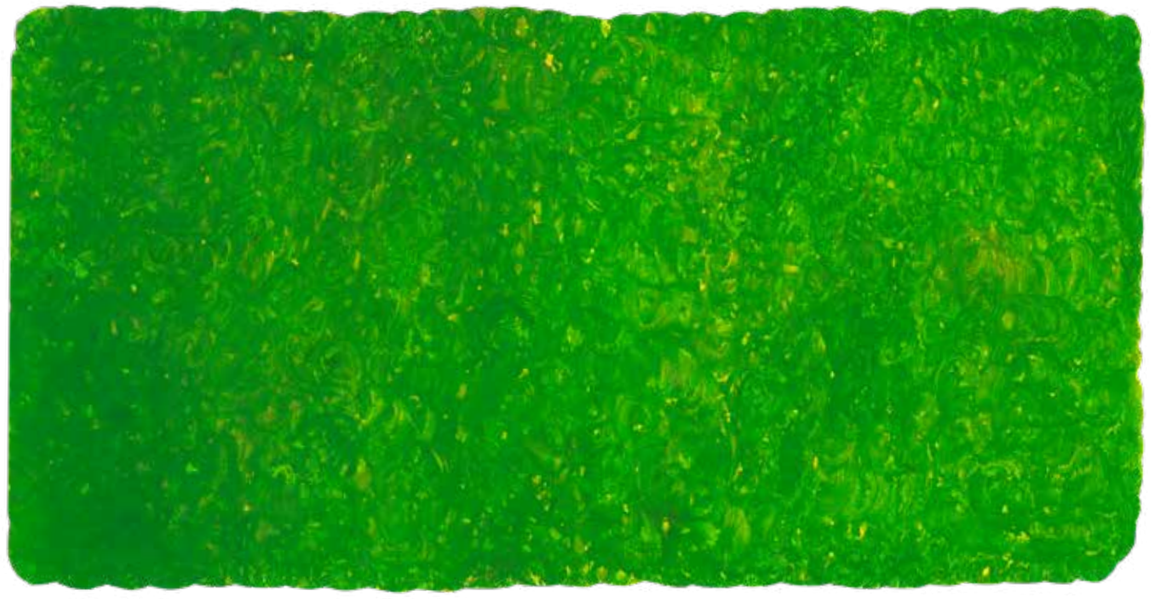
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H3.2.6



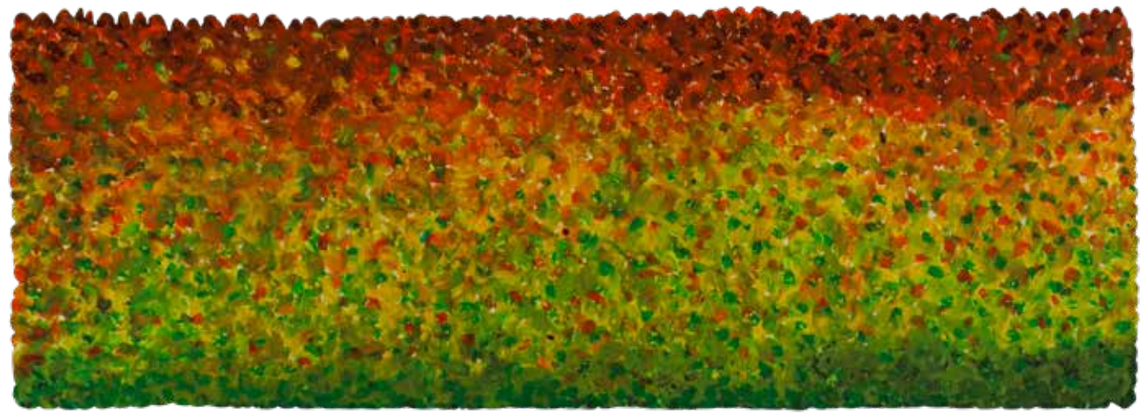
H3.2.7



H3.2.8



H3.2.9



H3.2.10



H3.2.10

3. PHYSICAL BOUNDARY OF A PROPERTY

3.2. HEDGE

The layer in between



H3.2.1



H3.2.2



H3.2.3



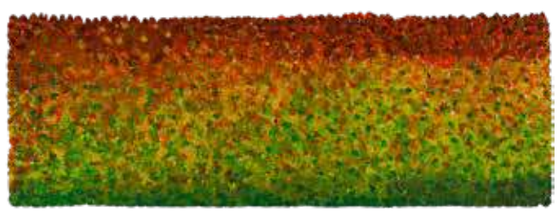
H3.2.4



H3.2.5



H3.2.6



H3.2.7



H3.2.8



H3.2.9



H3.2.10



H3.2.11

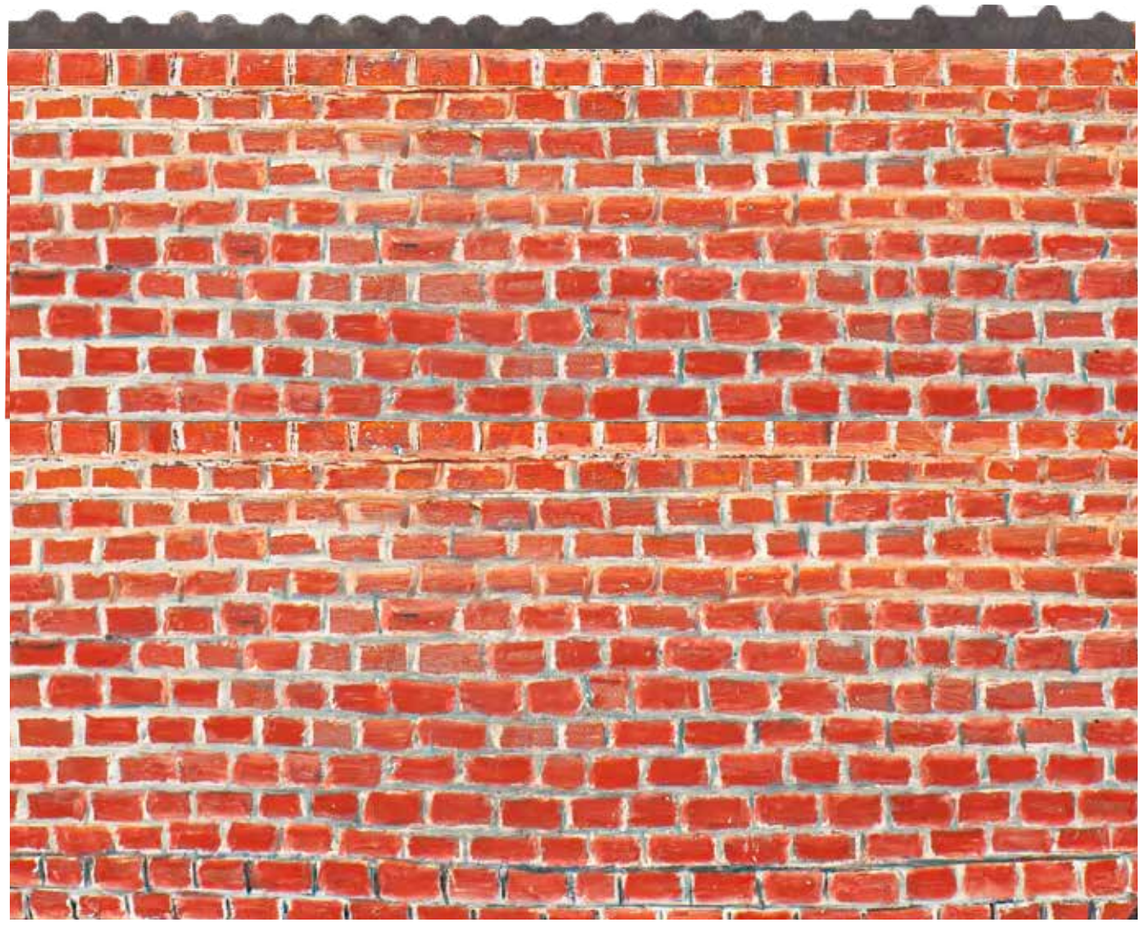


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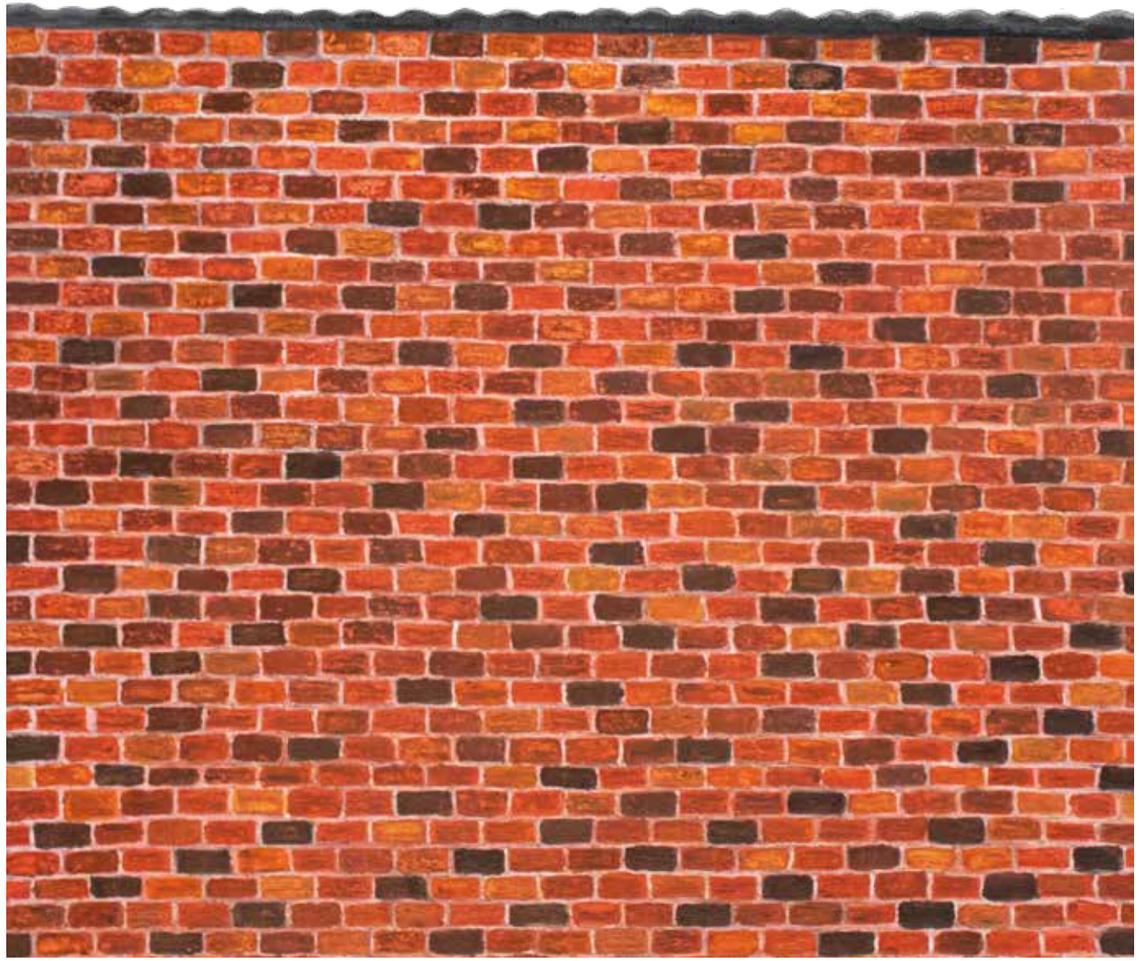
3.3. WALL

The layer in between

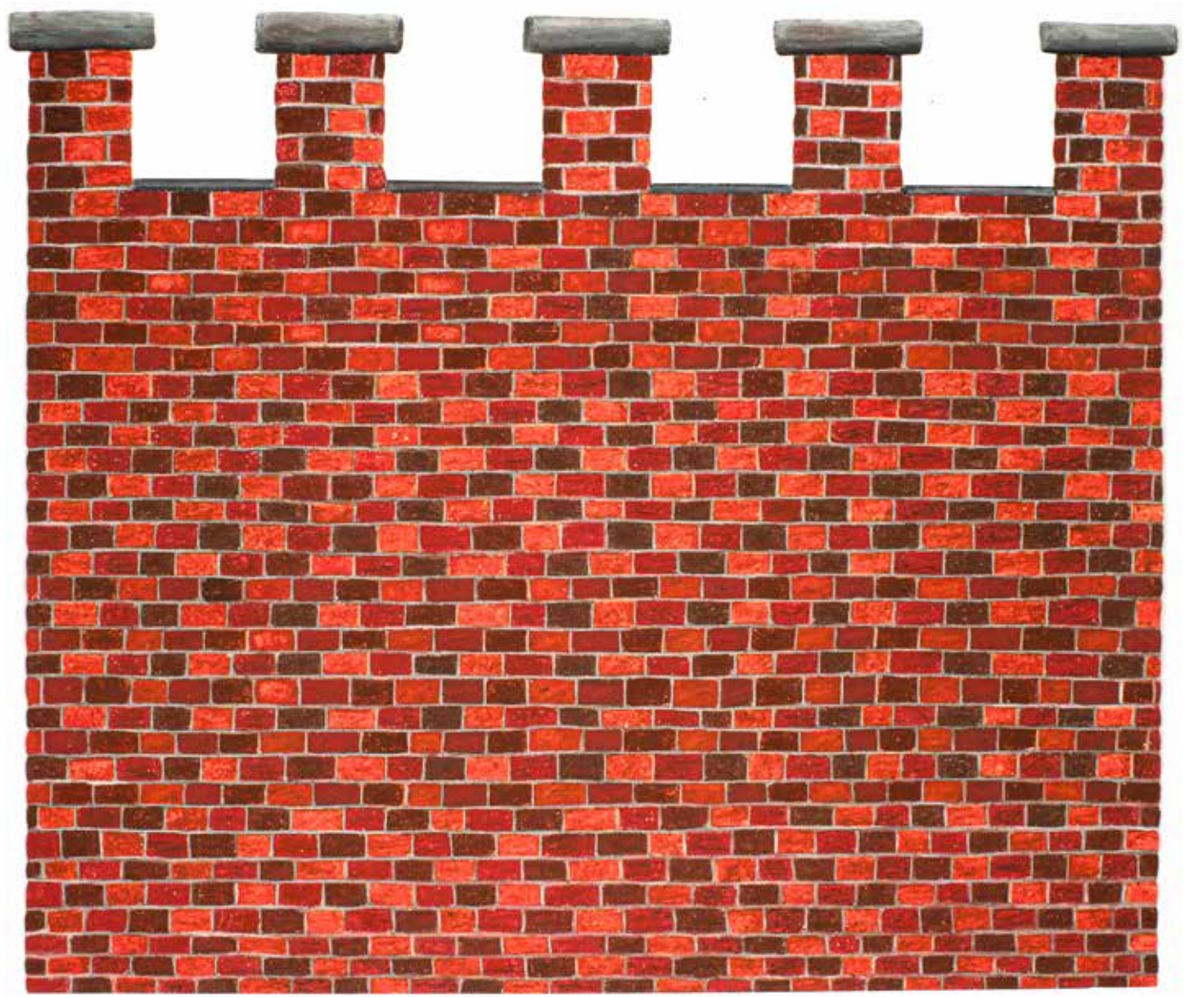
W3.3.1



W3.3.2



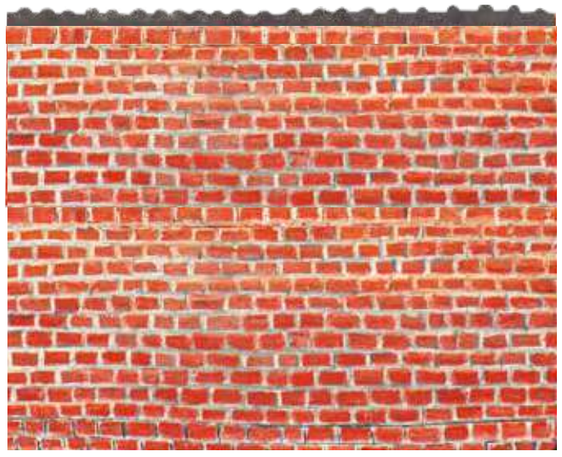
W3.3.3



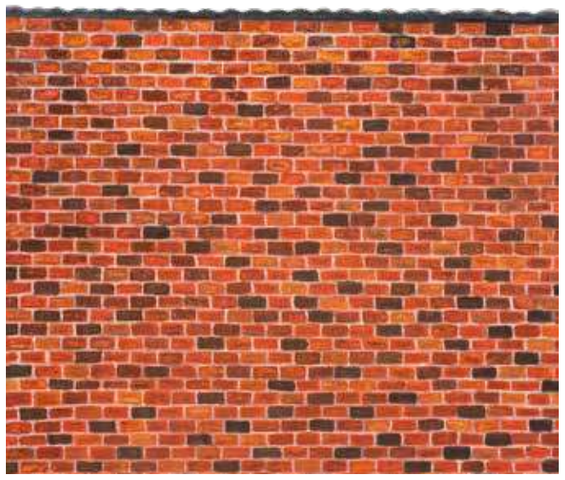
3. PHYSICAL BOUNDARY OF A PROPERTY

3.3. WALL

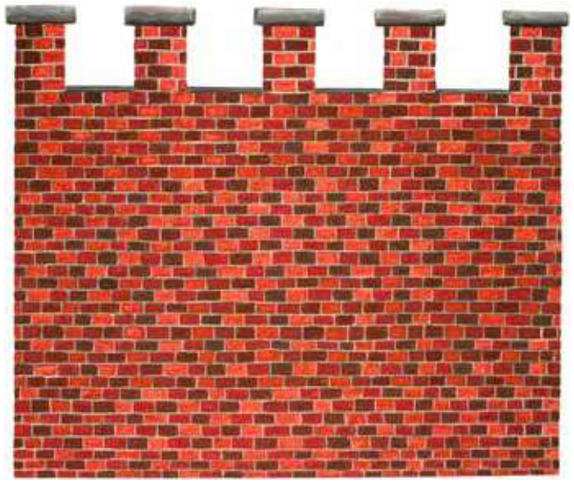
The layer in between



W3.3.1



W3.3.2

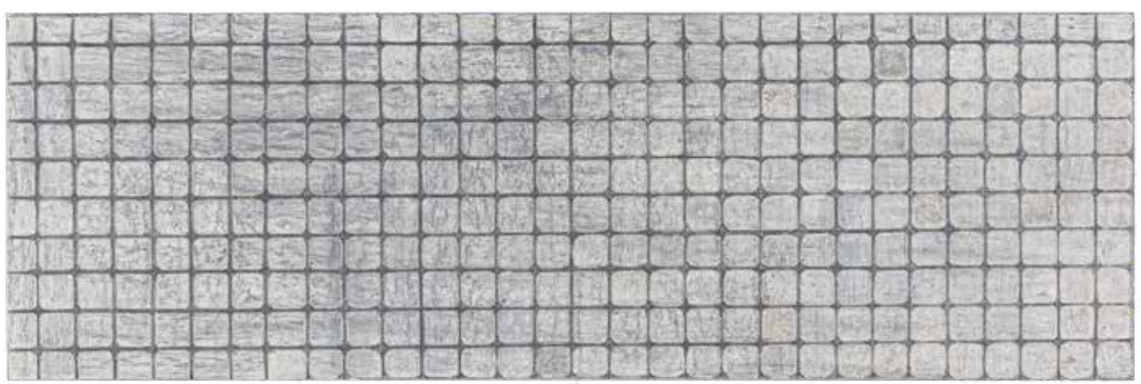


W3.3.3

4. ROAD

The layer above the bottom layer

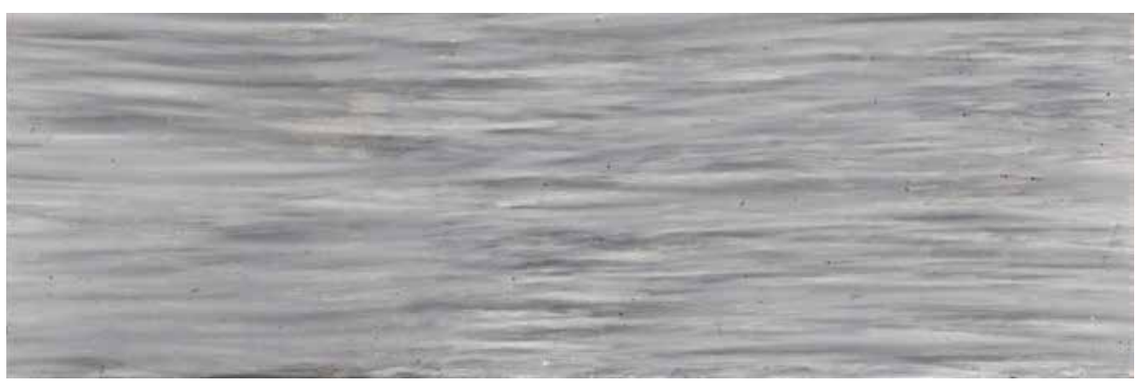
R4.1



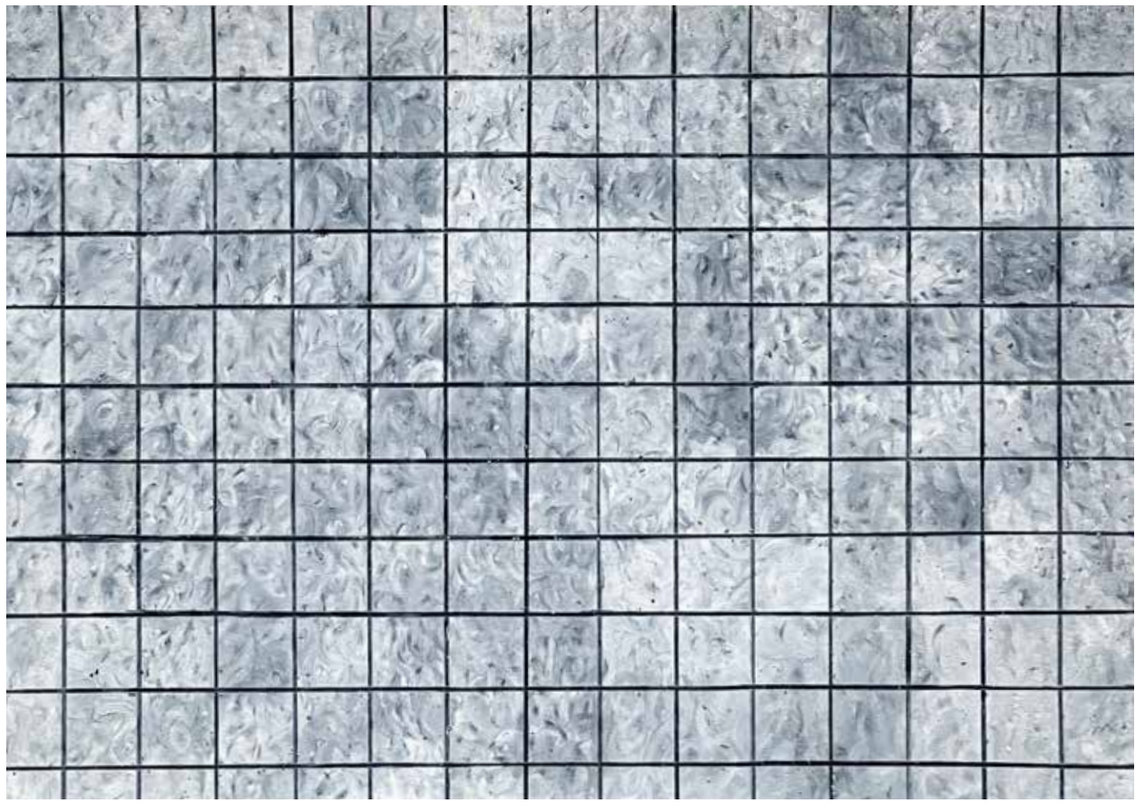
R4.2



R4.3



R4.4



R4.5



R4.6



R4.7



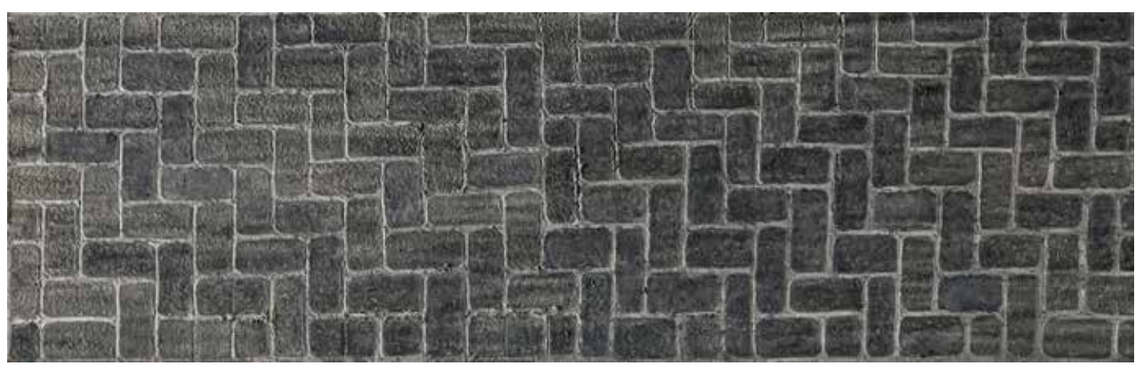
R4.8



R4.9



R4.10



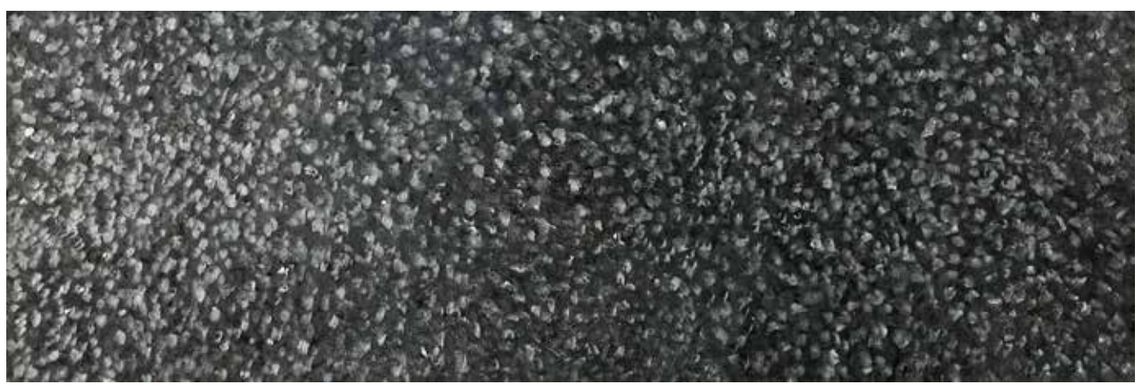
R4.11



R4.12



R4.13

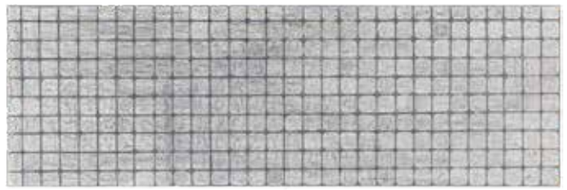


R4.14



4. ROAD

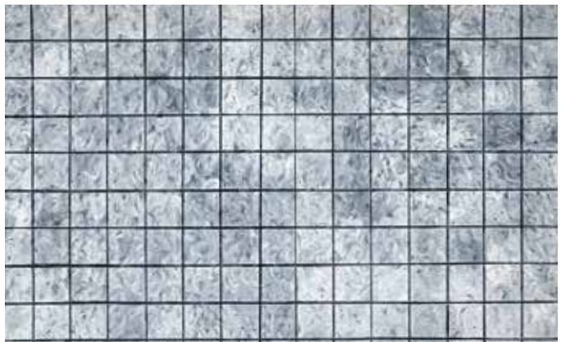
The layer above the bottom layer



R4.1



R4.2



R4.3



R4.4



R4.5



R4.6



R4.7



nr.8



R4.9



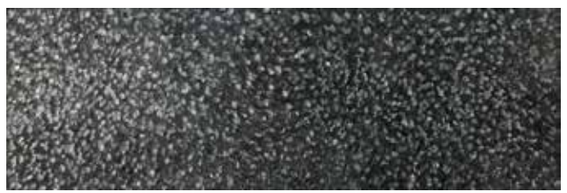
R4.10



R4.11



R4.12



R4.13



R4.14

5. GROUND

The bottom or last layer

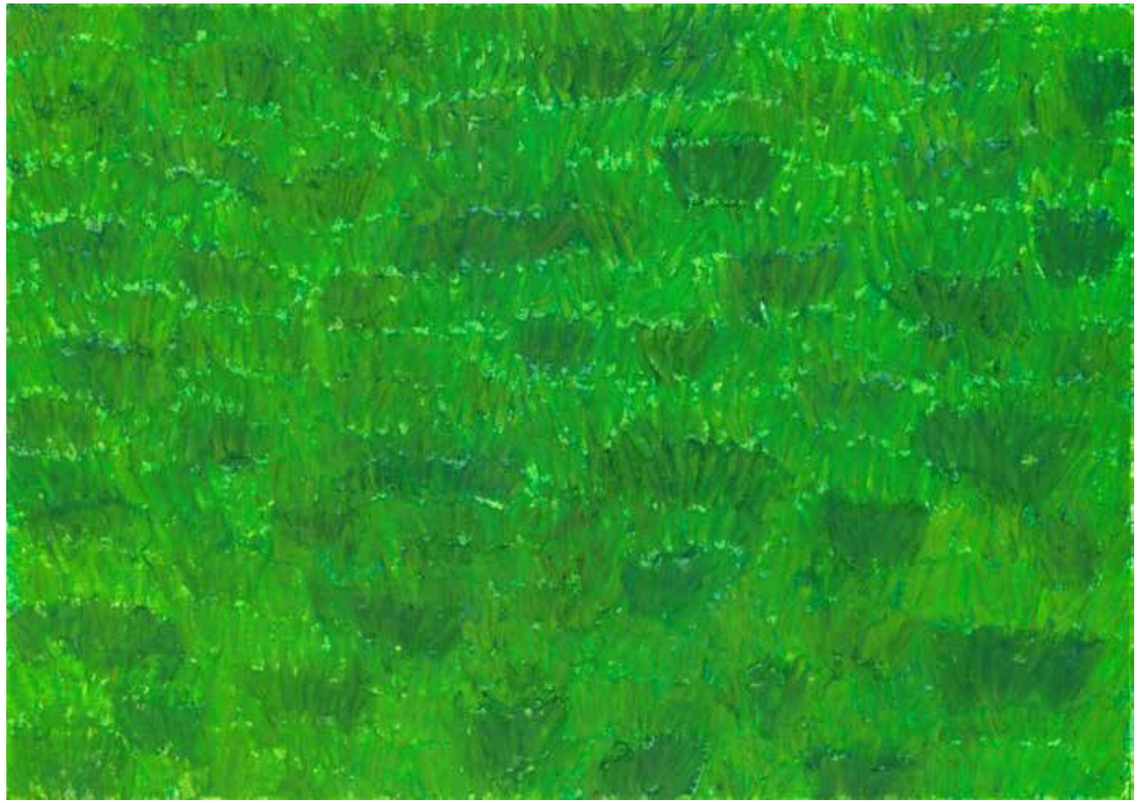
G5.1



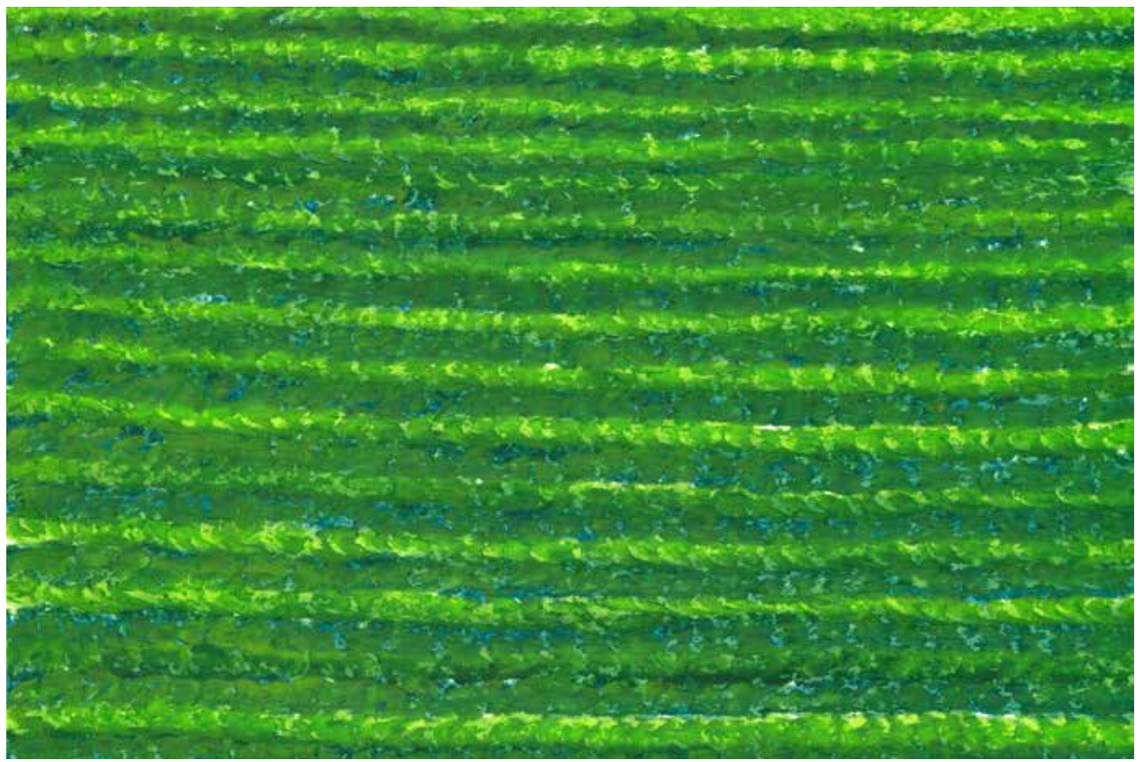
G5.2



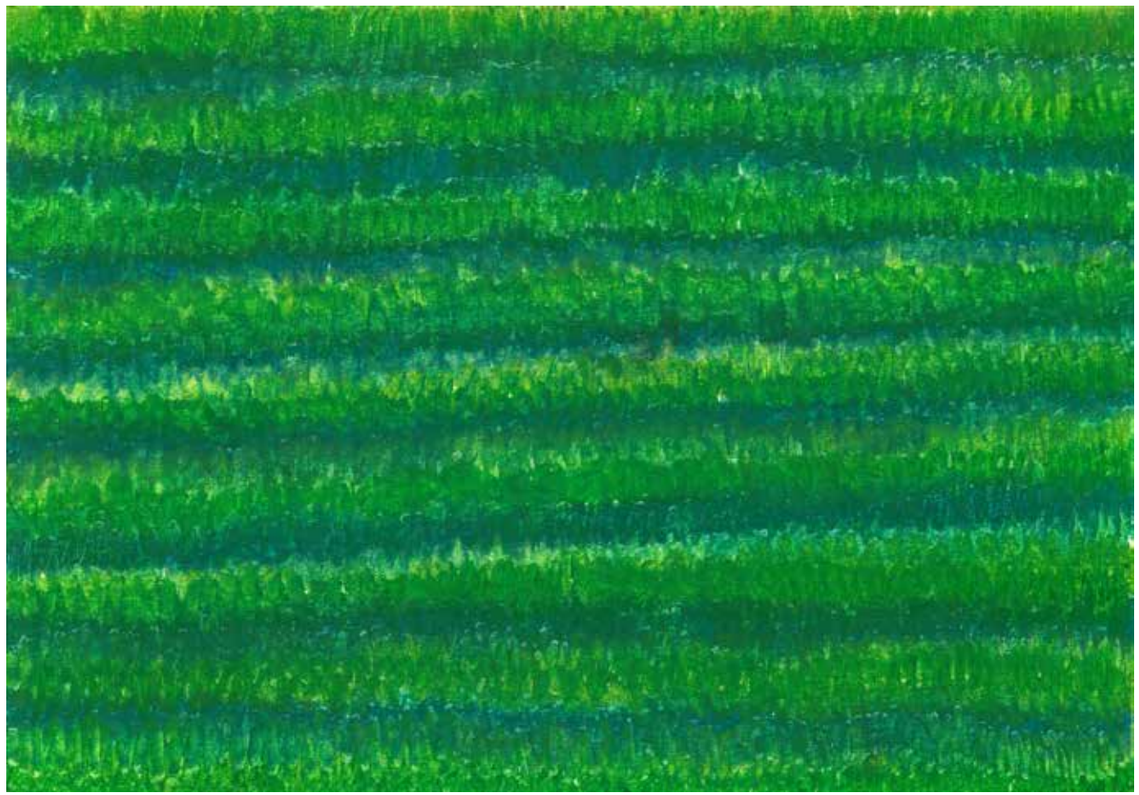
G5.3



G5.4



G5.5



G5.6



G5.7



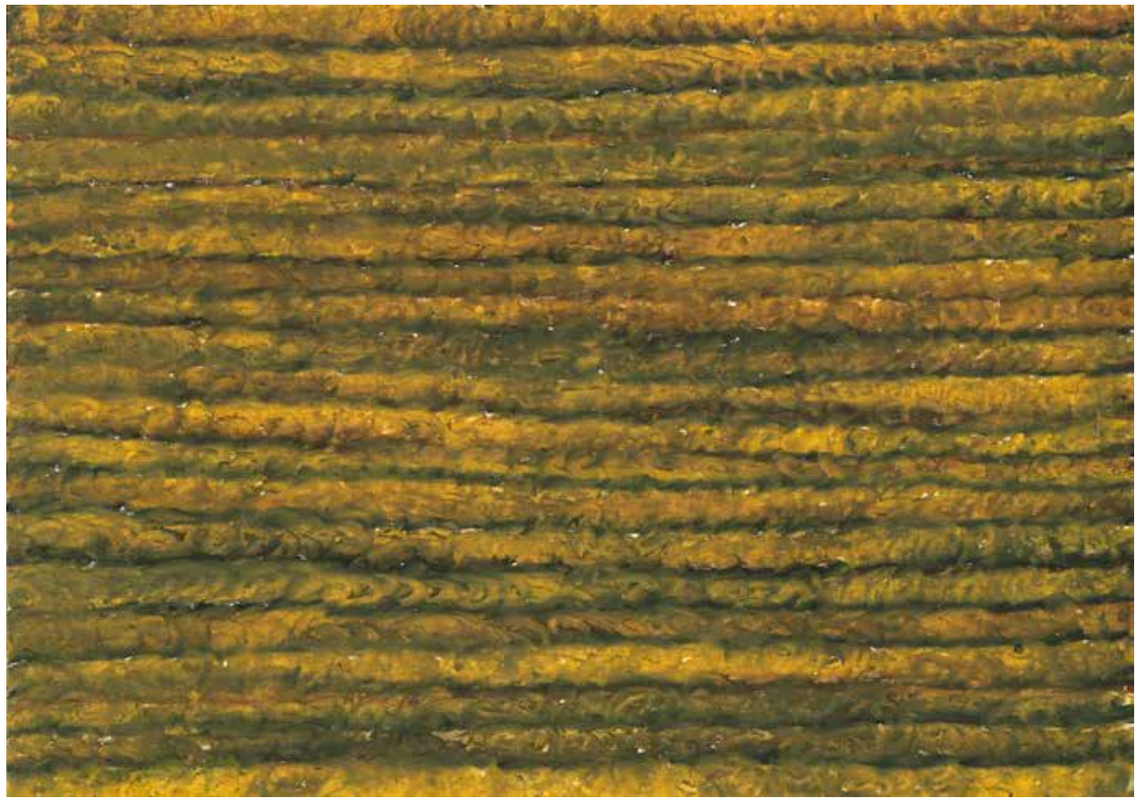
G5.8



G5.9



G5.10



G5.11



G5.12



G5.13



5. GROUND

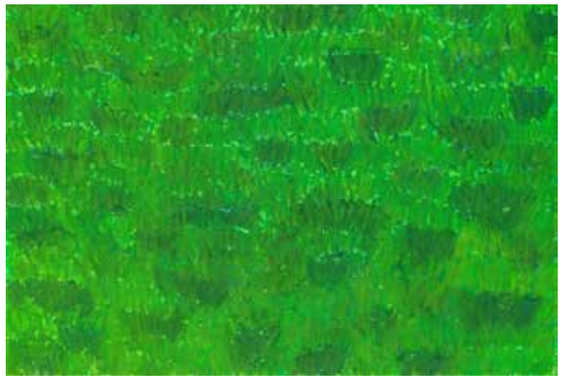
The bottom or last layer



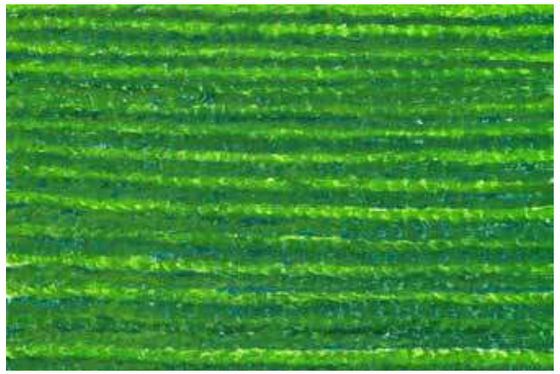
G5.1



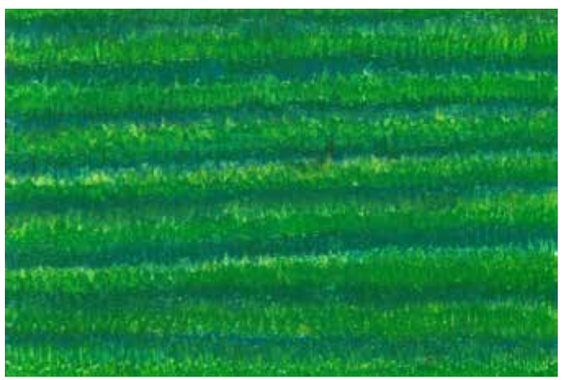
G5.2



G5.3



G5.4



G5.5



G5.6



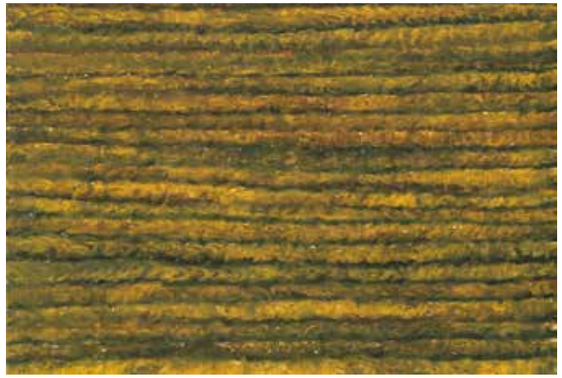
G5.7



G5.8



G5. 9



G5.10



G5.11



G5.12

5. GROUND

The bottom or last layer



G5.13

ARTIST INTERVIEWS

Artist
Jana Vasiljević

Year of birth
1990

Hometown
Belgrado, Serbia

Place of residence
Gent, Belgium

Type of artist
Multidisciplinary artist, illustrator, printmaker, painter, comics artist, curator, writer and publisher

Education
2005 – 2009
Packaging design
Belgrado School of Design, Serbia

2010 - 2013
Bachelor's Illustration LUCA Gent, Belgium

2011
Exchange Illustration, UAL, London, U.K.

2013 – 2014
Master's Illustration LUCA Gent, Belgium

First Encounter
I have known Jana Vasiljević since 2017, around this time I started my bachelor's in graphic design at LUCA Gent and Vasiljević was working there as an assistant in the screen-printing laboratory. At that time, I wasn't familiar with her work yet.

Interview
Date
21 February 2024

Transportation
Bicycle

Travel time
To go there: 14 min.
To return: 3 min.

Location
9000 Gent

Communication
1 E-mail
12 Instagram Direct Messages

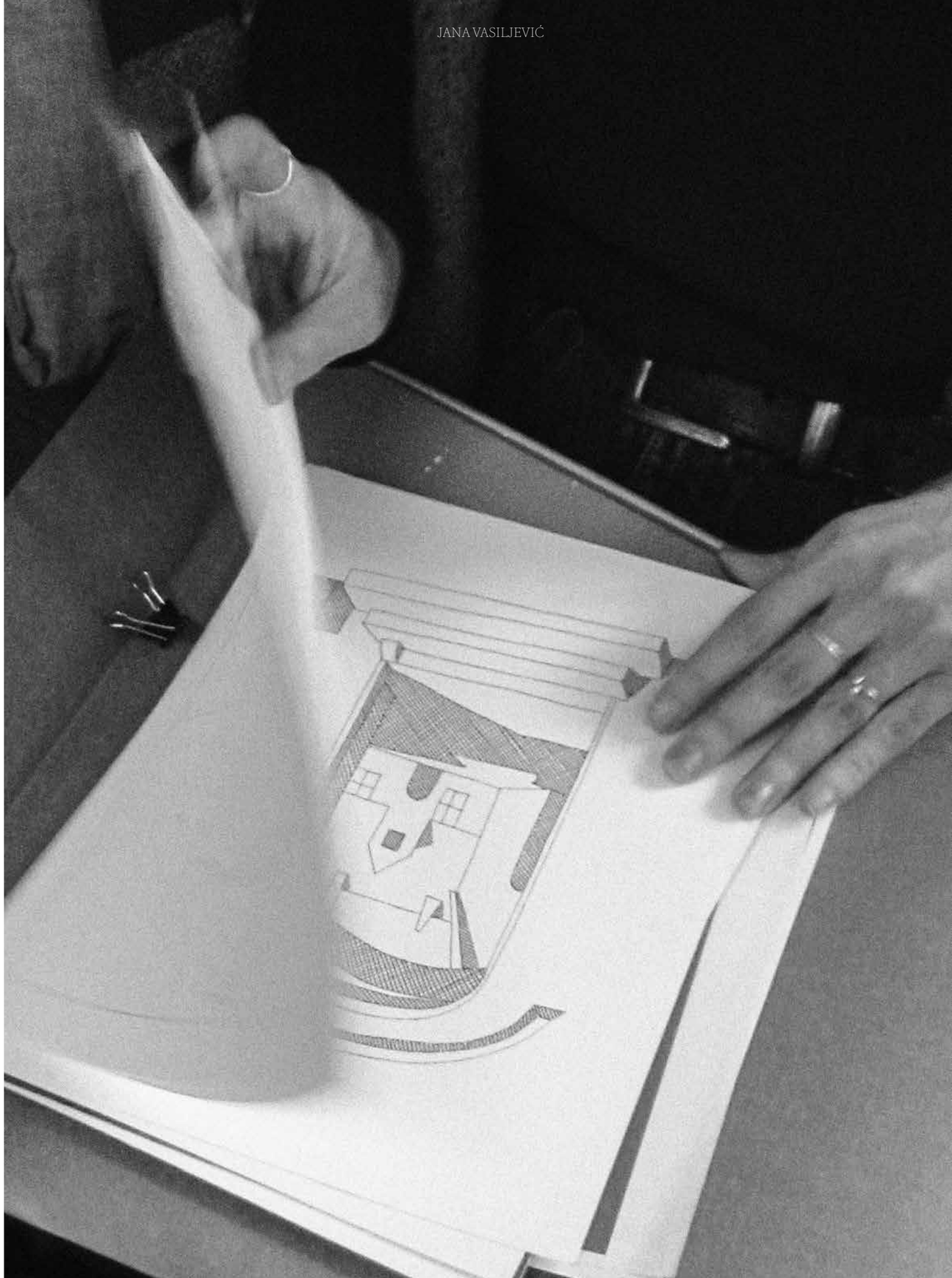
ARTIST INTERVIEW

JANA VASILJEVIĆ



Wednesday, the 21st of February

I leave by bike to visit Jana Vasiljević's studio. Her studio is located next to the canal, Coupure, in Ghent. She welcomes me with a Turkish coffee and a big smile. Jana recently moved from one studio to another, that is why she is still settling in her new studio. For this reason, her landscape paintings are currently stored away at home. During the visit, we discussed her work, and she showed me the work in progress, her process of creating the landscapes and the sketches that were made in order to make the final images.





Background information

Vasiljević has a Serbian father and a West Flemish mother. These cultural backgrounds and experiences inform a large portion of her work. She attended school in Serbia up until college. She would spend the summertime with her grandparents, in Boezinge, a village located in the countryside of West Flanders. In 2009 Vasiljević moved to Ghent and started her studies in Illustration at *LUCA*. After living in the city of Ghent for 14 years, her goal is to buy a house in the countryside of Flanders.

Nowadays she feels strongly connected to the Flemish landscape. However, that was not always the case. She was not always a fan of Flanders. Back in her teenage years she would have loved to spend the summers with her friends back in Serbia. In those days, during the early stages of the internet, the only possible way to communicate with her friends was through platforms like *MSN messenger*, and in other forms of chat rooms. Sometimes, instead of spending time with her friends, she had to pull out weeds in nearby fields alongside her nieces and nephews. This was common practice since she was part of a large Belgian farming family.

She has quite a rich and diverse background, blending her Belgian upbringing with her Serbian roots. It is interesting how her connection to Flanders has evolved over time, from initially not feeling drawn to it to now feeling strongly connected to its landscape.

As a Belgian–Serbian artist, living in Belgium, she feels a strong connection with artists who also have multicultural identities. Vasiljević participates and belongs to multiple collectives. Along with eleven other female-born artists and her Serbian friend Martina Petrović, she belongs to a collective named *Garden Of Delights*. Together with Petrovic, she creates textile work about Serbian rituals and women's work. She is also the founder and editor of the *Tieten Met Haar Collective*. The Tieten Met Haar collective publish and organise events around alternative comics.

Everything in her work embodies the environment that surrounds her. Overall, her work seeks a sense of security, safety, identity, belonging and familiarity.



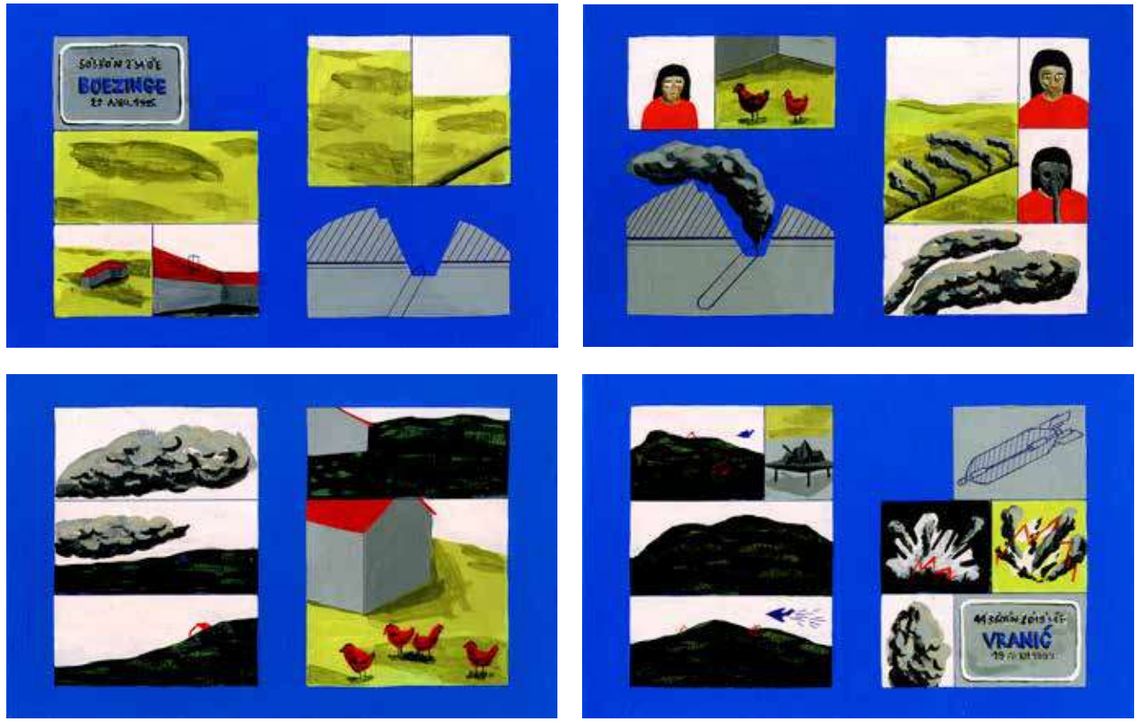
The work process

Jana Vasiljević remains active with her discipline. She creates her own personal projects, collective endeavours, and collaborations with other artists. If she is not actively occupied with multiple projects at a time, she takes initiative in the form of participation in community arts.

She began her *Zomergem landscape series* with a photograph. Vasiljević made digital sketches based upon these photographs. Before painting on the panel, she made a pencil line drawing with a ruler as a base.

To speed up the process, since a year ago, she traces the images, prints them on a transparent paper, and transfers them onto panels using a projector. These panels transform into paintings.

She made digital sketches due to a lack of materials. Vasiljević left Ghent with her partner for Zomergem during the lockdown in 2020. She did not know how long she would stay there. Due to this, she only brought a few tubes of paint, the basic colours and a few wooden panels. The paintings created in Zomergem are very colourful and graphical. This visual choice originates from her interest and prior knowledge from design, in Serbia.



Jana Vasiljević, Boezinge 1917 - Belgrade 1999, 2014



Jana Vasiljević, *Boezinge 1917 - Belgrade 1999*, 2014



Jana Vasiljević, *Boezinge 1917 - Belgrade 1999*, 2014

Master project, Boezinge 1917 - Belgrade 1999, 2014

Vasiljević started making paintings of Flemish landscapes during her fine arts master's program. Initially these were for a graphic novel she was working on at the time. She had also written the story for this graphic novel. It was partially set in Boezinge, during World War 1, that she experienced through the stories of her grandparents, who heard it from their parents. The other part is set in Serbia during the war of the 1990s, which she personally experienced when she was very young. The civil war took place from 1992 to 1995, so he was still too young to remember. But the bombing of Serbia by *NATO* in 1999, did have a significant impact on her and on her master's project.

To help create these depictions she based her graphic novel on the visuals of the 1990s computer game *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Doom 2* and *The Red Baron*. It is a first-person shooter game with a graphically evoking interface.

In Wolfenstein 3D, the meeting point, also known as the "boss level," typically occurs near the end of each episode. This level usually involves confronting a challenging enemy or boss character. Characters such as Hans Grosse or Adolf Hitler, depending on the episode. The layout of the levels in Wolfenstein 3D varies, but the meeting point or boss level is usually positioned towards the end or middle of each episode. This is where the player must defeat a formidable adversary to progress further in the game. Similarly, Vasiljević's work is constructed based on this layout of Wolfenstein 3D.

Zomergem, 2020

During the 2020 pandemic Vasiljević remained with her partner in Zomergem. It is a village located in the countryside. While she resides there, she starts painting the landscape. She tries to capture the beautiful but also human manipulated landscapes that surround her. This idea of human manipulation in nature manifests in her paintings through very calculated and vivid lines. This line quality has a very graphic and industrial feel to it. It serves as a metaphor for the lack of nature in Belgium and the interactions humans have with nature that shape their environment.

Vasiljević creates this unnatural feeling in her paintings, by using two different light sources or playing around with the composition. Her compositions often create tension by relocating the horizon and unbalancing the image. This shifts the focus of the image to one specific point.

The horizon in her images is always a straight line. There are no hills or mountains in Flanders, it is a very flat landscape.

After hearing and reading this, I got interested in the etymology of the word **Platteland [countryside]**, because it is also applied to hilly or mountainous regions around urban areas in Europe. The confusion arises from the assumption that plat [flat] means "even" or "level", whereas in Middle Dutch, plat referred to areas without buildings or fortifications. Thus, platteland originally meant "unbuilt land," vulnerable to enemies. However, in modern Dutch, "platteland" simply refers to rural areas with villages, fields, and nature (Den Boon, 2021).

> During the interview she says: *"The only thing that occasionally sticks out is the church tower."*

With this statement I do not entirely agree, there are many disturbing architectural elements in the Flemish landscape such as electric poles, lighting poles, windmills, apartment buildings, and water towers. But those elements Vasiljević decided to leave out of her paintings to simplify the image to its essence. She questions how far she can go for a landscape to be recognizable as a Flemish landscape, by stripping the landscape. Sometimes 3 lines is all she needs.

I think the idea of a church tower being the only element that breaks the horizon line is an idyllic and romantic idea, but it is unfortunately no longer accurate. It sounds rather outdated, something I could link to the pictures by Walter De Mulder.





Jana Vasiljević, *Boerderij bij Drongengoedbos*, Zomergem series, acrylic on wood, 120×80cm



Jana Vasiljević, *Boerderij tussen Sint-Laureins & Sint-Margriete*, Zomergem series, acrylic on wood, 120×80cm



Jana Vasiljević, sketch for the mural in Zwankendamme, 2022

Residency in Zwankendamme

In September 2022 Vasiljević took part of an artist residency in Zwankendamme, organized by *Kunstenplatform Plan B*. She created a mural that represents the entrance to the village of Zwankendamme, when coming in from the harbor. It was quite challenging for Vasiljević to capture the picturesque.

Zwankendamme is a small village with approximately five streets. The village was created for people working in the glass industry. The industrial zone is situated behind a verge. There are train tracks, windmills, a harbour and a gigantic glass factory. But Jana Vasiljević chose to ignore the industrial zone. She based her mural on the remaining rural environment, in order to capture the remaining countryside.



Jana Vasiljević, The mural in Zwankendamme, made during the artists residency organized by Kunstenplatform Plan B, 2022

Off topic

Vasiljević spoke about her frustration around spatial planning in Belgium, Serbia and the United States, the regional and the urban planning.

She was very shocked when she realised that one of the highest points in Belgium, located at 681 meters above sea level, had a parking lot. Baraque Michel, Belgium has approximately 50 cars parked there at any given time. It is great to be able to visit a beautiful nature reserve like the High Fens, by simply hopping out of the car, but for Vasiljević this serves as a clear example of how humans have manipulated nature according to their human needs. The High Fens has a very unique and beautiful landscape, but sadly the human presence is very visible. Not only is this an issue in High Fens but everywhere else in Flanders. Even in locations that are meant to be nature preserves.

Another frustration is that the parks in Ghent are very small. Vasiljević finds it a pity that a lot of land in Flanders is used for industrial purposes, for the meat industry, fields for potatoes, wheat, ... and to produce food for animals – that are living in poor conditions, on the farm – while there could be more nature. Belgium is a small country, for this reason it is even more a shame that the spatial planning is so messed up.

Serbia is about 2.5 times bigger than Belgium. According to Vasiljević, there is more space and culture. The northern part of Serbia consists of lowlands, while other parts are characterised by hills, mountains, and valleys. Additionally, the country boasts beautiful architecture, with most cities concentrated in the valleys. One aspect Vasiljević appreciates about her homeland is the ability to embark on a 20-kilometre hike through Pristine natural landscapes, where the only sights are those of untouched nature. Although the nature in Serbia may look beautiful at first, it is actually very polluted by lithium. As a result of this polluting issue, some of her childhood friends do not have access to clean tap water. This has created a regional protest movement against pollution.

In all its various dimensions, the landscape holds political significance. It delineates the sources of our food, indicates the quality of our living environment, influences our modes of transportation, shapes our healthcare system, and determines our housing, utilities, and overall day to day material conditions.

While I tell Vasiljević about my experiences living in the United States, and how different the landscape is there, she brings up the food deserts.

> *According to the Food Empowerment Project: "food deserts can be described as geographic areas where residents' access to affordable, healthy food options (especially fresh fruits and vegetables) is restricted or nonexistent due to the absence of grocery stores within convenient travelling distance. ... food deserts are socio-economic: that is, they are most commonly found in black and brown communities and low-income areas (where many people do not have cars). ... food deserts contain an overabundance of fast food chains selling cheap "meat" and dairy-based foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt* (2024)*".*

Vasiljević is currently working on a series of paintings about motherhood, as she questions whether she wants to become a mother or not. She took a break from creating landscapes because she no longer found herself surrounded by the environment. Her dream is to one day have enough money to buy a house in the countryside in Flanders (J. Vasiljević, personal communication, February 21, 2024).

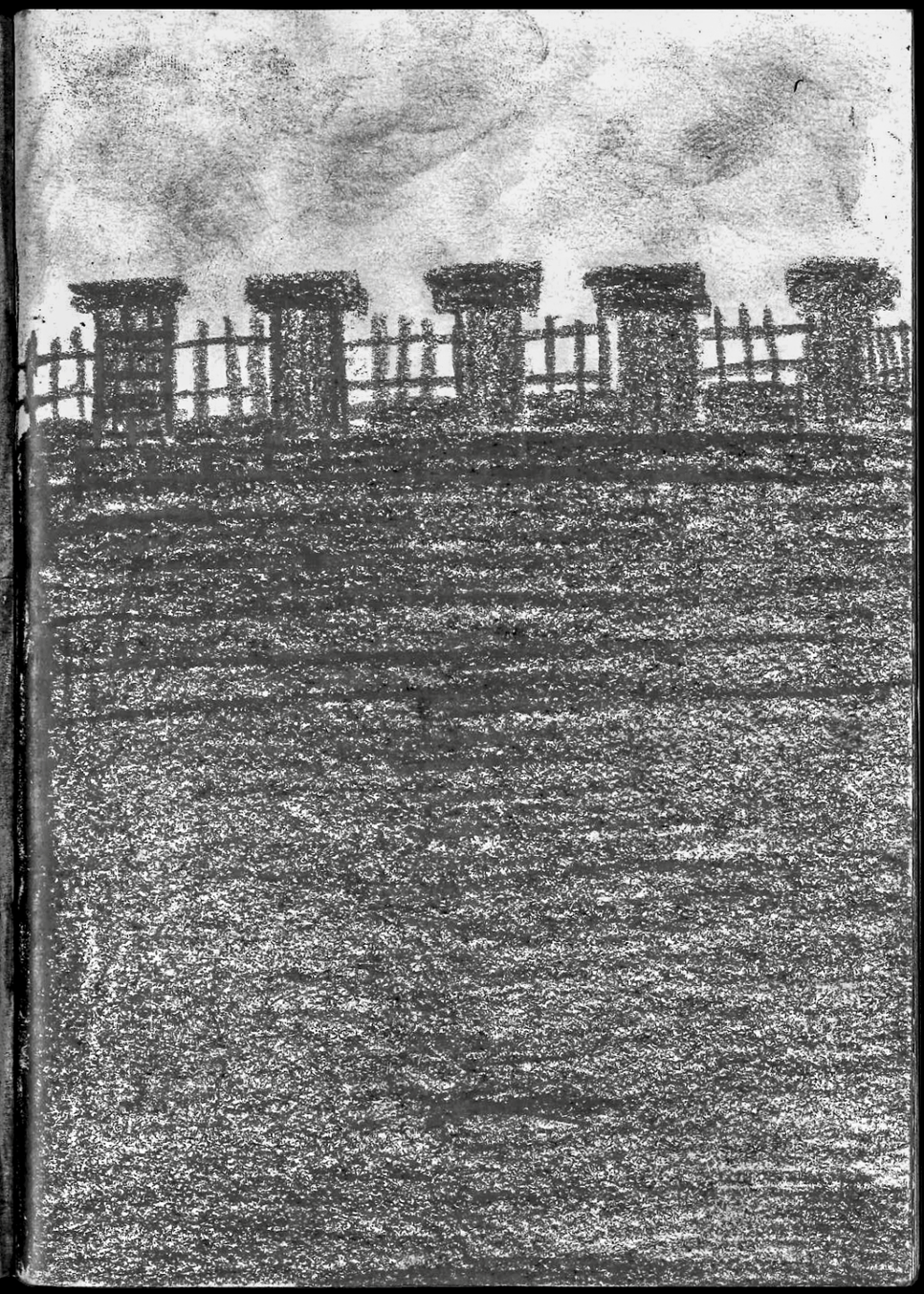


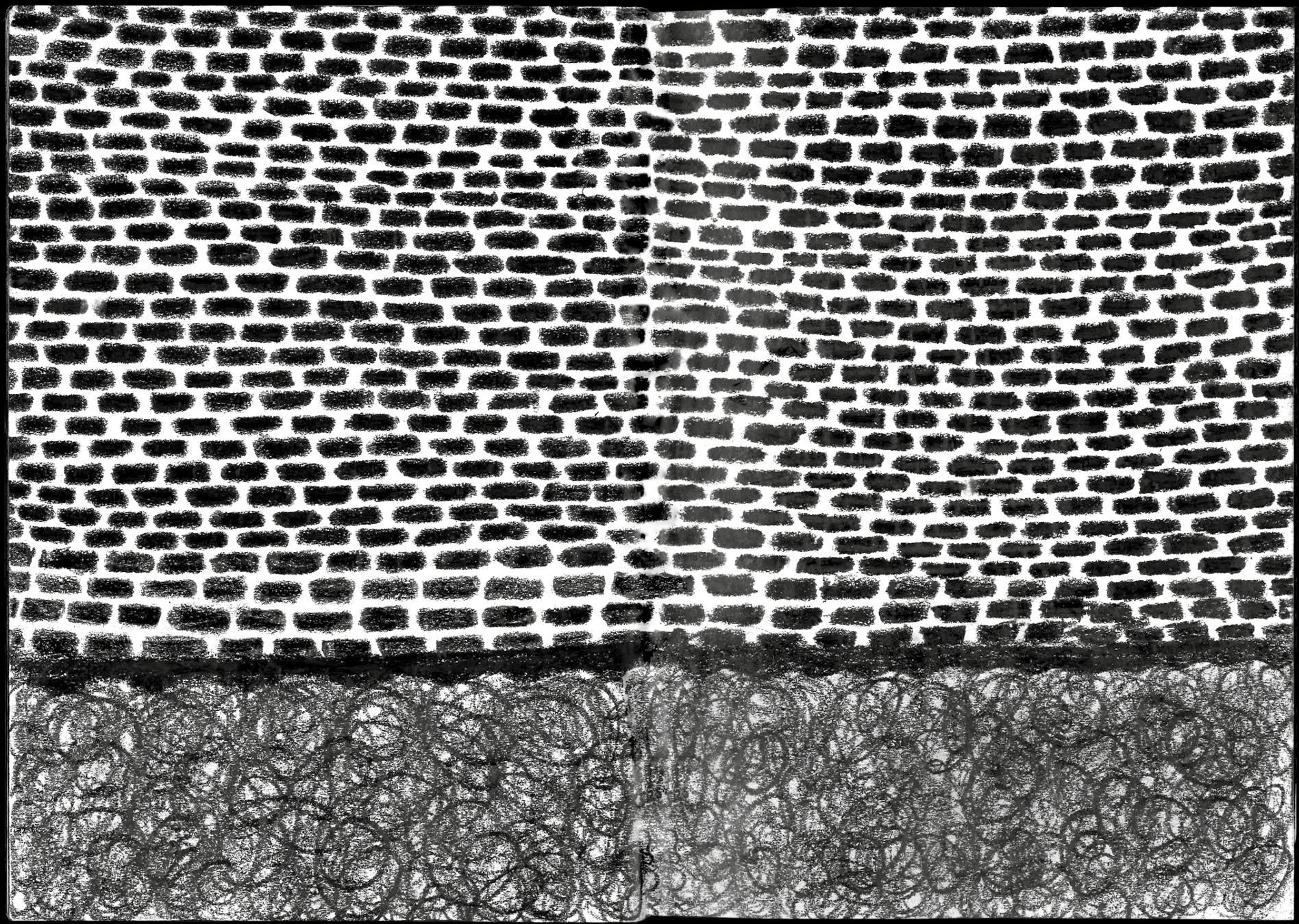
Jana Vasiljević, *Droomhuis*, 2021

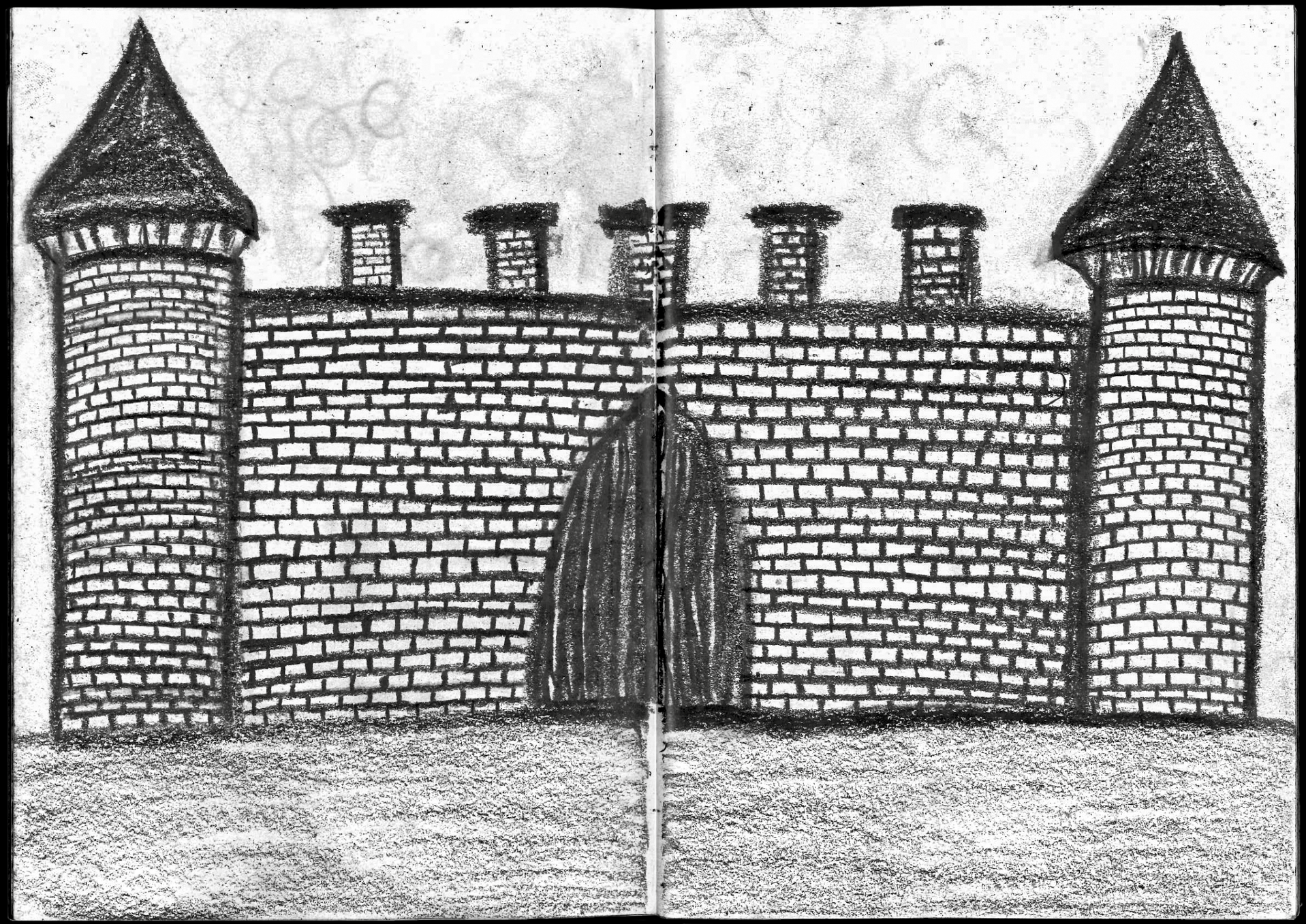
Inspiring artists
During the making process Vasiljević prefers to not let herself get influenced too much by other artists that work around a similar project. She gets inspired most by her surroundings, artist friends and family.

Mentioned artists
Martina Petrović
Roger Raveel
Joseph Willaert
Valentine Gallardo
Alexander Robijn
Matilde van heluwe
Nina vandenbempt
Sahjan Kooner
Thijs de smet
Pauline spirra
Dominique Goblet
Goele Dewanckel
Steve Michiels

Favorite artist
Joseph Willaert, Jana Vasiljević's first purchased art piece, that wasn't by one of her friends, was a silkscreen by Joseph Willaert, bought on a secondhand web shop for a decent price.







ARTIST INTERVIEW

DIETER DAEMEN



Artist
Dieter Daemen

Year of birth
1988

Hometown
Kessel-Lo, Belgium

Type of artist
Photographer

Education
2007 – 2008
BA Photography
Media & Design
Academy, Genk

2008 – 2010
BA Photography
LUCA, Brussels

2010 – 2012
MA Photography
LUCA, Brussels

First encounter
On Monday, the 15th of May 2023, my partner sent me a screenshot through Whatsapp of Libraryman's website with the cover of Dieter Daemen's photographic book, No Place Like Home. He discovered this book through a workshop that took place at his school, ISIA Urbino, by Stefania Rössl and Massimo Sordi. They brought various books by other photographers with them, exploring different themes related to nature.

On Sunday, the 1st of October 2023, my partner and I visited OMNEFEST 2023, a photographic exhibition in Castelfranco Veneto. The exhibition featured works by my partner and other photography students from ISIA U. It was during this exhibition in Italy that I had the opportunity to see the work by the Belgian photographer, Dieter Daemen. Both the work of his residency there and the photographic book, "No Place like Home" were on display during the exhibition.

Interview
Communication
12 email exchanges

Date
4 March 2024

Duration
of the interview
1h 28 min. 57 sec.

Location
3010 Kessel-Lo

Travel time
To go there: 1h 54 min.
To return: 1h 24 min.

Transportation
To go there:
Bus
Walking
Train
Walking
Bus
Walking

To return:
Walking
Bus
Walking
Train
Car



Monday afternoon, the 4th of March

my partner, Andrea Valzania and I left together with the bus towards the train station of Gent-Sint-Pieters. From there on we took the train to the station of Leuven. When arriving in Leuven, we took another bus in the direction of Kessel-Lo. After the bus ride, we walked towards Dieter Daemen's house. He invited us to his house, where his studio appeared to be next to his living room. We started by drinking a cup of coffee together and eating some salted peanuts and taralli. For the visit Daemen presented his framed pictures of the project "No Place Like Home". He did this on the table, where he normally makes his picture frames. Then he gave us a summary of his different projects. We spoke about his residency in Italy, at "OMNE" in Castelfranco Veneto, and asked him questions concerning his projects, his approach and his work process. Later, he guided us through his small selection of favourite photo books. And last but not least, he gave me a copy of his book, No Place Like Home.

Landscape photography?

Dieter Daemen starts the conversation by saying that he doesn't agree with what I wrote in my email.

Hello Dieter, 18 feb 2024, 13:13

My friend, Andrea Valzania, is coming to Belgium from Sunday 25/2 to 6/3, would it be possible to come together for a studio visit and an interview with you, regarding your pictures from the Flemish landscape?

Kind regards,
Beppe

From his point of view, his pictures were not Flemish landscapes, because when he thought about a landscape, he thought about a wide horizontal picture that gives an overview of the surroundings, that indicates more than what he is presenting in his images. What he photographs is only a detail of a landscape. For instance, his photographic book, No Place Like Home, contains images that are rather closed off.

By reading the books of Patrick Verlaak and Jeroen Laureyns, and by following their landscape seminar at *LUCA*, my definition of a landscape extended beyond the limits of the rules written down below. From my point of view, what one might imagine when talking about Flemish landscapes are paintings from the renaissance or paintings by the Flemish master or a stereotype of what a landscape must be. That it should contain a horizon, give an overview of the area, and capture nature, but then you can ask yourself if it is still possible to create a landscape in Flanders at present, where there is almost no more nature, without it being a national park or a nature reserve.

According to Collins dictionary:

1. The landscape is everything you can see when you look across an area of land, including hills, rivers, buildings, trees, and plants.

2. A landscape is all the features that are important in a particular situation.

3. A landscape is a painting which shows a scene in the countryside.

In most of his photographs from the series "No Place Like Home", Daemen captures a part of the sky, a piece of a house, and fragments of one or more natural elements. According to the first definition written above, he already comes close to what a landscape should be, by including buildings, trees, and plants. The only difference with the statement is that in Daemen's work he is not giving an overview of an area of land, but a zoom-in, and besides that, he is approaching the landscape from a lower perspective.

Background information

Daemen has a complex, love-hate relationship with his hometown, Kessel-Lo. He feels like an outsider, in the place where he has always lived. He grew up there, he has lived there his entire life, except the year he studied in Genk. He is very bored by the area he lives in and detests the place. But at the same time, he is also fascinated by it. He describes it as a type of nostalgia. The place where he grew up, his heimat, his safe place. It feels very close to him. He disagrees with the opinion that Flanders is horrible, in his opinion, things are more complex than that.

Work process

At first, he normally does not take his camera with him. He starts his photographic projects by cycling around, exploring his surroundings with an attentive eye. For No Place Like Home, specifically he took all his pictures within a range of 5 kilometres from his home. As he pedals through various landscapes, some things catch his attention - an intriguing sight that sparks his creativity. Later, he turns back, to capture that sight with his digital camera and tripod. When he returns home, he immediately looks at the pictures and gets fully absorbed by them for the rest of the day.

Most of the time, Daemen dedicates himself to focusing on one task at a time. His creative process often unfolds within the context of a specific project, where he captures a series of photographs. This approach allows him to dive deeply into his subject matter.

An important lesson Daemen learned is the value of allowing projects or photographs to rest. He discovered that revisiting and looking at them later, with new eyes and extra experiences, often brings clarity and another insight.



No Place Like Home

After completing his academic studies, Daemen reflected on his photographic journey and had a realisation about borders, while capturing suburban landscapes and feeling an impact of the imagery, entering the media of migrants arriving in Southern Europe during the refugee crisis in 2015. He realised that the borders in Europe existed both externally and internally.

The borders surrounding Europe are not physical; rather, they reflect the dehumanising discourse of the crisis and the growing distance between people. Inside borders manifest as garden barriers, mirroring the distance within our society between individuals. In Belgium, the physical borders are highly present, they push people away from each other.

Instead of focusing on external borders, No Place Like Home concentrates on internal boundaries. Daemen chose to focus on the enclosed gardens in his area. He described hedges as a form of soft violence, marking private property, where others are not allowed.

The title, No Place Like Home, describes the concept of warmth, familiarity and comfort. Whereas his images express something totally different. This contrast is something that feels very familiar to me, because I also use this kind of contradiction in my work, as a sense of humour. Dieter explains that the hedges - and consequently the neighbourhoods - might appear as very unwelcoming to outsiders, but on the other hand, they provide comfort and familiarity to those who are connected to them.

Daemen's fascination with sculpturality and texture led him to photograph hedges. He focuses so much on texture that in some photos you can almost feel the hedge trimmer they use.

While photographing Daemen became aware of the suspicion from locals, but found out that by the time they understood that he was photographing their plants, it opened a conversation about the hedge's care and condition. This leads him to the performative aspect of the hedge, the attention and care they receive. He concludes that a hedge, on the one hand, is a way of presenting themselves and on the other hand it shows the outsider to stay out by creating these physical boundaries.

Primarily Daemen considered the images as big prints, but he eventually made them smaller to draw the viewers closer to enhance the tactile experience. Besides that, he realised that by suggesting something behind the hedge, it added depth to the photographs and created an extra tension.

During our conversation Daemen mentioned the photographer Herman van Boom, who explores a similar thematic such as hedges, but according to Daemen with a mocking yet descriptive tone. Van Boom is a Belgian-Dutch photographer, he studied in Stockholm and partly lives in Keulen. In this way, he has been able to take enough distance from his subject matter. He works mostly within the Flemish front gardens, depicting strange sculptures (Deweer, 2016).

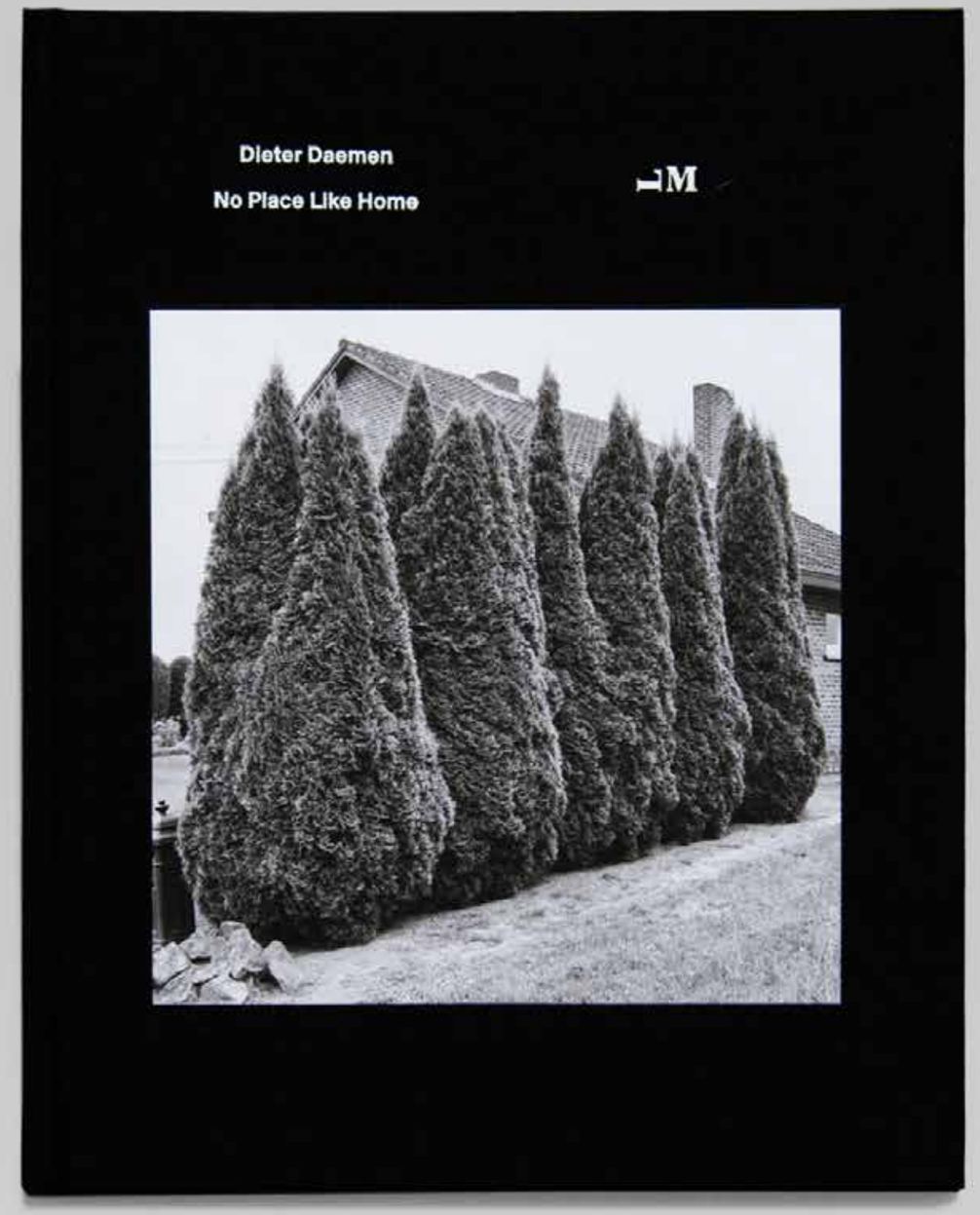
He is also known for capturing the essence and ordinariness of the Flemish soul in his photographs. One of his photo series, titled *The hedge*, focuses on the significance of hedges in the Belgian countryside. Hedges have been a part of the landscape for centuries, dividing fields from fruit trees. While traditional farmer hedges are disappearing from the modern Belgian landscape, they are gaining popularity among homeowners for their functional benefits. Hedges serve as living fences, demarcating properties, and providing protection against weather, wind, insight and noise. They also act as a barrier against intruders and offer a sense of security and privacy. Van den Boom's photographs of hedges showcase their beauty and their role in shaping the Belgian landscape (Architectura, 2018).

Curtain

There was a phase where Dieter Daemen got inspired by Gerard Richter, around 2016, a German painter who made multiple paintings of curtains. In 2020, unintentionally Daemen photographed a series of curtains. One picture in the series is titled *Not after Gerard Richter*, because he was not thinking about Richter's work while making those photographs. He was mainly obsessed by the structure and materiality of those curtains.

All the photos were taken in the room upstairs. Daemen considers curtains as a very Flemish thing. They cut off your vision in the same way as hedges do. Curtains feel confrontational, like hitting a wall. He makes the picture seem like a window but then closes it off, keeping you outside the depicted space.

The pictures were created in a technically complex way. Daemen used different layers and compression to capture the curtain texture. He explains that if he makes his pictures too big, they fall apart. For this reason, every image of these curtains decides their own size. His intention is that you can see and almost feel the fabric, but at the same time you do not really see it.



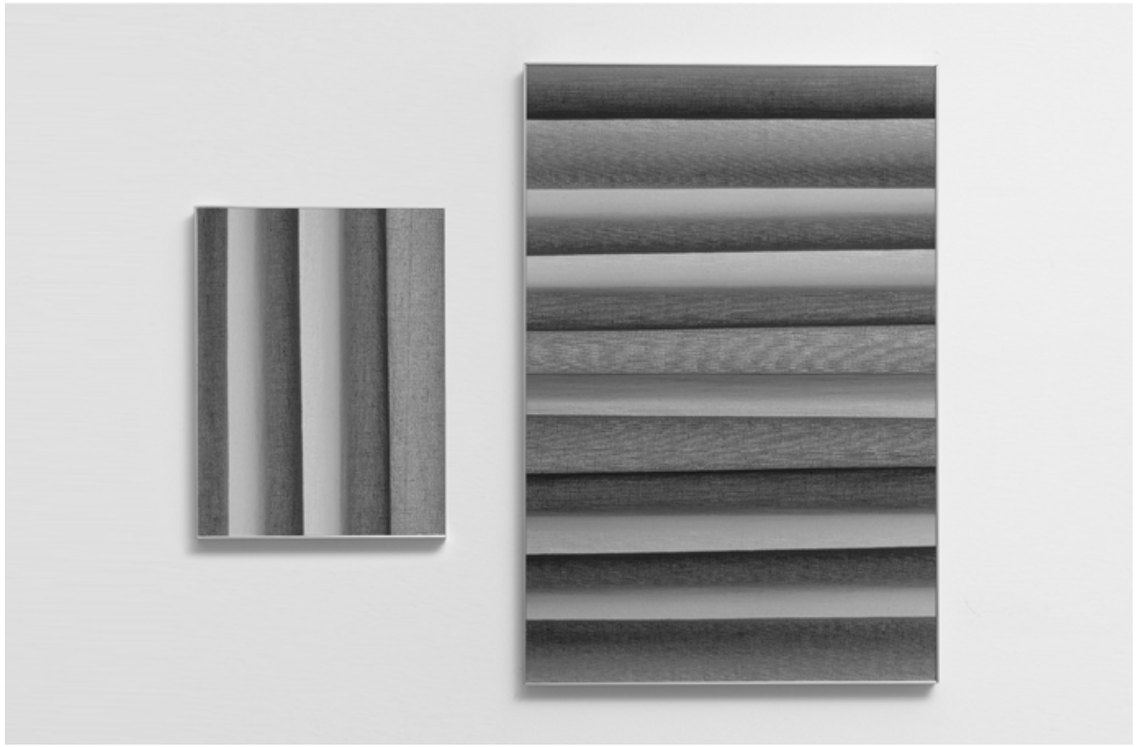
Dieter Daemen, *No Place like home [photobook]*, 2018



Dieter Daemen, *No Place Like Home*, 2015-2016, 18 cm x 18 cm, on paper 29,7 cm x 21 cm, framed without glass



Dieter Daemen, *No Place Like Home*, 2015-2016, 18 cm x 18 cm, on paper 29,7 cm x 21 cm, framed without glass



Dieter Daemen, *Not After Gerhard Richter*, 2019, 45,4 cm x 30,4 cm, archival pigment print, artist's frame without glass



Dieter Daemen, *heimat*, 2015 - ongoing, 18 cm x 18 cm, on paper 29,7 cm x 21 cm , framed without glass

Heimat

Heimat is an ongoing series of pictures. Daemen started the project in 2015, around the same time as No Place Like Home, those pictures have a similar thematic as No Place like home, but they did not fit within that project, for this reason it became a separate project aside from No Place like home.

For Dieter Daemen, Heimat goes back to the idea of a place being a safe space.

> *"Heimat describes not just a geographical place, but a state of belonging ... Heimat is about the landscape that left its mark on you, the culture that informed you and the people that inspired you when you were growing up* (Bittner, 2018)."

The title of the project reflects the opposite of what the images communicate, for example the dark stained-glass windows resemble how I imagine what a prison window looks like. This picture gives you a sense of restraint. It is like looking at a picture where you would not want to be, where you feel out of place. It gives you a feeling of being held back, of being stuck and not able to escape.

In the series there are different pictures of trees, where pieces of wood, that are dead trees, support new growing trees. Those pictures symbolise the idea of being both supportive and restrained. Daemen finds it intriguing that a tree is held up by dead trees. It is held up, but at the same time, we force the tree to grow specifically like that, it is a perfect example of how humans shape nature. Those trees are also a possible metaphor for human beings in our society: supported but at the same time inhibited and constrained.

Sussurring leaves

Dieter Daemen started photographing a tree over three weeks, visiting it three times to capture its essence. He took 24 pictures of the same tree from various angles, in a very analytical way. When it comes to landscape photography, you normally can nota approach it analytically. The landscape itself must be your inspiration. Printing the photographs presented a unique challenge, as Daemen printed the images in nine different shades of grey.

After completing the initial photography, Daemen set the project aside for three years, storing the photos in a drawer. This deliberate pause is a hallmark of his creative process, allowing him to return to the work with fresh eyes and a renewed perspective. Daemen believes that if he had finished the project earlier, the result would not have been as satisfying.

OMNE residency

In 2021, from the 4th to the 12th of September, Dieter Daemen took part in a residency program, organised by *OMNE* (*Osservatorio Mobile Nord Est*). This association is a landscape observatory, realising different residencies, exhibitions, public walks, workshops, publications, conferences, meetings and much more. During his residency, Daemen initially had a difficult time photographing for various reasons. First of all, it was the first time that he worked on a project while abroad. Before the residency, he never took pictures outside of Belgium. The second difficulty was the Italian weather. Daemen normally photographs when the sky is nicely grey and depressing. In Italy, it was hard to find a cloudy day during the 8-day residency.

According to Daemen and Valzania's point of view, cloudy skies are the perfect match for architecture photography, because it eliminates shadows. As a result, the subject's shape stands out. Valzania metaphorically compares the cloudy sky to a white backdrop, usually used in a photo studio for still life photography.

From the 22nd of September 2023 till the 30th of October the project was displayed in Castelfranco, Veneto. Valzania and I went there on the 1st of October.

Inspiration

Dieter Daemen gets more inspired by paintings than by photographs, because of the textures. He is so fascinated by them and wants to get really close to the paintings. So close that he sometimes gets into trouble with the museum staff.

What intrigues him most about textures is that you can only truly appreciate them when you see them in person. He emphasises how easily we get distracted by pictures - whether they are on our phones or in advertisements - taking us away from experiencing actual reality.



Dieter Daemen, sussurring leaves, 2017, 30 cm x 30 cm, stained maple frame



Dieter Daemen, sussurring leaves, 2017, 30 cm x 30 cm, stained maple frame



Dieter Daemen, sussurring leaves, 2017, 30 cm x 30 cm, stained maple frame

Inspiring artists

When Daemen started studying photography, he got inspired by Andreas Gursky's older work. And more specific, the pictures he took before becoming monochromatic, where he would just walk around with his view camera and capture the German landscape. He also used to be super influenced by Bernd and Hilla Becher. He declares that they were not going to make his heart beat faster anymore now, but that they influenced a whole generation of photographers. Then later on there was a period that he was very fascinated by Gerard Richter. After that he is inspired by other artists, it continuously evolves and shifts.

Dieter Daemen often turns to books to delve deeper into the artists who inspire him. One of the first books he shares with us is *American Prospects* by Joel Sternfeld, a pioneering American photographer known for his use of colour. Daemen is particularly drawn to Sternfeld's work because of the captivating colours, which have a powerful way of drawing him in.

He also shares a fascinating anecdote about Sternfeld: while working on the book, Sternfeld could only afford to take two photos a day, as he was using a large 8 × 10 inch camera. This story highlights the dedication and resourcefulness behind Sternfeld's remarkable work, aspects that Daemen deeply admires.

Daemen tends to go back to very old school photographers for his taste in photography. The second book he shows is a book he bought recently by Paul Hart, a British photographer. He has made a series of three books, about different places in the UK, that have been reclaimed from the sea. It is a very traditional approach, straight forward photography. He finds it very moving, gorgeous, impressive and overwhelming.

The third book, *Can You Hear the Wind Blow*, by Kim Jungman, is a collection of photographs of trees. The fourth book is called *The Long Now* by Uta Barth. He finds it a gorgeous book, it is about visual perception and about looking at things for a longer time. A few pictures focus on the way the light passes in the room; it has a very atmospheric feeling to it. One photograph is a picture of a carpet, the unique way she photographs the space moves Dieter Daemen.

Favourite artist

An influential photographer for Daemen is Gerry Johansson, a Swedish photographer. He remembers going to a big photography exhibition in Brussels. Where he saw a lot of big and colourful works, for example by Jeff Walls. Walls is a Canadian photographer that creates gigantic works in lightboxes. The pictures are very elaborate. They dominated the space. Amidst these grand displays, Johansson's photographs were tucked away in a small, intimate corner. Despite their modest size, the ten small pictures were profoundly absorbing and deeply inspiring for Daemen.

Sometimes Daemen fantasises about sending him an email to do a print exchange. Until now he did not dare to do it, because he is afraid that when it does not work out like he desired, it will ruin his fantasy and burst the bubble of fandom.

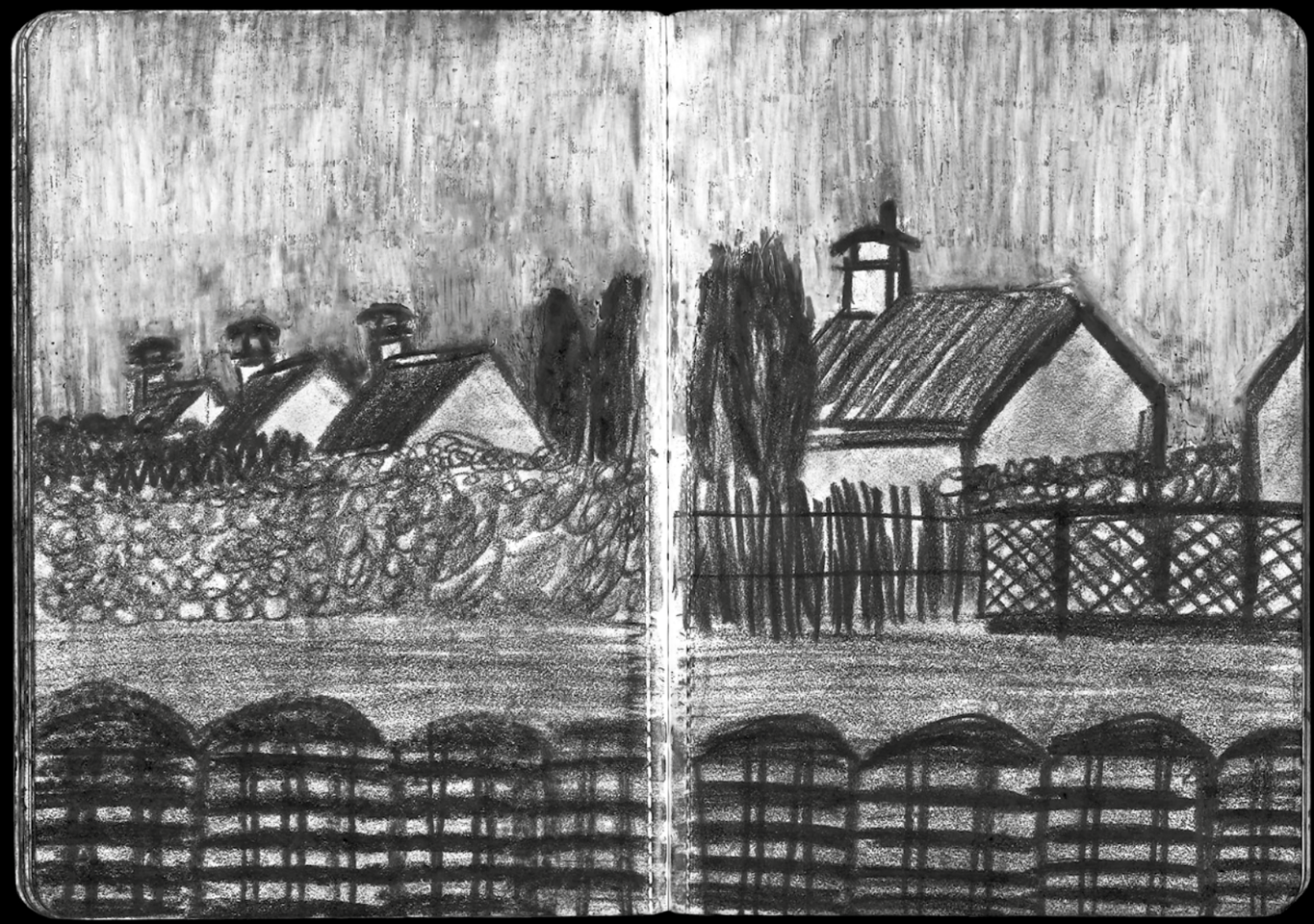
Most of Garry Johansson is published by *Mack*, an independent art and photography publishing house based in London. One of Gerry Johansson's most notable moments was when he embarked on a remarkable journey to Antarctica, bringing with him an 8×10 inch camera—a highly unusual choice for such an expedition. Johansson is also known for his affinity for a 6×6 cm medium format camera, with which he captures suburban landscapes that consistently reflect his distinctive vision.

Garry Johansson admires the simplicity of the creative process where one goes to a place, walks around, takes pictures, and ultimately creates a book documenting the photographic journey. While Daemen appreciates this approach, he often wonders if there is more to engage with, if perhaps more effort is required beyond just this straightforward method. However, he eventually realised the beauty in simplicity—how powerful it is to return to the fundamentals of photography by simply going somewhere, walking, observing and experiencing the moment.

He is also very fascinated by something being very unspectacular, because photography really lends itself to spectacle and travelling. For example, in 2012 the exhibition in *Bozar* in Brussels, *A Sense of Place*, featured many large photographs, and less small photographs, that invited the viewer to go closer and experience the pictures in a more intimate way (D. Daemen, personal communication, March 4, 2024).



Mentioned artists
Gerard Richter
Andreas Gursky
Herman van Boom
Joel Sternfeld
Kim Jungman
Hilla and Becher
Jeff Wall
Terry Johnson
Greet Van Autgaerden
Thierry De Cordier
Stephanie Kiewitt
Loïc Van Zeebroek
Stijn Cole
Sanne Vaassen
Uta Barth



Artist
Lin Vermeulen

Year of birth
1956

Hometown
Mol, Belgium

Place of residence
Hasselt, Belgium

Type of artist
Visual artist, Cross-over artist, Painter, textile artist

Education
1973 – 1976
art education
Municipal Higher Institute for Visual Communication and Design, Genk

1983 – 1989
art education, Municipal Academy of Fine Arts, Hasselt

First encounter
The first time I saw Lin Vermeulen's work was on January 26th at the Texture museum in Kortrijk. It was the opening of a group show called Draad [Thread] organized by Kunstwerkt, featuring thirty artists, including myself. The exhibition celebrated the creative freedom of textiles, showcasing a diverse blend of techniques, materials, and interpretations.

Communication
10 email exchanges
5 Instagram Direct Messages

Interview
Date
20 March 2024

Duration of the interview
17 min. 38 sec.
19 min. 06 sec.
(audio got interrupted, total conversation 1h 13 min. 06 sec.)

Location
3500 Hasselt

Travel time
To go there: 2 h 27 min.
To return: 2 h 27 min.

Transportation
To go there:
walk
Bus
train
car

To return:
car
train
Bus
walk

ARTIST INTERVIEW

LIN VERMEULEN





Monday morning, the 11th of March

I took the bus in the direction of Ghent-Sint-Pieters station, from there on I took the train to Alken. Lin Vermeulen decided to pick me up at Alken station with her car. After which we drove together to her studio in Hasselt. She welcomed me to her home, offering me a coffee and chocolate eggs. She lives and paints in a quiet neighbourhood in Limburg.

Background information

Lin Vermeulen, born in 1956, grew up in *de Kempen* [the Campine region], where there was a Catholic atmosphere. Especially in her early years she experienced the silence that goes back to the Catholic church, where obedience was expected, questioning authority, such as parental authority, was not tolerated, and expressing opinions, especially as a woman, was discouraged. Emotions and problems were swept under the rug, leaving Vermeulen unable to voice her thoughts and feelings. She fought against this closed-minded atmosphere, longing to be heard and respected. According to her, this narrow-mindedness is a characteristic feature of Flemish culture; the silence and struggle she experienced are visible in her work.

From a very young age she knew that she wanted to be an artist. She described to me a memory of hers, of lying on her bed as a 7-year-old girl and thinking: *I'm going to be an artist later* and how she immediately realised, already at that young age, that it was going to be tough. Because female artists were not well known nor seen at that time, she thought that she would become one of the first female artists. Later, she realised women artists simply did not receive the same recognition. Being a female artist was not straightforward in her time.

The road to emancipation is the driving force in Vermeulen's life and art. She had to fight to be emancipated. Her family did not offer any support or understanding for her decision to study art and advance in painting. Her parents wanted her to go to college, leading to a conflict between their desires and hers. Vermeulen got married at 19 and because of this she had the opportunity to start living independently. Soon after the wedding, she had two children. However, this did not mark the end of her artistic pursuits. It was just then that she chose to continue her art studies. Vermeulen admired liberated female writers and found great inspiration in them. Fortunately, her husband did back her decisions and respected her interest in feminist literature. This marital situation was very progressive at that time.

Thematic

As an artist, Vermeulen has faced numerous challenges and continues to seek her own path. She channels her frustrations, traumas, and fears into her art and imagery, using mediums like oil paint, ceramics, and textiles. Vermeulen does not idealise pettiness or narrow-mindedness; whereas there is often confusion about this among the viewers. Instead, Vermeulen aims to give a face to what she always has detested. The fussy, the petty and the small-minded is absolutely not something that Vermeulen romanticises; confusion often arises about this.

Lin Vermeulen paints traditional subjects, such as the portrait, still life and landscape. She paints portraits like a passport photo, a format that refers to photography. Further, she creates sculptures with the idea of recovering her trauma. The trauma of being classified as a woman, as a second-class citizen. She makes these works from an urge to show what kind of conditions she lived in, to create awareness about the period in which she lived as a child and adolescent.

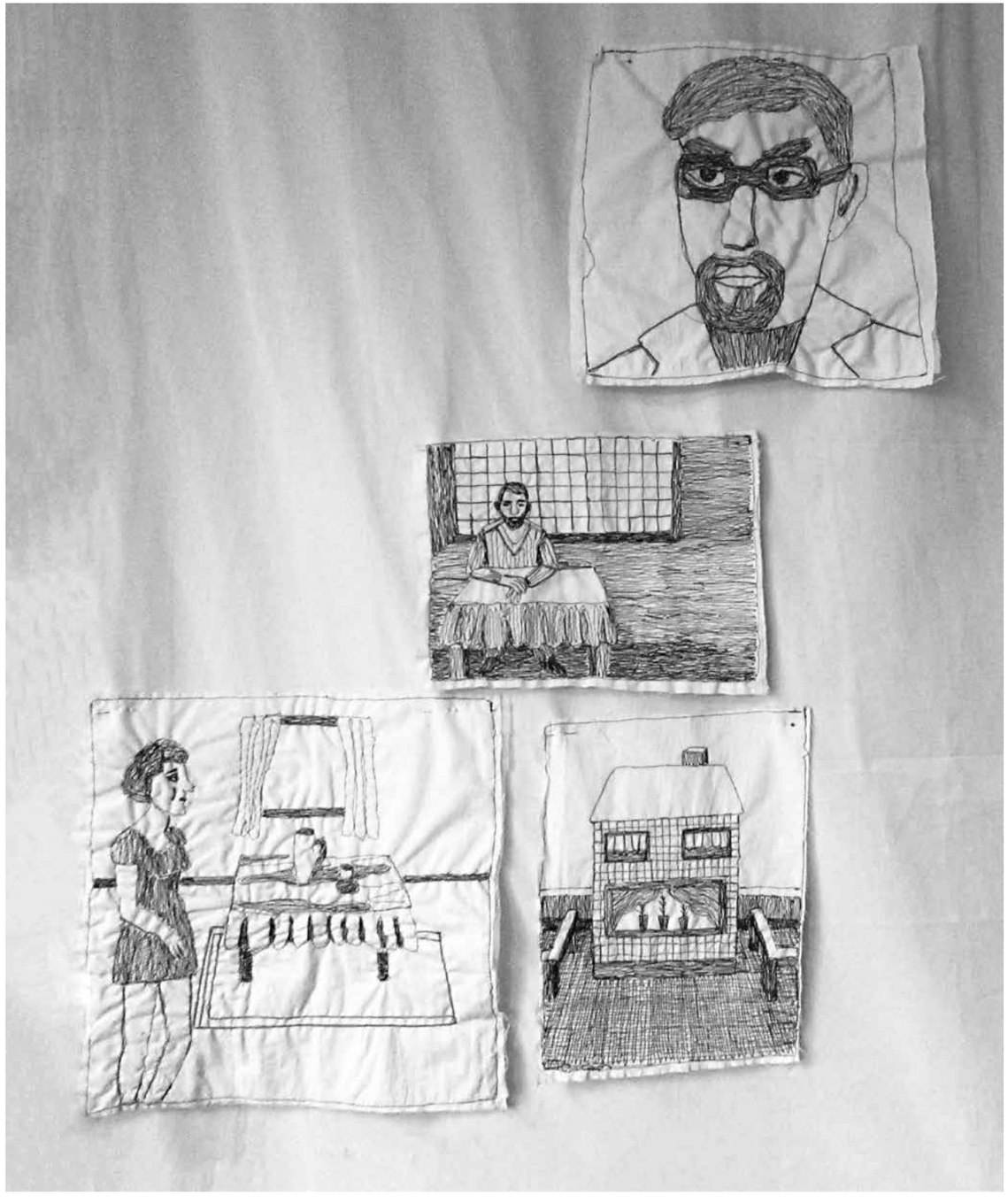
The interior is one of the recurring themes in her painting. Because of the furniture auction she had to go every month to Antwerp with her father. She tells me from memory about the hour-long car rides.

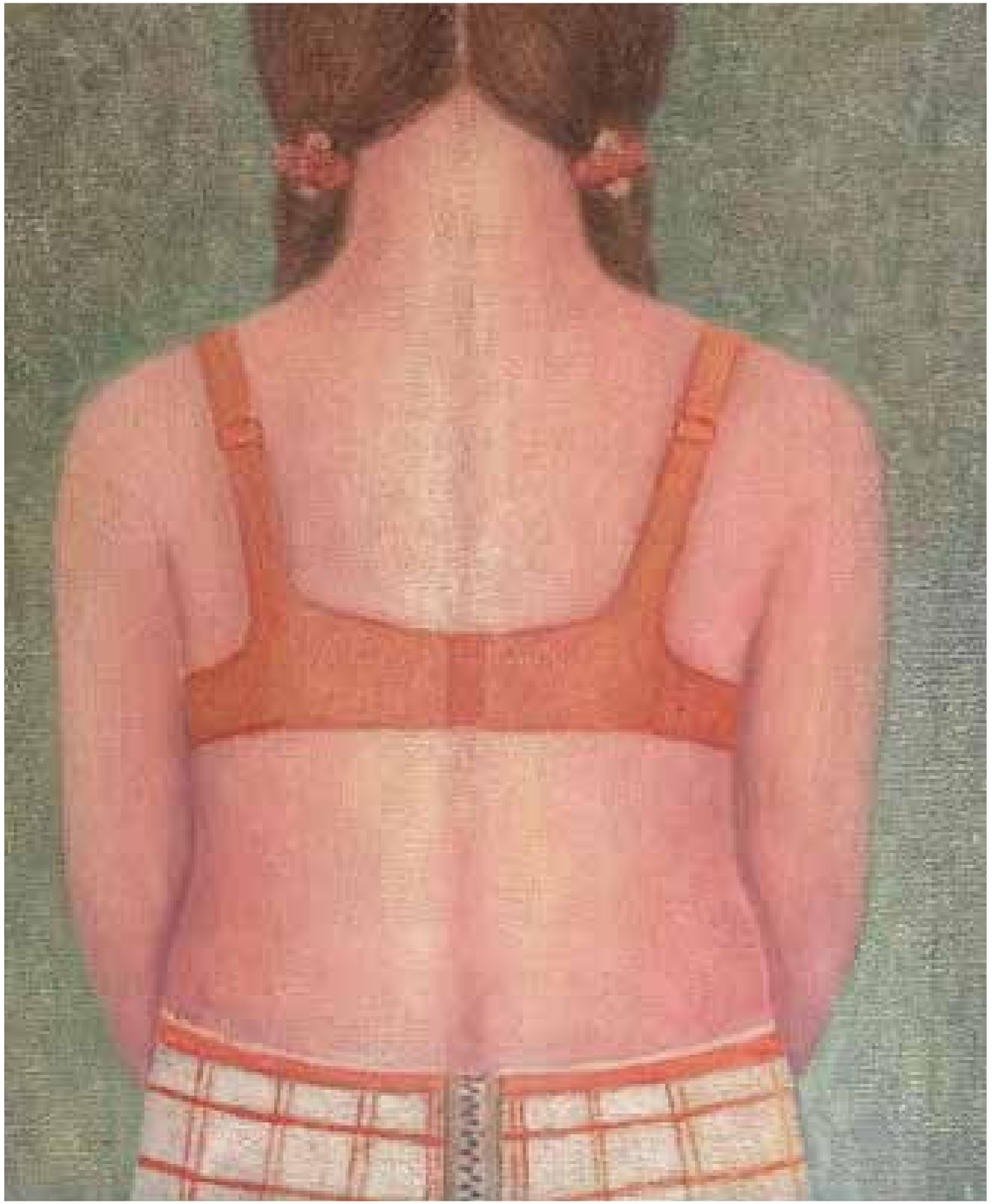
Work Process

She sometimes works on one painting over 3 years. During her teenage years, she used to paint in her room, while looking at the street, with the curtain's half closed. The impact of this closedness for her, in this situation, is a perfect example to describe the Flemish character of narrow-mindedness. This also reflects in the houses that she paints. She grew up in a period where women fighted for more transparency, but instead of showing this openness, she painted the restraint.

Visual language

Her artworks are very clean, stylized and colourful. Through unpicking and stilling, her work becomes stronger and more minimalist. When she paints, she starts from her feelings, she does not paint realistically, but imaginatively. There often arises confusion around her work, what she depicts is not the life she romanticises, but rather what she has a detestation of. Vermeulen's works look colourful and vibrant at first glance, but what she wants to tell is a different story. She wants to tell stories about stillness and sameness. What the image shows and what it tells contrast with each other. The portraits, street scenes and interiors reflect the detachment. You feel a very cold-hearted atmosphere that for Vermeulen defines the Flemish character, on which she wants to lay the focus. Her portraits show no emotion. She builds an invisible wall between the viewer and the person portrayed.





Lin Vermeulen, *First bra*, oil on canvas 60 × 50 cm



Lin Vermeulen, *Grandmothers house* (Het huis uit mijn herinnering van grootmoeder), 2023, 60 × 70cm

Medium

Vermeulen uses a diverse range of mediums and materials to create her artworks, including oil paint, gouache, clay, and textiles. She uses oil paint on canvas for her paintings and gouache on paper for more colourful and narrative work. The experimentation of different materials allows her to explore various textures and techniques. This adds complexity to her work. She brings a lot of structure to her work by working with different layers on top of each other. With oil paints this is made possible, but when Vermeulen started painting, she often used acrylics. With this type of paint, she realised that it was impossible to create depth or layers.

Art genre and movement

Initially, when she started art, the different time periods were divided into movements. It was not accepted that different movements were taking place at the same time. During the beginning of her career, she noticed that abstraction claimed attention. Vermeulen's work, which is rather figurative and narrative, did not fit into the established art movements. For her there is a great importance to telling stories in her work, which leads to figurative and narrative work. But this type of art genre did not fit within the zeitgeist back then. However, currently, Vermeulen notices that there is a rise and greater understanding, recognition, and appreciation for figuration in painting. As a result, it led to more appreciation of her work in recent years.

The woman as a second-class citizen

Vermeulen felt like a second-class citizen as a woman. Women were not taken seriously. She saw this pattern returning, in her home, at school, and in the art world. Male art students were favoured and given opportunities, while females were sidelined. As a matter of fact, there were no female teachers at her school. This prejudice against women was not only a problem in her family, but also in the rest of the Flanders society, and even on a global scale. While her sisters accepted this type of treatment, Vermeulen rebelled against it, from a very young age.

Furthermore, Vermeulen was deeply frustrated by the lack of recognition for women artists. Only a handful were known, often only recognized as the wives or daughters of famous male artists, like Sonja Delaunay, Georgia O'Keeffe, Charley Toorop, and Frida Kahlo. Over the years, Vermeulen noticed progress and change in the visual arts.

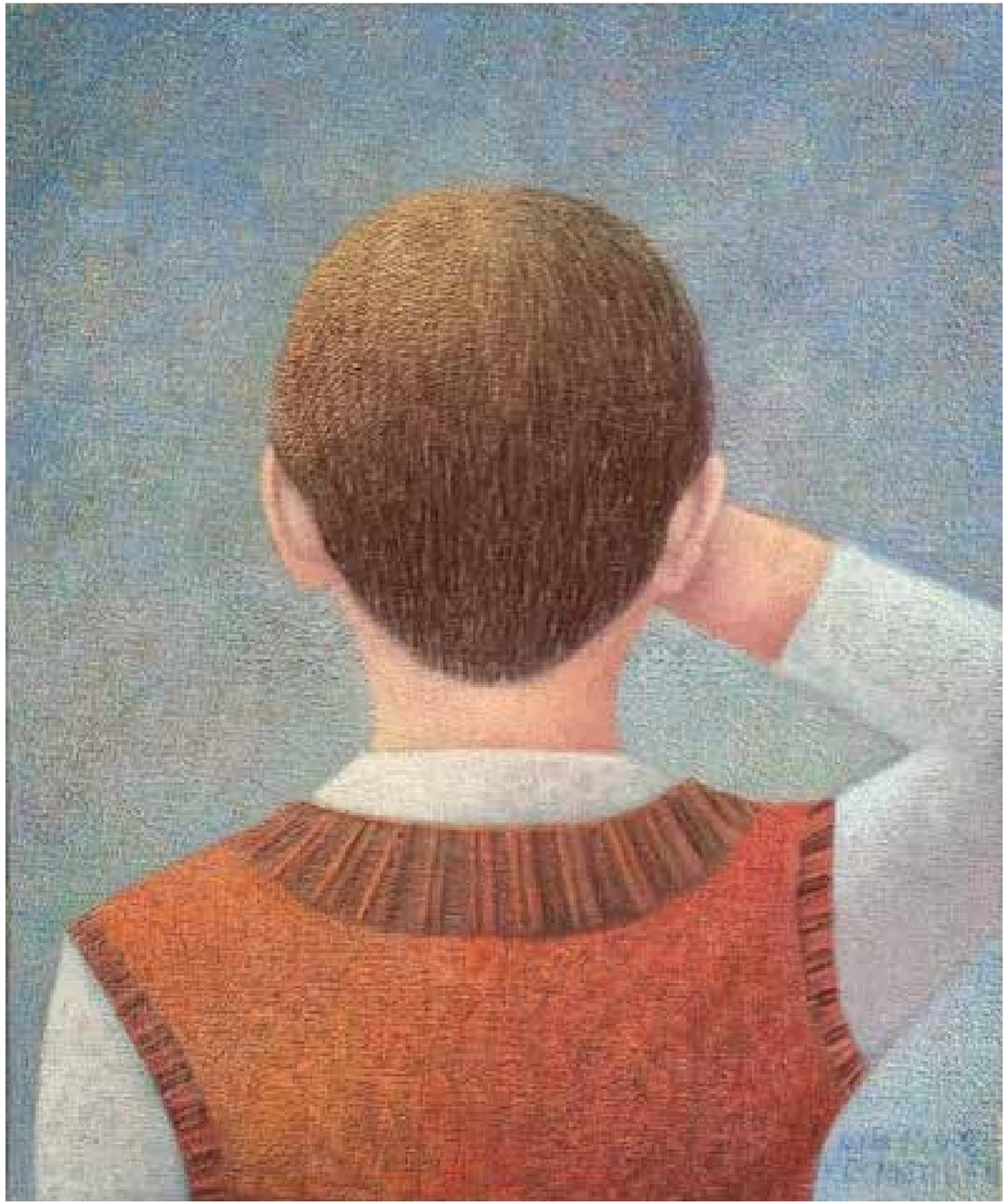
Off topic

We also discussed the influence of the Catholic Church in Belgium, and the way this religion left its marks on society nowadays. Some particular things in our way of life find their origin in Catholicism. For example: all shops that close their doors on a Sunday, because in the bible Sunday symbolises a day of rest. In addition, we also talked about the difference between Belgium and the Netherlands and more specifically, how the Dutch people deal with their problems differently and tend to be more direct than Belgian people. And it is remarkable that also this goes back to religion: namely the assumptions of Protestantism and Catholicism.

According to Vermeulen the Women's liberation changed the Netherlands in 1968, whereas this was blocked in Belgium by the Catholic point of vue.

She also declares that guilt, keeping silence and not talking about your own problems is something we inherited from the Catholic Church. In the Netherlands, they broke out of that taboo, by fighting against this state of mind.

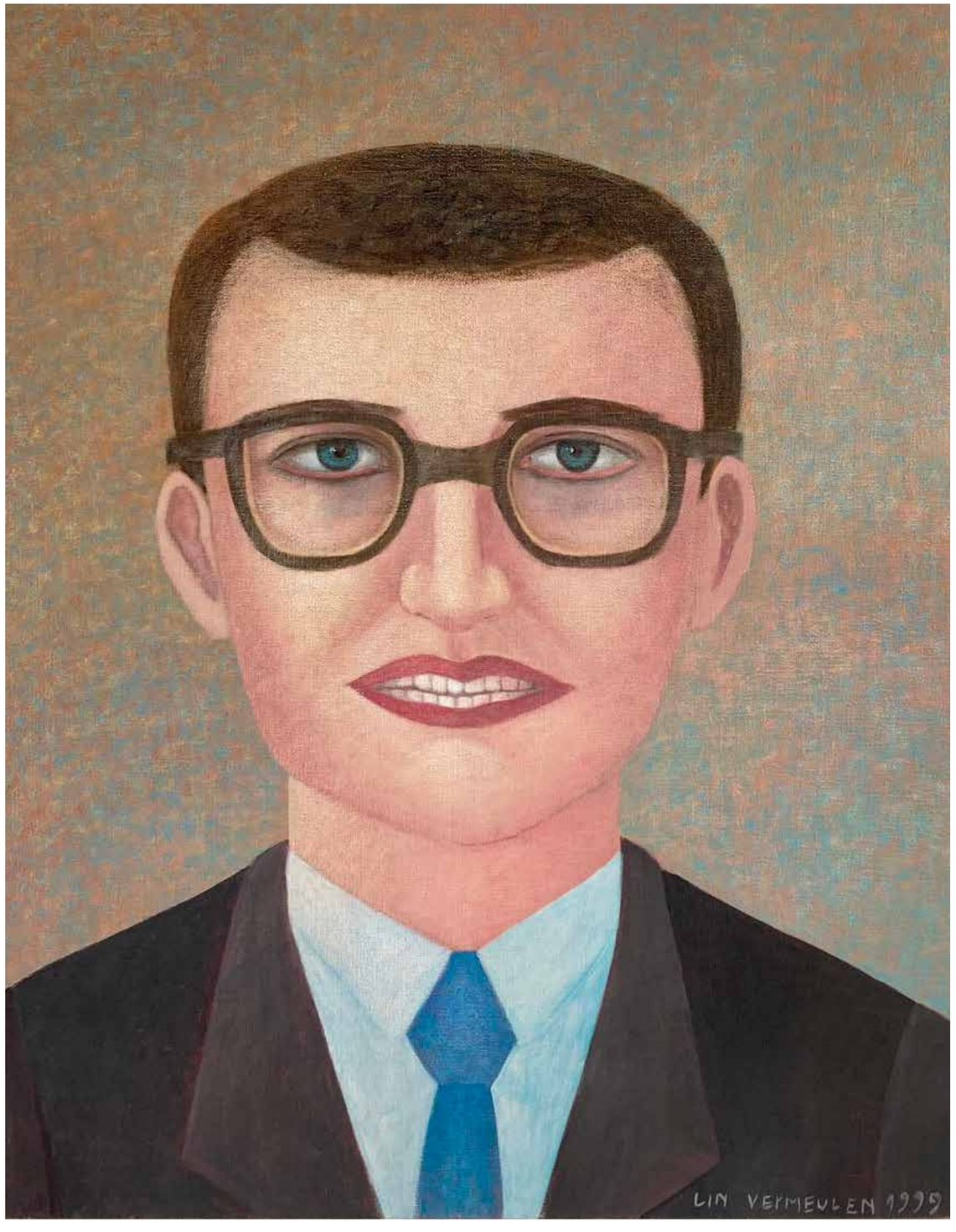
And then, we discuss why there is the Belgian tendency to speak negatively about the country. Vermeulen thinks the weather is the one to blame. She says that the weather has its impact, not only on the landscape, but also on the state of mind (L. Vermeulen, personal communication, March 11, 2024).



Lin Vermeulen, *Move on and leave all the mess behind*, 2022, oil on canvas, 51 × 61 cm



Lin Vermeulen, *Flowers*, 2024, oil on canvas, 50 × 50 cm



Lin Vermeulen, *Tv presentator (Portret van nieuwslezer)*, 2011 80 × 100cm





Lin Vermeulen, *Emancipation*, 2023, 150 × 180 cm

Inspiration
Vermeulen draws inspiration mainly from her surroundings and her personal experiences. She has focused mostly on her personal development as a visual artist. She always remained loyal to her own unique visual language; she did not want to get influenced too much by other painters.

Inspiring artists
The Belgian, Dutch, and French expressionists are a great inspiration for Vermeulen's work, as well as individual artists such as Balthus, Morandi, Nikifor, Willem Van Genk, Magritte, and Henry Rousseau. Next to that, she got to know two inspiring artists through an art magazine, Jacoba van Heemskerck and Louise Bourgeois.

Mentioned artists
Frida Kalho
Charley Toorop
Georgia O'Keeffe
Sonja Delaunay
Roger Raveel
Balthus
Morandi
Nikifor
Willem Van Genk
Magritte
Henry Rousseau
Jacoba van Heemskerck
Louise Bourgeois

Artist
Sebastian Van Canneyt

Year of birth
1998

Hometown
Maldegem, Belgium

Place of residence
Maldegem, Belgium

Type of artist
Visual artist, Fashion designer, Cross-over artist, Painter

Education
2017 – 2018
Astronomy UGent

2018 – 2021
BA Fashion
KASK, Ghent

2021 – 2022
MA Fashion
KASK, Ghent

First encounter
On the 22nd of October 2023, during the Belgian Art & Design Fair in Ghent, I saw Uitzicht op bos, by Sebastian Van Canneyt in the Arsenaal Gentbrugge. He got selected to take part in the fair as one of the young talents in art and design.

The second time I saw Sebastian Van Canneyt's work was on January 26th at the museum, Texture, in Kortrijk. It was the opening of a group show called "DRAAD" [THREAD] organised by Kunstwerkt, featuring thirty artists, including myself. The exhibition celebrated the creative freedom of textiles, showcasing a diverse blend of techniques, materials, and interpretations.

Communication
22 Instagram Direct Messages

Interview
Date
20 March 2024

Duration
of the interview
52 min. 53 sec.

Location
9990 Maldegem

Travel time
To go there: 3 h 7 min.
To return: 1 h 48 min.

Transportation
To go there:
Walk
Bus
Bus (accidentally took the wrong bus)
Bus
Walk

To return:
Walk
Bus
Bus
Walk

ARTIST INTERVIEW

SEBASTIAN VAN CANNEYT



Wednesday morning, the 20th of March

I walked to the bus stop at Ledeberg's main square. From there on I took the bus to Ghent-Sint-Pieters, where I took another bus, thinking I was going in the direction of Maldegem, but little did I know, 45 minutes later I realised that I took the wrong bus. Luckily, at least the bus was going in a similar direction. When I found out, I got off the bus and about a half-hour later I was able to catch the bus in the right direction. 3 hours later ... I arrived at Sebastian Van Canneyt's house. A trip that normally already requires an hour and half ended up as a very long ride. Luckily, I took different sketchbooks with me, and I was able to make a lot of drawings on my way there. What I did not find on my way to Van Canneyt's studio was something to eat, Sebastian Van Canneyt offered me a slice of bread with cheese and a glass of Iced Tea. Then we went upstairs to his studio space, where he showed me some of his new and old works. We discussed his practice and after an hour I took off to catch the return bus. The right one, this time.





Background information

Sebastian Van Canneyt grew up in Maldegem, where he has been living for 25 years now. During his studies in Ghent, he stayed in a sort of student residence for 7 years. While living in Ghent he returned to Maldegem, during the weekends and the summer period. After graduating from KASK, he built his studio space in his childhood home in Maldegem.

First, he started off by studying physics & astronomy at the university of Ghent. Eventually, he figured out that he wanted to reconsider his academic path. Initially, he used to think about art as something to do in his leisure time, but this idea of studying art kept following him. At first, he wanted to study something where he was sure that he would be able to make money with. For this simple reason he thought of fashion, because everybody wears clothes. Later, he acknowledged he wanted to do art full time.

Before starting his academic career, Van Canneyt could not interpret abstract art. His knowledge of arts was limited to painters like Van Eyck and Rogier Van der Weyden. These were the painters he knew the best, because their art was exhibited at the Groeningemuseum. It was one of the museums he visited the most, because it was the only one that was so close to where he lived. They made super-realistic paintings, something that Sebastian Van Canneyt thought he would never be able to do. By attending KASK, a new world had opened up for him. He learned about art history and contemporary art.

During his first-year bachelors, he mostly learned the basics in fashion. The second year he had to choose a minor and he chose film. His brother was the actor in the movie he made. Van Canneyt decided to dress him in a very special costume. In this costume he was doing everyday actions like ironing, eating and washing the dishes.

For Van Canneyt the 'Flemish rural landscape and surroundings' evolved from a frustrating factor in his life to a fascinating factor in his life. His frustration with the rural Flemish landscape originated from the lack of cultural events: in the rural environment where he lived, Maldegem, there were hardly any cinemas, exhibitions or museums. As a result, he wanted to move somewhere else. He did not want to stay in Maldegem, because of the silence and the boredom that he experienced. But while staying in Ghent, during his studies, he realised that he had to admit that he missed his confident rural environment. By travelling back and forward through the Flemish landscape by train or bus, his appreciation for the rural environment grew.

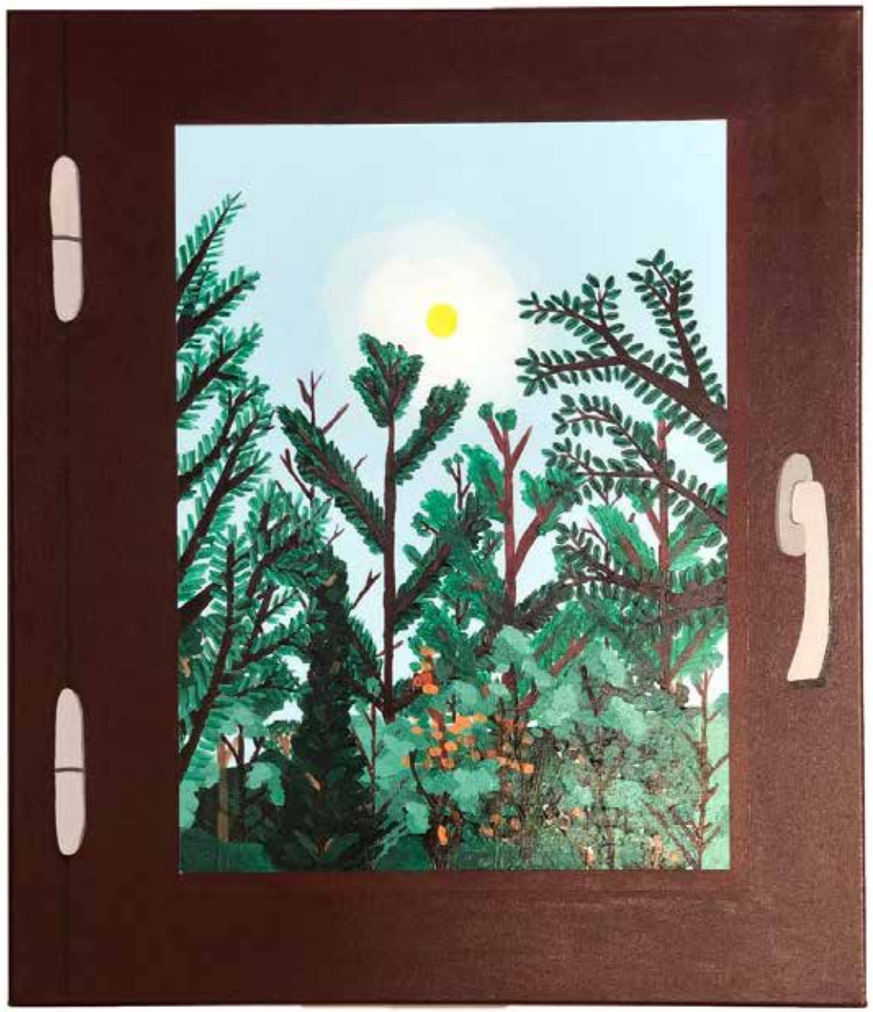
So, something that once used to be a frustration now became a big source of fascination. He now appreciates the countryside for its indifference and the slowness. For example: the people that are now living in his street are the same people that have been living there for 20 years. He finds it intriguing to see, that on the one hand everything stays the same (in other words: you see the same things all the time), but on the other hand the surrounding landscape continuously changes: the light is different, the weather, sometimes the sun shines, sometimes it rains, sometimes it is both at the same time and sometimes something burns down, or something breaks.

The everyday life

Van Canneyt has a fascination for the rituals of everyday life, such as preparing sandwiches and eating them at noon, shaking hands, when we meet someone and doing the dishes, a ritual that he really hates to do. He has a great appreciation for the little things in life. He wonders where those rituals find their origin. The theme of everyday life returns to his paintings too, once he made a painting of an ironing board standing in his student room. While passing through his room, he realised how beautiful this object is. He describes it as a very sacred element. For his painting, he made an abstraction of it. Van Canneyt takes everyday life elements out of their context and puts them on a pedestal. By doing this the object becomes something alienating. He finds that sense of alienation, and the tension it creates, interesting.

Material use

During his third year of bachelors he started painting in grayscale, for the simple reason that he bought one pot of paint in white and another one in grey. Afterwards, he bought another colour, red. So his paintings transformed into red-pink paintings. Now eventually he started buying the colours he really wanted to work with like blue, green, yellow and brown.



Sebastian Van Canneyt, Venster I, 2023,Acrylics on canvas, 60 × 70cm

Work Method

As a visual artist, Sebastian Van Canneyt is not concerned by what the viewer thinks about his work or the way it is interpreted. He enjoys creating by experimentation and exploration, similar to how a child plays freely.

As a child he got bored easily, to get rid of this feeling he built, wrote and played Minecraft. Building is something he did for a very long period in the garden, later this got replaced by Minecraft and Lego. Nowadays, together with his father he creates constructions for his work. He likes to build useless things. In general, he appreciates non-functional objects.

Van Canneyt creates like a visual artist but thinks and plans like a designer. His work is very graphic and systematic, because of his background in fashion design. For fashion you need to have a plan, freewheeling on garments is something almost impossible and very difficult to do. Fashion design is a very planned craft. When it comes to drawing or painting, he is not concerned by the craft. He draws but is not interested in being able to draw realistically. For him it is more about the image making itself. Before he starts working on a painting, he already has the idea in mind, he makes a quick sketch and transforms it into a painted canvas.

Crossover discipline: Portable installations and fashion as an art object

Clothing as an object interests him more than the functionality of it. That is the reason why he tends more towards visual arts, in this way he can make objects for exhibitions. He prefers exhibitions over fashion shows, because of the velocity. An exhibition form is something created for long lasting, in which you can immerse yourself, while a fashion show presents 200 silhouettes in fifteen minutes. Fashion shows interest him less. There are a lot of beautiful fashion shows and he also follows the fashion weeks. You can do a lot within a fashion show, but he appreciates an exhibition more.

He is inspired by clothing specifically, through fashion history. Workwear is a hugely rewarding subject. A lot of this clothing is archived. Every day he discovers new garments from 100 years ago. Many fashion designers also make use of that, and those reinterpretations inspire him as well.

He is still working within fashion, but he does not use this in his visual language. On one hand, he makes portable installations and clothing sculptures and on the other hand, fashion as art objects. He likes to create sculptures and spatial work that must be installed.

Crossover discipline is something very contemporary from my point of view. Sebastian Van Canneyt has no explanation for how this actually started for him, it is something that grew spontaneously.

For Van Canneyt it is much easier to tell his stories through crossover. The production of a clothing line is something financially impossible for him. Besides that, he also is not interested in making money out of clothing, it is not his desire. He already has a teaching job to make money. He is a morals teacher at an art school.



Sebastian Van Canneyt, *Uitzicht op bos*, 2023, Acrylics on canvas and wood, Painting without frame measures, 20cm x 100cm



Sebastian Van Canneyt, *'de hagen snoeier'*, 2023, Acryl on canvas and wood, 85 cm x 60cm



Sebastian Van Canneyt, Nightwatch 2023 (installation view), FOMU

Masterproject *Endegem* (2021 – 2022)

For the paintings for his master's project, he started by taking pictures at night of everyday life objects and places, like traffic signs, cranes, construction sites. Because he is taking those pictures at night he had to use the flashlight on his camera. By doing this, he isolates the object and puts it on a pedestal. That idea fascinated him, and this was the starting point of a whole series that later turned into drawings that transformed into paintings and clothes. The summer before his master year started, he sketched and painted all summer long. During his master year he worked on his collection of clothing and clothing installations. For the installations, he made a poetry collection about the absurdity of everyday life.

The poem was a story about Ferdinand, a paver who lives in the village of Endegem. That particular fascination with pavers and pavement workers comes from fashion. Through fashion he got inspired by work wear, military, utilitarian and functional clothing. He is fascinated by people who really live in their clothes. That is how he got to those direct honest occupations and everything that comes with that, the simplicity, the social construction and the rituals. The name Ferdinand was inspired by a French mail carrier, Ferdinand Cheval, that built le palais ideal, a monument in France, where he inscribed messages for visitors, such as "Travail d'un seul homme". Van Canneyt's work is an homage to Ferdinand Cheval. In his work Ferdinand describes life in Endegem, he links the story to Flemish villages. Endegem is a nonexistent self-made-up village, whereas Adegem does exist, and is close from where Van Canneyt lives.

To exhibit his master's collection, Van Canneyt made wooden figures to wear his clothing. Those figures are scarred by life, you can see this mainly in their eyes. These figures are people who really perform physical labour and it is visible in their appearance that there is a kind of authenticity, rawness behind them, without plastic surgery. Van Canneyt sees the beauty of this. For him, it feels like everybody is clean and groomed nowadays. Van Canneyt takes the bus very often and there he sees a lot of different people with different faces.

In his sketch and process book, that forms the starting point of his master's project, Endegem. His sketches for paintings and clothes are very simple pencil drawings. In the beginning of the book the sketches were in colour, after some time they lost their colour and became pencil line drawings, because he had to speed up the tempo, to be able to create more possibilities. Sometimes he draws something, but then eventually it is produced in another way.

Nightwatch 2023, FOMU

On the 31st of March 2023 FOMU opened their doors for Nightwatch, a nocturne by 17 young artists, that created work around the theme of Ego. Sebastian Van Canneyt got invited to show his work that explores and questions the relationship with his ego. For this work Van Canneyt got inspired by a poem by Jan Arends. It is a very short poem called Lunchpauzegedichten [Lunch Break poems] "Je gaat de straat op, je neemt een mes mee in je hand en je laat iedereen zien wie je bent (Arends, 1974, p. 52)." [You go out into the street, you take a knife in your hand and you show everyone who you are.]

The message of this poem reflects in his characters, who are very anti-social. He believes that nowadays we all conform to a certain pattern of being cheerful, happy, and friendly. However, he wants to be left alone to do his own thing. This hermit mentality is exaggerated to the point where it becomes funny.

2023

Currently, in the year 2023 he started working more with single stories that happen during the daylight. Nowadays he paints more starting from what he feels like, it is less connected to one big story. But his paintings are all connected through a similar visual language that he is further developing. He is still painting the same small world, the landscape he is surrounded by, and the rural environment (S. Van Canneyt, personal communication, March 20, 2024).



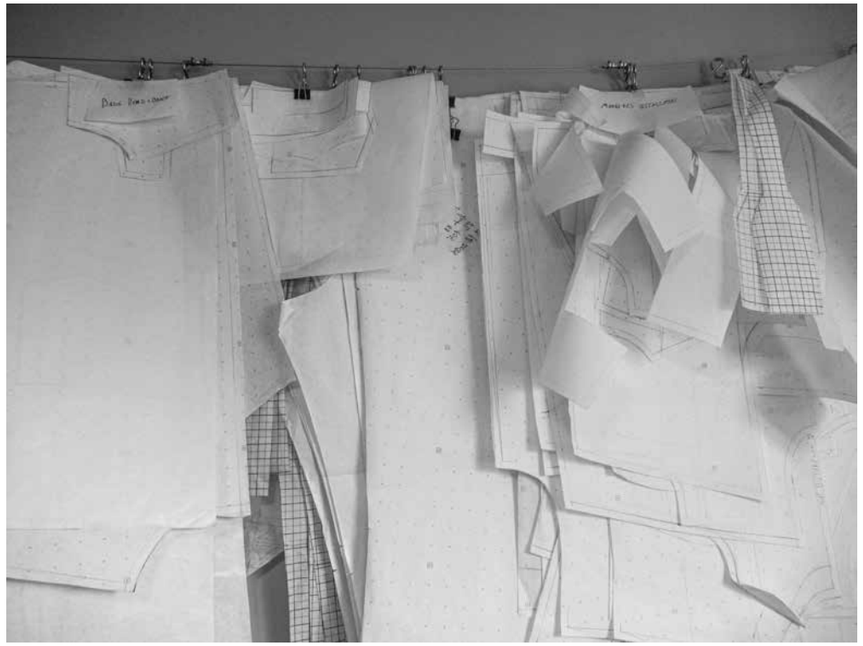
Sebastian Van Canneyt, figure of Endegem, 2022



Sebastian Van Canneyt, figure of Endegem, 2022



Sebastian Van Canneyt, Hemd, 2023, Acrylics on canvas 60×70cm, 100% katoen



Inspiration
In General Van Canneyt is more influenced by other artists than by fashion designers. Designers that he is fascinated by are Daniel Arsham, Iris van Herpen and Craig Green, for their clothing installations and Raf Simons, for the way he combines subcultures and workwear. He thinks it is fascinating, but it is not something he would do.

For his paintings he gets inspired by paintings he saw during his art history classes. Painters such as Roger Raveel, Raoul De Keyser and especially, Joseph Willaert, which he finds a great painter. He realises that the artists he is inspired by, when it comes to the Flemish landscape, are the common artists that get mentioned often. In recent years, he has also developed a fascination with American abstract expressionists like Ellsworth Kelly, and colour field painter and minimalist, Mark Rothko, and the British painter, David Hockney.

He mostly enjoys colourful works that are not too realistic. Mimesis is something that he finds a bit boring, but it is personal. He thinks a reinterpretation of reality has more value than a hyperrealistic work. Figuration allows this simplicity; it is recognizable and sometimes abstracted. This is what usually appeals to me as well.

Mentioned artists
Craig Green
Daniel Arsham
David Hockney
Delphine Lecompte
Ellsworth Kelly
Ferdinand Cheval
Iris van Herpen
Jan Arends
Jan Van Eyck
Joseph Willaert
Mark Rothko
Raf Simons
Raoul De Keyser
Roger Raveel
Rogier Van der Weyden

Artist
Renske Decuyper

Year of birth
1999

Hometown
Sijsele, West Flanders, Belgium

Type of artist
Visual artist, Painter, Sculptor

Education
2017 – 2019
BA Sculptor, LUCA Ghent

2019 – 2021
BA Painting, LUCA Ghent

2021 – 2022
MA Painting, LUCA Ghent

2022 – 2023
MA Education in visual arts, LUCA Ghent

First Encounter
While I was searching for interesting references, books and texts about the landscape on Limo – the online database of the library of LUCA school of arts – I bumped into the master's thesis by Renske Decuyper, Fragments from the landscape, where she questions: 'What can the figurative landscape in painting teach us today about the general handling of the landscape?' Her thesis analyses images and fragments from landscape paintings, focusing on visual aspects that inspire and examine human relationships with nature. Besides that, she discusses the idea of fragmentation and the importance of context (Decuyper, 2022).

Communication
1 email exchange,
23 Instagram Direct Messages

Interview
Date
25 March 2024

Duration of the interview
55 min. 38 sec.

Location
9980 Sint-Laureins

Travel time
To go there: 1h 12 min.
To return: 1h 4 min.

Transportation
Car, Train, Walking

ARTIST INTERVIEW

RENSKE DECUYPER





On Monday, 25 March

I walked towards the station of Gentbrugge, where I took the train to Eeklo. On the train I made different drawings in my sketchbook. In Eeklo station I waited for Renske Decuyper to pick me up. We drove together to her house in Sint-Laureins, where her dog was waiting for us. Her studio is on the top floor of the house, consisting of two different rooms, one is her workspace, and the other is a storage space. During the studio visit we discussed her material use, her inspiration and different artworks. Afterwards we drank a coffee together in the living room downstairs, meanwhile she asked me about my work and master's project. Then she brought me back to Eeklo station so I could catch the train back home. On the train I continued making drawings in my sketchbook.



Background information

Renske Decuyper grew up in Sijsele, a suburban village. Sijsele is situated on the outskirts of Bruges, the capital city of West Flanders. That is where Decuyper's artistic career started as well; she attended the Maricolen, an art high school in Bruges. Maricolen has a very traditional way of teaching art, the school mainly focuses on studies of painterly masters in order to be able to replicate their style to learn from their expertise and learning different types of techniques for diverse mediums. A very different approach from LUCA Ghent, the university she attended for her sculpture studies afterwards.

In 2017 Decuyper started studying sculpture at LUCA Ghent. For Decuyper, the transition from high school to university was challenging. It was a big shift in mindset from traditional to contemporary. She was not familiar with contemporary art and her parents had never been involved in the art world. Decuyper struggled a lot at first. During her first year in sculpture study, her teachers were Stijn Cole and Hans De Pelsmaecker. She found it difficult to deal with their criticism. They were very strict when it came to material use. For example, she once tried to make a sculpture out of wood, and her teacher questioned why she chose that specific type of wood rather than another kind. With questions like these, she felt disapproved of. She found it difficult to continue working under those conditions. After two years, she switched from sculpture to painting, because of various reasons. Later, she realised that it was not about the medium nor technique, but more about her personal approach. While making sculptures she always had a lot of different options, in material use. She thinks that maybe, for her, there were too many options within the medium at that time. Painting was a more specific medium with less options when it comes to material use.

She started working from observation in sculpture and continued with this in painting. She got encouraged by her painting teachers to create very spontaneously, without overthinking by just enjoying the process. She used plants and window views as her subject. Decuyper finished her bachelor's and completed her master's two years ago. Afterwards she followed the educational masters. Currently, she has been teaching visual arts at a school nearby. When she is not teaching, she is painting in her studio.

Material use

The ecological aspect is reflected in Decuyper's work through the stories her paintings tell and her awareness of material use.

During her painting bachelor's, Decuyper started creating her own tempera paint.The reason for this was to really get to know the material she works with and know where the ingredients come from. There is always been this question: If we love our environment, why harm it? Especially when making artworks there are many material choices one can make. Most art supplies have a big impact on the environment. With pigments this is also the case, and pigments happen to be the main ingredient to all paints. Without any chemistry background she tried to understand the history and the way pigments are made today. For each pigment, there is a whole different story, she is still curious about it and trying to understand it.

When she realised that it is difficult to know where each pigment comes from or what process it took to make it, she attempted to produce her own pigments. She explained the process she followed: it began with collecting stones during a walk. Back home, she tried to pulverise the stones with a mortar. Although it was a promising idea, the experiment did not work out well because the material was too hard to process. Nevertheless, she tried other materials such as eggshells. The resulting pigment had an eggshell white colour but contained larger, unresolved pieces. To refine the pigment, she had to repeatedly drain and pour the mixture into water. After completing this intensive process, only the finest particles should remain. However, she never ended up painting with her homemade pigment because there were still too many larger pieces. She realised that creating her own pigment would require too much time and effort, which is something she currently does not have. However, making pigment from earth tones is easier because they release colours more easily, although this results in thicker chunks in the paint.

While she was studying painting at LUCA, she did not pay the right attention to the technical elements. Her first works made with tempera crackled, because she did not mix the pigment with her binder in the correct way. Nowadays, on the contrary, she finds those technical elements fascinating and it has become an important part of her practice. It made her more aware of how much trial and error was needed to make the high quality paints in tubes we use today. She enjoys working with these paints as well, as they have so many qualities and offer many possibilities.

This is the way she defends her working method: for her the solution for being as ecological as possible is to simply use less different types of oil paint tubes. She only has 5 different colours. With those different colours she can create almost all the other colours she needs. Besides that, she uses different pigments; they last a long time, and she is sparingly with them. 'It's very hard to not use harmful materials in art, but it's important to be aware of it and handle them with care. Where there are better choices to make, make them. It is a slow learning process.'

During her master's she started painting with tempera as a base and worked with oil paint on top of that. The parts that are painted in tempera look more like aquarel and the parts in oil paint are thicker layers, more voluminous, impasto. I noticed that there has been a return of interest in creating sculptors and spatial work in Decuyper's practice. She recently made work with plaster and paper-mâché. She likes to bring variety in the materials she uses. She explains that by using a different medium, you discover new things. It is like a cross-pollination, they influence each other.



Still lifes

Decuyper primarily works with natural elements and plants. During her bachelor's, she began creating still lifes that were very organic and ethereal on the canvas, without a clear sense of space or focal point. From that period, only one work remains; all the other canvases have been destroyed and repurposed. She recycles her canvases to reuse them for new works, as she believes this approach is economical and ecological.

Master's project, landscape paintings

During her bachelor's she made still lifes, which led her to create landscapes in her master's. She used to have a typical romantic image of nature. That idea shifted after a while. Nowadays, Decuyper approaches the landscape she is surrounded by in a questioning and critical manner, but always from a positive point of view. She has many questions arising when it comes to the Flemish landscape and the chaos that has resulted from our urban planning.

She is fascinated by the interaction of older and newer elements within a landscape. Some parts have been standing there for decades, like old bathtubs in the meadows or grazing poles. But then there are some new elements like windmills and apartment buildings. Especially the combination of those different architectural elements she finds particularly interesting. It seems like it was totally unthought in some places.

The perspective of her bigger landscape paintings is partly frontal and partly painted from above. I wonder out loud if that is because she paints on the top floor. She thinks it is possible that this could have influenced the paintings. She makes a lot of observational paintings. She paints by looking out of the window. I tell her that I interpret it as 'looking at the landscape from different windows', but Decuyper explains to me that it is rather during the process of painting that she makes decisions on how she paints things. She wants to create a sense of chaos by bringing together all those different elements. Whether the size of the elements in comparison to one another is correct or not, how big the trampoline is in comparison to the cow does not matter to her, nor interest her.

She made a painting of her boyfriend letting the dog out. The painting is a visualisation of the walk. She made different paintings from memory about walking her dog in Sint-Laureins. Those paintings are visualisations of what she saw during those walks. She brings different moments, during those walks, together in one image.

In this painting specifically you can see the landscape with all its different types of characteristics. Not only romantic characteristics, but realistic as well. On the right lower corner you can see her partner holding the leash of their dog. The painting is an exploration of the elements that you see regularly in the Flemish landscape.

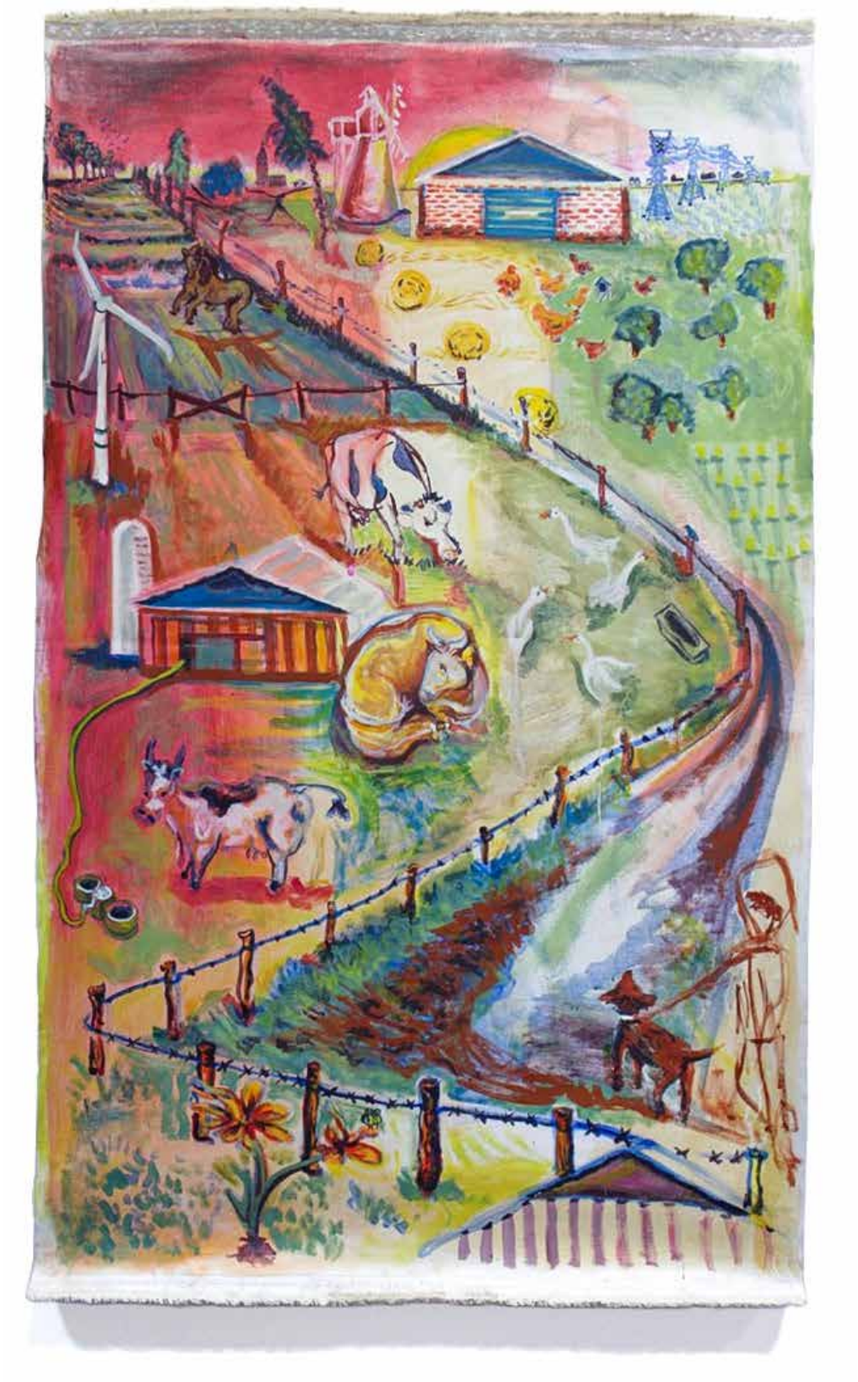
Decuyper tells me that for ecological reasons, she decided not to eat meat. That is why, during her walks, she wonders where all the pigs are that people eat? She never saw any pigs on the land before, while she knows there should be thousands of them. She is curious about where they are hidden. In the stables or in the sheds?

According to her, everyone has their own responsibility in engaging with the surrounding landscape. For example, how gardens are landscaped, designed, and decorated. Some gardens have predominantly pebbles, others have lots of plants, which both have a different influence on nature and the environment in general. This is something she finds fascinating. She thinks that a lot of people are not aware of their own influences on this matter.

Work process

Decuyper's work process mostly starts by walking with her dog in the neighbourhood, something she does daily. When she is back home, she starts sketching from memory about the experience she felt during her walk. Before, she used to make more observational drawings from the landscape by sketching on-site. But nowadays, she sketches afterward.

She sketches mostly with oil pastels, pencils, and paper cut-outs. Her sketches are very fast, spontaneous, and without any sense of criticism. For Decuyper, sketching most of the time is done with a sense of spontaneity, whereas the process of painting is much slower. These are two completely different actions. Whereas in her sketches she allows herself more freedom. For her, the usually following rule applies: if something works within the format of a sketch, it also works on canvas. If she paints on canvas, it has to be good, there is less space for failure because of the time it takes and the cost of the material.



Renske Decuyper, *Platteland*, 2022, eitempera op doek



Renske Decuyper, *Parcours*, 2022, eitempera op doek







Renske Decuyper, *Nr1*, 2024, olieverf op doek, 55×95cm
Renske Decuyper, *Nr2*, 2024, olieverf op doek, 55×95cm
Renske Decuyper, *Nr3*, 2024, olieverf op doek, 55×95cm



Renske Decuyper, *Raam + 1paard*, 2020, eitempera op doek, 49×76cm

Living on the border of Belgium and the Netherlands

Decuyper primarily works with natural elements and plAccording to her, everyone has their own responsibility in engaging with the surrounding landscape. For example, how gardens are landscaped, designed, and decorated. Some gardens have predominantly pebbles, others have lots of plants, which both have a different influence on nature and the environment in general. This is something she finds fascinating. She thinks that a lot of people are not aware of their own influences on this matter.

As I mentioned before, Renske Decuyper lives in Sint-Laureins, which is on the border of Belgium and the Netherlands. We discussed the difference in spatial planning between Belgium and the Netherlands and the visibility of this in the local area that surrounds her. She explains that there is an extreme difference between those two landscapes. When she goes to the end of her street, she is in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, everything is more divided; there is a clear difference between the countryside and the village. In Belgium, there is not any transition, there are no clear visual boundaries when you go from the countryside to a village and when you go from the village to a city; it blends into each other. In Belgium, there is more fragmentation as well. It is also referred to as a maze of streets, a house here, a house there. While in the Netherlands, they do not meander like that with their houses. When there is a road that runs through the meadow, they do not build any houses on that road. The biggest difference for Decuyper is that she feels like the urban planning in the Netherlands is actually something they thought through: where to place what, everything feels more structured. You actually understand when you are in a village because that is the place where there are more houses. And where there are a lot of fields, where you can see the horizon, you are in the countryside. The different types of areas are more divided. In Decuyper's paintings, you notice her interest in land use and urban planning.

Decuyper however does appreciate the Belgian landscape more, just like Dutch architect, C. Weeber does. He describes it as " *a breath of fresh air after the streamlined and utterly dull housing output of the Netherlands* (De Meulder et al.,1999, p.79)." We discussed her thesis briefly. She wrote about landscape painting within the lowlands.

Weidepaaltjes [meadow posts] / A zoom in on the landscape

Recently, Decuyper has been working around a new subject: field posts. The paintings are a zoom in on her interest in landscape painting. However, the posts have always been part of her work, not mainly nor intentionally, but they have been a recurring element. When she started painting still lifes during the corona pandemic, she also painted the surroundings, such as the window and the view through the window. This view, her surrounding landscape, also involved those posts.

In the bigger landscape paintings that Decuyper made for her master's project. The posts give the painting the right rhythm and connect everything together. The paintings often consist of all different fragments, and those posts are the connecting element that helps to shape the composition of the painting.

The posts she mainly focuses on are the meadow posts. Those posts are, in reality, dead pieces of wood, but Decuyper transforms them into something full of energy, colour, and life. If I had to make a description of the paintings of these posts, I would put them into words as portraits of posts because you can almost feel different personalities in the posts Decuyper paints. No pole looks the same in her paintings; they all have different layers, colours, and textures. Each painting reflects the wooden skin of the pole. She challenges herself to always paint the same subject, but in a different way. There is quite a noticeable evolution from the first posts she painted, that looked more like sticks seen from afar, to the ones she is painting now.

Ever since she started working with posts as a subject, she sees those posts everywhere, even in the most unusual places. Therefore, she defines them as a plague. For example, when she went to Scotland, she saw them on a rugged rock. She then started questioning how the Scottish people were able to place these posts on those rocks, which are, of course, very hard ground to put a pole in.

In Scotland, the landscape is very different in comparison with the Belgian landscape. For this reason, she has not made paintings about her Scottish experience yet. She thinks it would be strange if all of a sudden there appeared mountains in her paintings. According to her, that woul not fit because in Flanders everything is flat.

Decuyper makes paintings from the elements and objects that human beings are adding to the landscape, the physical borders. She wonders how long those posts have been standing in these fields. Those posts exist in all shapes and colours, but Decuyper focuses on the wooden meadow posts. She even brought some home from her walk. She once used one as a tool to create a new work. I wondered if she would use it as a study object as well, but it has a more decorational function for Decuyper. She takes them with her as a souvenir. She only takes them if they are abandoned in the street and she is sure they have been lying there for a long time because then she is convinced that nobody cares about them.

In the paintings she has been creating now, you have less sense of the horizon. It seems like an endless landscape that keeps on continuing because you can see the posts, one behind the other. This brings a type of layering to the work. She mostly paints the posts from the front view, but she is willing to experiment with the perspective. She is pleased to be able to focus on one subject. Decuyper declares that she is not the most productive painter; she prefers to take her time to paint something.

Inspiring artists

With the sculpture department of *LUCA*, she visited the *Raveel Museum*; this experience had a big impact on her. She was amazed by the fact that Raveel's practice was a mix between sculpture and painting. This aspect particularly attracted her. She especially appreciates the way he combines strong geometric shapes with natural forms; he also painted a lot of posts, which triggered her to paint them as well.

Decuyper appreciates Hans Op De Beeck's work. He works around a similar subject as her: a stone fence instead of a wooden one, it is a zoom in on the Flemish landscape as well. The work is based upon the enclosed garden. It is something very recognizable, those grey gardens. The way he draws those grey concrete walls in pencil. It is drawn very fragile as if the stone wall is crumbling. She strongly admires Jean Brusselmans' work. I could almost say that she is in love with it. She used to go to *Muzee* quite often, where you can find his work next to Roger Raveel and Raoul De Keyser. She is interested in the work of Francis Alys when it comes to speaking about borders.

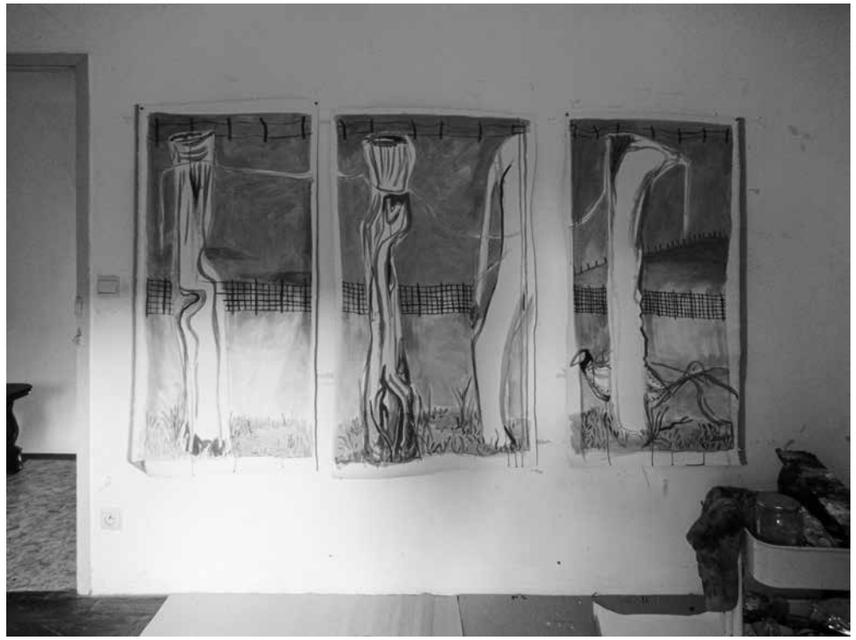
Renske Decuyper appreciates artworks with imperfections. For her, when an artwork is picture perfect or a romantic imagery, it becomes something very decorative. Ben Sledsens' paintings are a good example of that, she finds them too idyllic, too perfect, too sweet, and too beautiful and because of that, for her, there is nothing interesting to that.

Female artists

After I ask Decuyper about the artists she is inspired by, I ask her if she also had a favourite female artist. She felt caught by my question because she realised all of a sudden that she did not mention any female artist, which was rather painful. Then she corrected herself by saying that normally she takes care of that. For example, she tells me that as a teacher, most of the time, she gives the well-known artist as an example. So during one of her lessons, she discusses James Ensor, but in the meanwhile, she also mentions female artists, such as Alice Frey, who worked within the same period. She thinks it is important to be aware of which artist to discuss and to try to bring a variety of diverse artists while giving an art history class. She just started teaching, so right now she is sticking to the more traditional subjects.

To her class, she explained that Ensor was a well-known artist, and that Alice Frey was less famous because she is a female artist. And female artists did not get as much attention as male artists did. The students were shocked by how unfair the situation used to be. Decuyper was very charmed by the reactions of her students.

She realises that those times have changed, and nowadays this is not as big of a problem anymore if you are working as a female artist, but it is still important to focus on this (R. Deecuyper, personal communication, March 25, 2024).



Mentioned artists
Hans Op De Beeck
Ben Sledsens
Wayne Thibaud
Jean Brusselmans
Raoul De Keyser
Roger Raveel
Francis Alys
Alice Frey
James Ensor

ARTIST INTERVIEW

ELIAS CAFMEYER

Artist
Elias Cafmeyer

Year of birth
1990

Hometown
Roeselare, Belgium

Type of artist
Visual artist, Sculptor, Constructor

Education
2008 – 2011
BA Tourism and recreation management, Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences and Arts

2013 – 2014
Graphic design, Royal Academy for Fine Arts, Antwerp

2014 – 2016
BA Sculpture / Spatial art, Sint-Lucas Antwerp

2016 – 2017
MA Sculpture / Spatial art, Sint-Lucas Antwerp

2021 – 2022
Educational Master in Visual Arts, LUCA, Brussels

First Encounter
After a long time of wasting my time, scrolling and clicking on Instagram I bumped into something good, a picture of the installation Rotonde by Elias Cafmeyer. Rotonde was an in-situ installation, made for an exhibition called Sint-Denijs-City, that took place during the summer of 2023.

Communication
7 email exchanges, 3 messages

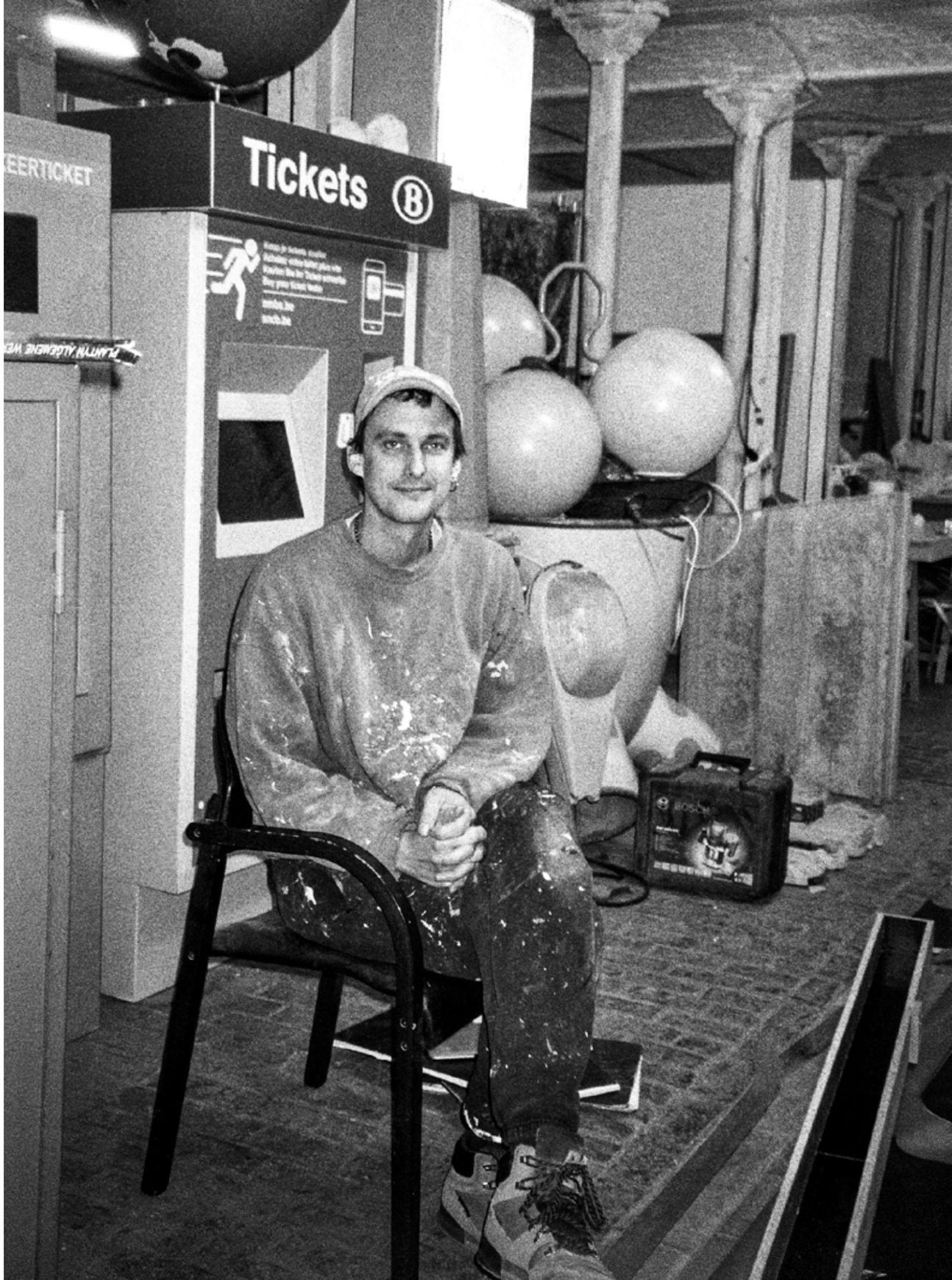
Interview
Date
29 March 2024

Duration of the interview
1h 7 min. 6 sec.

Location
1030 Schaerbeek

Travel time
To go there: 1h 13min.
To return: 1h 17min.

Transportation
Bicycle , Walking, Train





Friday, the 29th of March

I biked to the train station of Ghent-Sint-Pieters, where I took the train to the North Station of Brussels. On the train – as I usually do – I made different drawings in my sketchbook. When I arrived in Brussels North I walked to Elias' studio. He sent me a message that he would arrive a bit later, so I decided to sit down and make a drawing of the houses in front of his studio. When Elias arrived, we entered the building of his studio and took the elevator to the first floor. He has a spacious studio that he shares with one other artist. He quickly showed me around and then we sat down for the interview. During the interview we discussed a variety of topics such as his relationship to wayfinding, gentrification, his model career, his interest in primary colours and urban planning, but we also spoke about his different projects. During the interview I drank 2 coffees in a small white classic cup. After the interview we spoke about my artistic practice and my master project. Then I walked back to the station and took the train back to Ghent-Sint-Pieters station.

Background information

He attended a variety of studies before he started at sculpture/spatial art in Antwerp. By the time he started his study in Antwerp he was 25 years old, for this reason he asked if he could skip the first year. His class was a nice group in terms of maturity. They got along well during the studies.

During his first study, tourism and recreation management, he started to model, and he strategically planned his exams, so he could do both the castings, the fashion weeks in Paris and Milan and his exams. He modelled for three years during his studies and afterwards he was a full-time model for two years.

He always had a fascination for cities, roads and urban planning. He thinks this fascination comes from being a lot on the road in a car, as a child. He was always curious to know which roads lead to the same place. His parents were divorced, and his father often took him along different roads to his mother's house.

He thinks that starting from this fascination, his fascination for urban planning grew and that studying tourism and recreation management was the most specific academic path related to this interest. This topic he is still working around nowadays, as an artist. He thinks that his studies in tourism were not a direct influence for the work he creates now, but that his interest in tourism is a natural extension of who he is as a person, and closely aligns with his personality.

His second study, graphic design, was not a big success, after a year he changed to sculpture and spatial art. I think his interest in design was mostly reflected in wayfinding signs, but also in temporary signs like construction signs, street signs, traffic signals, road markings, billboards and advertisements. He admires the lines of road markings, and the solid/primary colours, that are used for wayfinding and street signs.

I asked him where he grew up, whether it was in a city or in the countryside. He asked me if we can still speak about the countryside in Flanders nowadays. From his point of view, Flanders is one big urbanisation. He grew up in Roeselare, not in the city itself, but in a sub-municipality called Rumbeke. But for Cafmeyer Brussels had a bigger impact on him than Roeselare did. For example, he replaced the reality of Roeselare with the Brussels situation. When he was riding his bike on the bicycle lane from Rumbeke to Roeselare, he pretended to be on the highway to Brussels. Ever since he was 3 years old, he had been insanely fascinated by Brussels, because he used to join his mother during her work when he was little. She needed to go to Brussels for her work, because she had suppliers in the city. Cafmeyer really cherished the time they spent together: that car ride was their quality time. Besides that he did not get to spend that much time with his mother alone, because he has brothers, a father and stepfather. He remembers very well how he could sit in the front seat and by the time they arrived in Koekelberg his mother started talking about Brussels. He was completely mesmerised by Brussels. He always found an interest in big urbanity and public space. Nowadays he finds Brussels too small. He would prefer to stay in even bigger cities.





Criticising the urban planning in Belgium

He creates work about how Belgium deals with public space and urban planning. His work can be seen as a kind of criticism. He has a lot of questions about how the public space is filled, especially on a social level. He is trying to find even more cases and material to work with, to implement that social layer in his work. He does not want his work to be tragic, negative or he does not even try to find a solution. He wants to create a kind of context and to understand how the space is built, but through humorous, tragicomic scenes. He has mainly been creating installations in public spaces for a while now. However, in the future, he would like to make smaller sculptures with a different approach. He wants to create artefacts of today. By creating an artefact of today, he is commenting on objects that should already belong to the past.

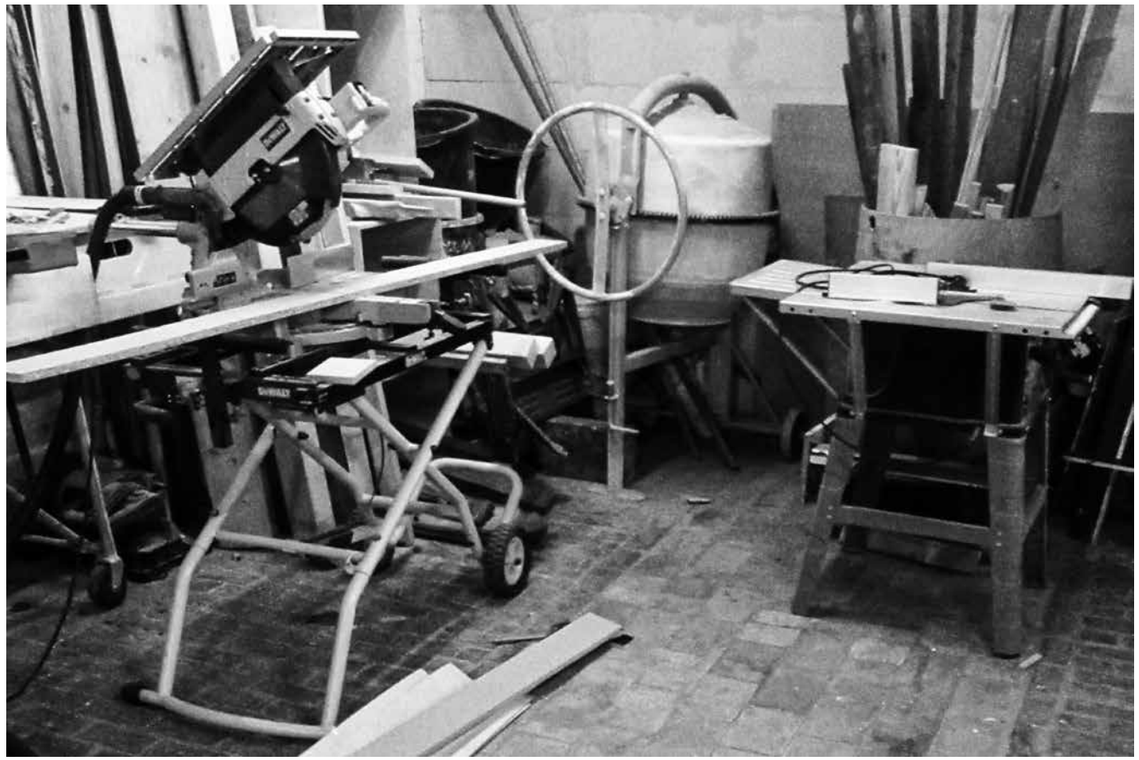
Some of his frustrations from urban planning are social construction, gentrification and certain interventions in the cities that are claimed to be for the common good. But he must admit that he is part of the problem, because he bought an apartment in Molenbeek as a white person.

"Matonge and Molenbeek show two moments in the well-known process of gentrification in which -often ethnically mixed- deprived neighbourhoods are gradually being 'taken over' by people from the more ethnically homogeneous and often 'white' middle class (Weytjens & Kuipers, 2022, p.330)*."*

Another example of a frustration is the imagoverlagende taxen, [image-lowering taxes] in Antwerp. The taxes are for different types of shops such as gambling establishments, sex shops, shisha bars and night shops. Every place that could damage the image of Antwerp has to pay a tax of around 8,000 euros a year. But also Forbidden city in Antwerp had to pay that tax as well. Whereas it is a kind of underground art space, located in the historical centre, near the cathedral.

Another ridiculous rule in Antwerp is that a van can no longer park inside the zone of the leien (it is a series of streets in the centre of Antwerp, that connect the South, with the North of Antwerp). If this happens there is an 800 euro fine automatically charged. But what about the construction workers who have to work in this area? They refuse new contracts in that area because of this new rule.

He thinks the low emission zone is good for a lot of reasons, but in this way the city exists mostly for tourism. It is the same in all the Flemish and Brussels cities. In Wallonia it is a bit less. The centre of the city is no longer accessible for the



inhabitants of the city. You can not get through everywhere with your bike, because the traffic is jammed everywhere, except for the Anspachlaan.

He finds Ghent, a city that deals better with this. That city has a completely different mentality. They often use a bakfiets [cargobike] to transport things.

He does not want to declare that low emission zone is something bad, but when the low emission zone got invented, and was established in Antwerp, all the aldermen and the city council had ties with the people who oversaw the car industry in and around Antwerp. Cafmeyer is wondering whether that was a coincidence or if the car industry lobbied to get the deal done. His main problem is that for instance, on a Saturday, rich people can easily come to spend a day in Brussels, and drive there, with their SUV or Tesla, while at the same time the residents of Brussels are no longer allowed to use their car, because they have no money for an electric car.

Besides that, according to Cafmeyer, something else is happening to the city: people are being pushed out of the city, because of real estate developers, who are constructing new buildings and taking over the city. Cafmeyer found out about Bart de Wever, that he invited real estate developers on his birthday, and suddenly, the next day, in the south of Antwerp, the houses were allowed to be double in height. Afterwards, all at once, half of Borgerhout was for sale, and there was a mass population move. The inhabitants were forced to move out of the city. Then, they all went to live in Mortsel, where they were able to drive around with an older car. This process is also referred to as gentrification.

Gentrification is a process in which a poor area (as of a city) experiences an influx of middle-class or wealthy people who renovate and rebuild homes and businesses, and which often results in an increase in property values and the displacement of earlier, usually poorer residents ("Gentrification," 2024).

An example of this is how they say about the Stalingrad zone in Brussels, that they are working on a social revaluation of the neighbourhood. The current inhabitants are mostly north African residents. Another example is the idea behind how the city is installing subway lines in Brussels. They are installing lines along Saint-Gilles, through the South area, through the entire centre and through Schaerbeek, but in the so-called 'less beautiful neighbourhoods' there are no subway lines at all.

For Residents Only, 2018, YART, Duivelsteen, Ghent

For the exhibition YART, he started by making pictures of the space and then on photoshop he made a lot of different sketches, to have different project proposals and possibilities. He really enjoyed that process. He created these sketches with the idea of having an unlimited budget. If he would have had an unlimited budget, he would have turned the whole space into a parking lot. But in the end, he was quite satisfied with the result, and he thinks it turned out better than when he would have had made the space entirely in a parking lot. Now there is the suggestion of a parking lot, and the actual space at Duivelsteen is still visible as well, you still see the grass and that contrast works well. Another idea for this space was an announcement of the construction of new residences coming up.

"For Residents Only is an installation that brings certain elements out of the public space together into a sculptural summery. The elements refer to a language used for urban spaces like a car park, a roundabout or a square. Combining those elements reduces the public space into abstraction. The viewer is at the same time confronted with the way we interpret (traffic) signs as purely functional, without looking further into the visual impact they have on the streetscape (Elias Cafmeyer, 2018)."

"For Residents Only is also a reaction to the typical present day Disneyfication of historical city centres. The installation is cross to the emergence of mobility plans, emission-free areas and pedestrian zones, however the contrast between historical heritage and urban misfits is prominently present in the Belgian urban landscape (Elias Cafmeyer, 2018)."

Disneylandfication is the touristification of the city centre, a tendency that Cafmeyer sees in all the European cities at the moment, but in Brussels they are not doing this yet. In Germany they are already applying it: a lot of buildings, that were built in the 70's, 80's or 90's, get a new facade from the neoclassical period. In this way they create a kind of fairy tale palace, while there is actually a brutalist building behind there. Disneylandfication also means that you promote everything as a tourist product.

Another example of disneylandfication is how they changed the Anspachlaan, which used to be a place where people from Brussels had small convenience stores and delicacy specialty stores, such as cheese stores. The city wanted to turn the Anspachlaan into a nice neighbourhood, but they did not take care of what was already good there, by preserving the small stores that were already there. Now there are only chains, such as Burger King, McDonalds, Quick, ... They embellished the area of the former Brussels Stock Exchange building, to please the tourists.

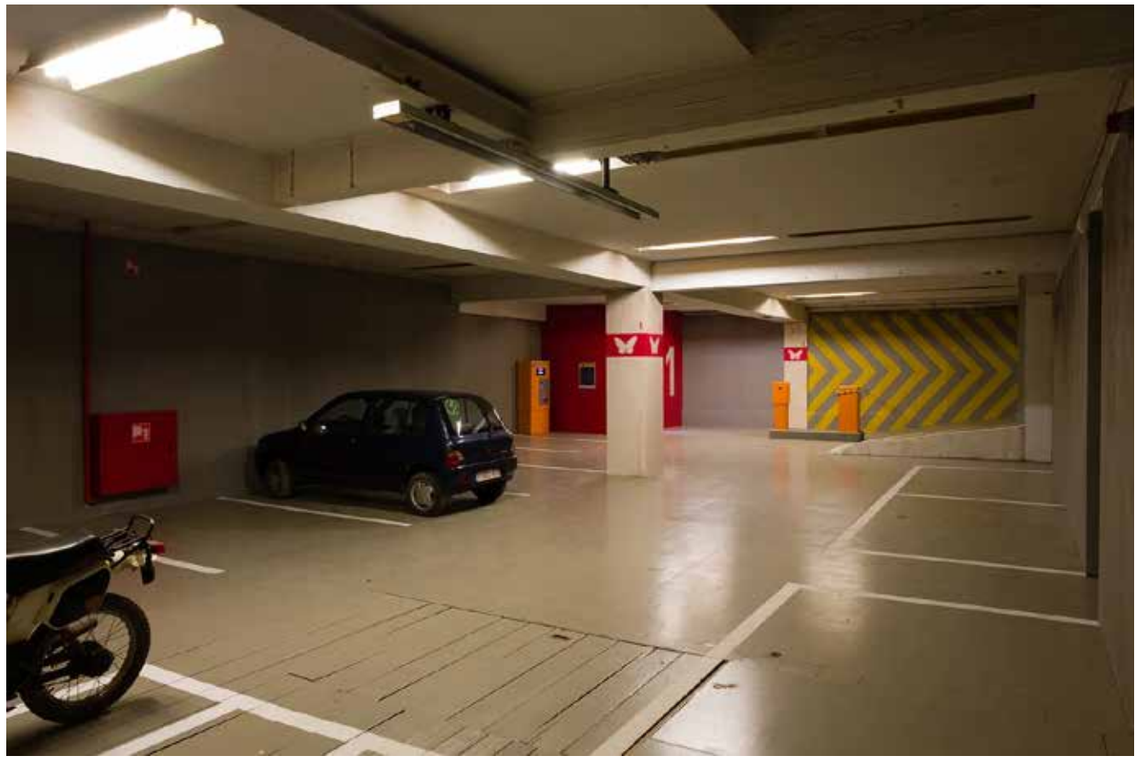
Unipark Extra City, 2019, Kunsthal Extra City, Antwerp

Sometimes, the space or location he is creating the work for gives him the inspiration for his art. For example, this space had a very low ceiling. He got into that space and thought it would be funny, if this was a parking lot and he immediately imagined it there. He made some quick sketches of it, in a sketchbook (while telling this, he admits that he is not a very good illustrator). When he has an idea in mind, it is really hard to get it out of his head. If he wants something, he does it, and luckily, he succeeds every time. But in the meantime, it causes him months of stress. For instance, sometimes he has to search for a car to place in a parking lot, which he first has to dismantle completely and then lift up. For him, it is not a matter of proving to himself that he can do it; he simply wants to see the work come to life.

He has an inexplicable urge to recreate spaces. He strangely enough finds it easier to recreate the entire space than to reconstruct a few elements. He very often jumps from one thing to the other, but then when he has the idea, there is a hyper focus. When he has the idea in mind that he wants then he really must create that idea the same day. There is the need to do it in that specific way, maybe because of his perfectionism or his ADHD?

Here I see a similarity with what I heard from Stijn Ter Braak on the podcast 'Kunst is lang en het leven is kort' ['Art is long and life is short'] by mister Motley en Luuk Heezen. Stijn Ter Braak also has an inexplicable urge to recreate things, in his case objects. Ter Braak was a guest during an episode of the podcast, and they asked him why he had this urge, but Ter Braak could notreally answer the question either (Heezen & mister Motley, 2023).

In the future he wants to work more on sculptures that can stand on their own, but at the same time he does not want to lose creating those installations, he wants to keep doing that. Because he really enjoys that process.



Elias Cafmeyer, *Unipark Extra City, 2019, Kunsthal Extra City, Antwerp*



Soest, Provincie Antwerpen, Vlaams Gewest (BE), 2022, Jump the wall, Paltzbiënnale, Soest / Utrecht (NL)

Something I often saw returning in his work are lampposts. He finds them really interesting objects. In this work, Soest, Provincie Antwerpen, Vlaams Gewest (BE), the lampposts are lit during the daytime. I asked him whether that is a critique on the fact that it is possible to see Belgium out of space, due to the density of our road network and how many lamp posts are standing up there. He responded that it was not an intentional criticism, but that it does enhance the surrealism in this way. He usually sets a timer that they lit at nighttime.

The title of the work is quite confusing, "Soest, province of Antwerp, Flemish region, Belgium" in combination with the location of the artwork, Soest, Utrecht, the Netherlands. This is because he built a small Belgian enclave in the Netherlands. An enclave is a piece of land that belongs to one country but is enclosed by another country. That piece of land is not connected to the country in any possible way. Examples of enclaves are Kaliningrad, a part of Russia that lies against the sea and is surrounded by Poland. Baarle-Hertog, a Belgian village of 22 enclaves in the Netherlands and Baarle-Nassau, a Dutch village, a group of 8 enclaves within a Belgian enclave. Everywhere in that village you see land borders, some doors are half in the Netherlands and half in Belgium, which means some of the houses there are partly in Belgium and partly in the Netherlands.

In Belgium we have a completely different way of dividing the public space, which is based on the Catholic tradition. In Belgium the majority is raised Catholic, the Spaniards used to rule in the Southern Netherlands, which is nowadays known as Belgium, the Protestants got expelled from Belgium and were pointed to the Netherlands, they created a new state in which you mainly had Protestants.

Around the 16th century, when the Dutch Republic was dominated by Spain, there was a division between the Catholics in the south and the Protestants in the north. According to Cafmeyer, the influence of these two different religions is also visible in the way Belgium and the Netherlands design their public spaces. In Belgium, the landscaping is typically French, with box hedges, flower beds, and very clearly designed symmetrical fountains, where nothing seems natural. In contrast,



Elias Cafmeyer, *Soest, Provincie Antwerpen, Vlaams Gewest (BE), 2022, Jump the wall, Paltzbiënnale, Soest / Utrecht (NL)*

if you go to a park in the Netherlands, like the Vondelpark in Amsterdam, everything seems naturally constructed. It follows the English example, with wavy lines, a bridge, and water. It is clearly constructed but based on what nature looks like.

The park where he exhibited, in the Netherlands, was a park where every millimetre was laid out, but it looked like real nature and there he made an artwork depicted as a Belgian park, a little Belgian enclave with a boxwood hedge and two lamp posts. For that installation he found it funny to leave the lights on, “because you are in Belgium and not in the Netherlands. In Belgium we forgot to turn off the lights, because Belgium is sometimes a bit ... (laughs)”



Elias Cafmeyer, *Untitled (Project Proposal III), 2017, wood, metal, model grass, sand, hister, 25 × 25 × 63 cm*

Untitled (Project Proposal III)

This was a project proposal that he wanted to install in Middelheim. He made this smaller model for the Middelheim project competition. Middelheim Open Air Sculpture Museum is a sculpture park, where you go for a walk, but in a lot of places in the park there are no lanterns. He wanted to do a humorous intervention in the park and install different lampposts there, that looked like they were hit by cars. In this way he wanted to create the illusion that cars could drive through the park. By making them all crooked they almost look like they were dancing.



Elias Cafmeyer, *Solid Leftovers, 2017, Het is niet anders, CC252, Ekeren / Antwerp*

Solid Leftovers, 2017, Het is niet anders, CC252, Ekeren / Antwerp

He was fascinated by residual spaces in the city, at the time he was making this work. A park sometimes is an example of a residual space. Most of the time a park is not immediately classified as a park. Before it was tied to a place that was part of a garden from a castle or a land that had been lying uncultivated for a long time. Only later it becomes a kind of residual space, because in mediaeval cities or ancient cities the concept of a park did not exist yet.

The contemporary version of a residual space is an intersection that is just a little too small to make an intersection or roundabout of, then they put a ridiculous bench or a trash can there and he think that is a very fascinating installations in itself, so he wanted to take that out of the streetscape and place it in a park. The scale is not really correct, but that strengthens the absurdity.



Untitled (Project Proposal IV), 2019, wood, acrylics, bister, plastic, insulation foam, grass for scale models, 58,5 × 58,5 × 78 cm



Elias Cafmeyer,Rotonde, 2023 Sint-Denijs-City, Zwevegem (Kortrijk)

Untitled (Project Proposal IV)

He made a project proposal for some kind of sculpture in a space, but it was an impossible budget for this project proposal.

The story behind this work is about climate change: Joske's house was flooded because he lived at the lowest point of the village. As an ecological intervention, they put his house on stilts. He had seen this operation in a movie at the time. In America, this practice is already in use; they dig a hole under the houses, put piles underneath, and then jack up the entire house. Afterwards, they make a frame under the house and add wooden steps. This mainly happens with cheap houses that seem to be made of cardboard. He found this very funny. But instead of placing an American house in his creation, he used the prototype of a typical Flemish house. Therefore, I find it strange that he used a rather American-looking white fence.

Kwintet, 2017

"Kwintet is a video installation for five screens showing five different streets in Antwerp. The buildings of these streets are photographed separately and photoshopped back into one image. The image slowly passes in front of the screen whilst hearing a sound piece. The score of this sound piece is based on the heights of the buildings. (Elias Cafmeyer, 2018)."

The fragmentation of the landscape is very typical of urbanism, but normally there is a kind of uniformity in the houses. In Belgium there is no uniformity in the houses at all. With Kwintet, He wanted to illustrate that, by taking several pictures of each building and placing them all together again. He does not only show this through the images, but the music makes that clear as well.

In the video you can see and hear the height of the gutters of the buildings. There was a piece of music, where the melody changed depending on the height of the buildings. It was a very slow piece, so you get a kind of Erik Satie composition. The video as mentioned earlier was based on the streets in Antwerp, but he has a version of Brussels as well.

Master year

He did not find his master's year enjoyable. He described it as a pure horror, everything felt very discouraging. Right now, he understands that they did not want to reject his ideas, but they wanted him to grow. But he thinks that if he would have done what they advised them to do, that he would never have been doing what he is doing now. They told him that his work remained a bit too sculptural, as a response to that he built a sculpture of 8 metres high and 7 metres wide. In the end, they all thought that was insanely good. But during his master's he was so demotivated, because of the criticism.

There were a lot of people who contradicted him at that time. Only nowadays he is starting to understand more and more what those people meant. But in the end, he is very glad that he did not understand them back then.

The struggles of an artistic career

Financially, life is not always as easy as an artist. He often finds himself spending more money than the budget allows, because he is too ambitious. Often the budgets are too little. To give an example for the exhibition *YART* at Duivelsteen in Ghent, he had a budget of 500 euro. All the extra money he spent, he paid himself. He told me that he wonders how he could deal better with the financial part of his artist's existence.

Most of the time he is working the equivalent of three full time jobs, including being an artist. Sometimes he really crashes and then he realises that there is also something else than making art. He also needs to be able to eat. In March, when we spoke, he was grounded by his doctor, because he was crossing his own boundaries by creating new work, teaching and renovating his apartment at the same time.

His art practice at that time being, was rather something he did in his spare time, but he could not really continue like that anymore. That is why, he is trying to get his artist status up to date, to prioritise his art practice. His aim was to start in September and make the creation of his art his main occupation, effectively proceeding his artistic career. To achieve and maintain his professional status, he had to fill out a lot of paperwork and create a dossier of his artwork. He was doing that, during the week of March 25th, he worked on his artistic documents until 1 a.m., the night before we met, this time and effort he would have preferred to dedicate to making art.

The post-graduation popularity is a little bit less now, he still has a lot of expos, so he can not really complain. "We are currently sitting here on a 5-metre-long logo, for a new installation for Buda." He was preparing an artwork for a group exhibition called Border Buda, in Belgium. He had to make two new sculptures for a group exhibition in Tongeren. And he had to restore some artworks for an exhibition in Utrecht. He had quite a lot of work and this had to be done by the end of June. During the summer of 2024, he had another exhibition in Genoa and one in the art centre of Liege.

Inspiring artists

There are quite a few artists that inspire Elias Cafmeyer. Guillaume Bijl is one of them, he is an Antwerp native and Cafmeyer describes him as the father of trompe-l'oeil art. On the other hand there is Koen Thijs. Koen Thijs has always been a big source of inspiration for him. Koen Thijs is the reason why he started to study visual art. Other Belgian artists that inspired him are Adriaan Tritciau and Luc De Leu. And international artists such as John Curveling and Gian Maria Tosatti. When he saw Tosatti's work at the Italian Pavilion during the Biennale of Venice in 2022, he was quite surprised, because he felt like he saw his own work there, he finds his own practice aligning closely to the one of Tosatti. But he did really appreciate the work.

His grandparents used to own a big garage, where he used to play with his siblings. This garage and those cars and garage spaces were a great inspiration for him. His uncle and aunt were working within the car industry, their business was mainly focused on picking up crashed cars and vans. This is where the admiration for transportation grew.

During his model career, his appreciation for transportation and orientation developed, because he constantly had to travel and to orient himself in new cities, that was the part he loved the most of his life as a model. It was necessary to know the city beforehand, so he knew how to navigate himself in the city by the time he arrived. This was important, because he had to go to 14 different addresses, for castings in one day. He had to do all the castings as fast as possible, to be able to do the assignments in the limited time he had in that city, it almost felt like a game for him. Beforehand he memorised the city map and analysed carefully how the city was constructed, where the rivers run, where the central square and where the big connecting axes are situated. This knowledge he used afterwards to find his way in these cities.

Finally, he concludes that studying other artists can be confusing as well. Subconsciously, other artists influence you, and it can evoke a certain feeling of insecurity when you compare your practice too much with that of others. This is especially true when he compares his own artwork to that of other artists whose practices are very similar to his own; he can become very intimidated. His conclusion: It is important not to focus on this. It is not accurate, because everyone has to follow their own path. (R. Decuyper, personal communication, March 29, 2024)

Mentioned artists
Erik Satie
Willem De Haan
Stijn Ter Braak
Guillaume Bijl
Koen Thijs
Adriaan Tritciau
Luc De Leu
John Curveling
Gian Maria Tosatti
Zeli Bauwens
Sara Smolders
Winni Claessens
Zena Van den Block

Artist
Michell Heyndrickx

Year of birth
1999

Hometown
Bazel, Belgium

Type of artist
Painter, Visual artist

Education
2011 – 2018
Artistic discipline Technisch Berkenboom Instituut, Sint-Niklaas, Sint-Lucas KSO, Antwerpen

2018 – 2019
BA Animation, LUCA Brussels

2019 – 2021
BA visual arts, LUCA Brussels

2022 – 2024
MA visual arts, LUCA Brussels (unfinished)

2023 – 2024
MA Painting, LUCA Ghent

First Encounter
In October 2023 I met Michell Heyndrickx, during one of the first courses of our master's program. The course was about professionalising art practice. Here I got the chance to see his portfolio for the first time, on a big screen in an auditorium with low quality pictures.

Communication
1 conversation, 14 messages

Interview
Date
~~25 March 2024~~
(cancelled due to illness)
2 April 2024~~

Duration of the interview
1h 5 min. 45 sec.

Location
9000 Gent

Travel time
To go there: 8 min.
To return: 6 min.

Transportation
Bicycle

ARTIST INTERVIEW

MICHELL HEYNDRICKX





Tuesday morning, the 2nd of April

I biked in the direction of Gent Zuid shopping centre, to visit Michell Heyndrickx' studio. He welcomes me in his studio on the first floor of the shopping centre. His studio space is quite spacious. He shares the studio with other masters students from LUCA, but he does have his own separate space. During the visit, we discussed his experience with art education, his previous work and current work, his master's project as a work in progress and his relationship with the art scene. He showed me some movie sets he was working on for his short film. After the interview I biked to school.

Background information

Michell Heyndrickx grew up in a rural neighbourhood (to the extent that Flanders can be rural) and lived in a fermette in Bazel for 22 years. Bazel is a very small village – with a manure smelling country air – where all the inhabitants go to the same bakery and grocery store. There is not a lot of diversity in the village. When Heyndrickx moved from Bazel to Brussels in 2018, – to a capital city – it was quite a (cultural) shock in terms of diversity. In 2023, he moved to Ghent to study. According to Heyndrickx Ghent feels more like a provincial city, a city with a village mentality. He prefers Ghent over Brussels: it is less hectic, noisy and overwhelming.

Heyndrickx gained interest in art and creating work when he was still a child. He was stimulated by drawing, building, and constructing. From the age that he was allowed to work with scissors, he started building cardboard houses. He preferred to build things, without following instructions. Heyndrickx never liked to work with a user manual.

He tells me how he has always been interested in narrative art, as a child his dream was to become a comic artist. He wanted to tell stories. As an 8-year-old he discovered a tutorial on YouTube: 'How to make cartoons'. He was really blown away by the realisation that cartoons could be created from anywhere, and that they were not made in a magical place.

During his artistic discipline in high school, he struggled a lot with figuring out what "type of artist" he wanted to be. Heyndrickx questions his role as an artist, he does not really know whether he is an illustrator, an animator, a writer, a movie director, an architect or a painter. He specifies his skills and projects he worked on, he already made miniatures, models, stop motions, animations and paintings. Nowadays he would describe himself as a painter. He always felt like he could relate more to the Sunday painter in the village, than to the artist in the museum. He explains that it is difficult for him to stick to one medium within the fields of visual arts, but that film would not have existed if painting did not exist. He also thinks that film and painting have much more things in common than one would think at first glance. For this reason he feels more like a painter.

In high school everything was given as a task, where you had to follow the instructions or to create something with a sort of expectation towards the final result. Heyndrickx disliked this way of education. He was very stubborn and wanted to follow his own path and rules.

As a child, when he went to the grocery store with his mom, they took some cardboard boxes home for Heyndrickx to cut, create and construct. In a very impulsive way he once created the titanic from cardboard. There were a lot of unfinished projects as well, because he went from one project to the next.

His relationship with art: Educational context, art movements, and personal preference

In LUCA Brussels he noticed that art students have a rather conceptual, abstract or minimalistic approach when it comes to art. From his point of view there was less attention for figurative art. Heyndrickx prefers figurative art over abstraction, minimalism or conceptual work. Simplicity and directness are key, when it comes to figurative art. He enjoys figurative artworks as long as it does not become an illustration. He finds a work in need of more explanation less powerful. He thinks it is very easy to sound smart by using complex words, but by doing so it does not always improve the message or the artwork. According to Heyndrickx this is often the case when it comes to ready-made or Objet Trouvé. His desire for art is to become more accessible, meaningful in a direct way and free from excessive self-justification or pretentiousness.

Heyndrickx agrees with the statement that everybody makes art – without even realising – and that everybody can be an artist. He wonders if without the institution, the artists like Borremans, Tuymans, and Picasso, would even differ from someone who enjoys painting in his or her garden? When you strip it down to the essence and the reason why someone paints, he thinks there is not much of a difference.

He prefers making art that can be understood by everyone – even by a 5-year-old – rather than having a few important men in the art world praise his work. Heyndrickx strongly disagrees with art that is made for a select few, requiring a certain level of intelligence and a specific taste to appreciate. If a 5-year-old is intrigued by his work, the work is successful and he is satisfied.

> *"During the age of modernism, the art world has been fascinated by the creative work of children, simply because 'they create freely and spontaneously and don't care about the refined technical and theoretical aspects of the art process (yet)', praising them as geniuses. However, when your art is described as a 'simplification' or 'infantilization' by art critics, it is always meant as a way to undermine you as a 'credible' artist. Which 'serious artist' would truly want to be associated with children, the so-called 'dumbest of society', who still believe in Sinterklaas, don't know what taxes are and regularly poop their pants (Heyndrickx, 2024)?"*

This happened during the bachelor exhibition at his school, where he projected his work across the entire space, from floor to ceiling and there were children whose shadows were visible on a projection. They started pretending to walk into the projected space. That was much more interesting.



Fascinated by Flanders

Initially Heyndrickx hated the chaos of the Flemish landscape and the ugliness of urban sprawl and ribbon development. The fact that Flemish villages are so chaotic is because of their architecture. According to him, there is not any country with such a diversity of architecture. And most of the time you can find this diversity in just one single street, the well-known farmette next to a Spanish hacienda villa next to a box house. After a while he started appreciating this chaos and ugliness, because he realised that the crafty, do-it-yourself, constructive urge that arises in Flemish people, when building or renovating a house, looked very comparable with the urge he felt during the construction of his cardboard boxes.

He agrees with the statement that: In the Netherlands the urban planning and division of the land is way better. However, in Flanders there is a surprise around every corner. His example is that you can drive on the bicycle lane for 500 metres and in the next street you are risking your life on a cobblestone lane. Besides that there is a sense of humour in our architecture, where 'koterijen' are the perfect example of.

Another characteristic feature is that the neighbours facade can never look the same, there always has to be something slightly different. In order to show individuality and uniqueness.

Heyndrickx compares the chaos of a Flemish village to the chaos in his mind. He regularly overthinks and has a lot of anxiety. He finds that in a village the chaos is not only reflected in the landscape, but also in the mentality. He feels like he is always surrounded by other people in the village. Generally speaking, a village in the countryside should be surrounded by green, and in a city you are normally surrounded by buildings and people. According to Heyndrickx, in Flanders that is not the case, you can not escape society or get lost in Flanders due to the lack of large-scale natural areas. There is nature, but it is so fragmented that after a maximum of an hour of walking, you already encounter a house. If you stand in a green area in Belgium, you can always hear a highway in the background. In other words: in Flanders you are never far from civilization.

He is fascinated not only by Flanders, by Flemish villages, but also by architecture in general. He appreciates both the sophisticated architecture – like the eclecticism, art nouveau and art decor – as the village architecture, like the café on the corner.



Heyndrickx believes there is no difference between someone building an eclectic villa in the 19th century – incorporating elements from different time periods like neoclassicism and renaissance – and someone constructing a farmette in the countryside – with pitched roofs and dormer windows. The farmette is often labelled as kitsch, possibly because it is built in a village. Both types of architecture originate from the same fascination and charm. For that reason Heyndrickx considers Art Nouveau and a farmette to be based on the same idea.

> *"The farmette is not a transformation of the traditional rural farmhouse, but on the contrary a pre-eminently modern form of habitation - functional layout, simplicity, convenient in use and maintenance, present-day comfort and facilities- which fits perfectly into the scenario of the new, different lifestyle mentioned above. The practically canonized decorative additions have a socio-cultural function* (De Meulder et al.,1999, p.90)*."*

> *"I find it rather comical that artists like Vincent Van Gogh, Gustav Klimt and Keith Haring are often described as 'watered down' and 'cliché' examples of art, simply because they are so widely known and well respected by 'normal people'. Self-proclaimed 'cultivated people' hate it when their working class neighbours watch the same tv-shows as them, like the same artworks as them, and listen to the same music as them... When a broader audience likes an artist, a film, a band, these things are instantly labelled as 'dumbed down versions' of their highbrow counterparts, because there's no way that the cult of cultivation will label their working class neighbours as 'have become smarter'. The farmette perfectly fits this same allegory* (Heyndrickx, 2024)*."*

Heyndrickx describes his village and hometown, Bazel as coming-home. According to him the inhabitants live much more in the present, they appreciate the little things in life more. When he is there, he really enjoys the quiet and peacefulness of his hometown and hanging out with his childhood friends. But of course every story has its bad side, the gossip, the rumours, the suspiciousness, the backbiting, the racism and the dishonesty are a few of the things Heyndrickx feels disgusted for. He clarifies with an example from this type of behaviour: In his street there are new neighbours with a Syrian identity, the woman wears a headscarf, which already causes racist rumour and the backbiting about the children staying up late. He thinks villages are generally speaking more narrow-minded, but the backbiting seems something more Flemish.

Brussels is a city full of diversity, where he is actually a minority, because there are less Flemish speaking people in Brussels. Heyndrickx prefers the cosmopolitanism in Brussels over the parochialism in Bazel. While there might be a lot of diversity in the city, he still sees that there is an obvious division, between different types of groups, from different cultural backgrounds. For instance every type of group has its own bar, the Flemish art students and the English Erasmusstudents go to a bar that is called *Lava bar*, while the Syrian guys are drinking tea on the other side of the street in another bar. He loved Brussels for its diversity, but he was sick of the arrogance from the artscene in the city of Brussels.

Toren, 2023

Toren [Tower] is a contemporary reinterpretation of an etch from a church tower by a local painter from Kruibeke. This etch of the church tower is probably hanging in the living room of every older inhabitant. Almost every village in Flanders used to have an etch of their church. The church Heyndrickx based his work on is the church of Kruibeke, however in his version of the work it is unrecognisable where the church is from. He made a digital drawing based on the already existing work, he copied the composition, but he got rid of the windows and other elements that made the church unique. Instead of the original etch, that is something very unique and fragile, he made a sort of universal ikea version of it, that can be printed endlessly. The tower is no longer a church tower, it has lost the value that it used to have for inhabitants. With this work Heyndrickx reflects upon the downfall and urbanisation of the village.

Ochtendzon tussen de stallen, 2023

Ochtendzon tussen de stallen [The morning sun between the stables] is another digital drawing based upon an already existing painting by a local artist that is unknown outside of Heyndrickx hometown. The painting was from the 50's and based upon the Hollebeek farm. This farm was accompanied by a shed in between the fields and the grass hills. The farm became an industrial site – that made dairy products for the whole neighbourhood – but has gone bankrupt. What used to be a charming little shed is now a gigantic, empty, concrete shed. For Heyndrickx this is a metaphor for the urbanisation of the village. Visually nothing remains of the original painting, only the title and the idea are the same, the composition is inspired by the image, but it is a completely different image. He got inspired by David Claerbout for this work.

Kerkstraat, 2022

Kerkstraat [church street] is based on an old black and white postcard from the mainstreet of the village. Every village has a church street, which makes it something universal. He traced the lines of the postcard and made a colour version. For his work, he used highly detailed patterns to imitate stones, tiles and bricks. In his version he removed the doors and the windows, by doing this he created a distance between the viewer and the image. It is a landscape that is closed off, a conflicting idea, it is a landscape where you do not want to be.

Het Poppendorp, 2023

Het Poppendorp [the Puppet Village] is a handcrafted miniature version of a village in Flanders. He wanted to reveal the fakeness by showing everything is made out of paper and cardboard. Rather than convincing viewers that these are real buildings, he wanted them to see the material he used. The village is the actual setting, like a backdrop. He created a tension of alienation with this image of the village. Later on it became one of the sets for his film.

Michell Heyndrickx found the title in a picture book, with images of villages. From the time back when a village was self-sufficient, before the building boom, then villages were still separated, like islands, or at least the nostalgic idea of it was still there. In the picturebook, those pictures have been described as a theatre setting or a puppet village, and that phrase inspired Heyndrickx to make this work.

Het Poppendorp is reflecting a psychotic image. When Heyndrickx was 19, he experienced a psychosis, during that period he was convinced that nothing was real, and that he was the only person existing with self-consciousness. He created this image from a feeling of insecurity. It felt like a threat. He could only affirm his own consciousness, but not the one from the people surrounding him. People around him were like dolls. He even questioned the consciousness of his partner and parents. If he turned his head they no longer existed, because then he did not see them, only what he saw existed. He compares that situation with how a rabid dog runs behind his own tail.

The miniature village he created is not really about the village itself, but more about the concept of the village as a scenery. The metaphor of a village as a theatre set, a puppet village.



Michell Heyndrickx, *Toren*, 2023, Digitale tekening, 21×29,7cm



Michell Heyndrickx, *Ochtendzon tussen de stallen*, 2023, Digitale tekening, 21×29,7cm



Michell Heyndrickx, *Het Poppendorp*, 2023, Karton, papier, plastic, acrylverf, 29,7×42cm



Michell Heyndrickx, *Fermettes,* 2022, film still, digitale render, 1920×1080px



Michell Heyndrickx, *Fermettes,* 2022, film still, digitale render, 1920×1080px



Michell Heyndrickx, *Dorpsgek (film still)*, 2024

Fermettes, 2022

A farmette formally takes its inspiration from a farmhouse, but the hard life, the peasant life, is left out. A farmhouse of the 19th century, which has been there for a few hundred years, is already timeworn and damaged. It does not has a carport or central heating, but it does have a chimney. The farmette is a farmhouse, without the soul of a farmhouse. It is a puppet version of a farmhouse. Starting from this thought, Heyndrickx made his film.

Fermettes, this short film is his interpretation of an already existing painting. The work process is almost the same as Ochtendzon tussen de stallen, Kerkstraat and Toren. Although this time it is not a still image, but a short film. In the film Heyndrickx's landscapes look empty, uninhabited and almost apocalyptic. As you imagine yourself walking along these farmettes, you feel the intensified idea of how artificial a farmette is. The farmhouses in the film do not have any windows nor doors. The audio of the film are farm and cow sounds that are repeated over and over again, so short that you hear that it is a loop. This makes it feel very artificial and empty.

Action Gnome, 2022

Out of a fascination for historical artefacts and scenography within the context of a museum, he created the Action Gnome. He gained an interest in the way ancient objects are displayed, reconstructed and experienced. He noticed that we look at objects from the past as something mythological, more than something that once had a contemporary context. Besides that, we do not seem to consider what could become historical in 20 years. We can understand the past, and so Heyndrickx questions: 'why do not we try to predict the future and what will become important?'

During the Classical Antiquity in the colosseum they sold action figures of gladiators. The idea behind the Action Gnome is to look at a contemporary object as historical. A cross-section of the gnome is presented on a visible line. This presentation technique is often used in history museums, to show different layers of the inner structure. The *Action Gnome* is a rather conceptual work about mythologizing objects of the past. The Gnome is a work made of plaster. Heyndrickx created a mould from a gnome that he bought in a store called Action. The Action is a store with really cheap prices and a big variety of products, mostly unnecessary stuff (M. Heyndrickx, personal communication, April 2, 2024).



Picture taken in the studio of Michell Heyndrickx in April 2024

Inspiring artists
He is very inspired and fascinated by local artists, "the village painter". He would describe the painter as someone who makes paintings and etches of the church, windmills, historical buildings, landscapes, … It can also be described as folk art, which is quite charming and nostalgic to Heyndrickx. He is convinced that those painters work with the same dedication and passion as Luc Tuymans does.

He is inspired by Rinus Van de Velde because his work is more approachable and can be understood by a larger audience, even by the inhabitants of Bazel. It is not just for narrow-minded art lovers in a white box and that is something he really appreciates about Van de Velde's work.

Heyndrickx also really appreciates David Claerbouts work, although it is more towards conceptual arts. He finds it a perfect balance between image and content.

Mentioned artists
Michaël Borremans
Pablo Picasso
Luc Tuymans
Rinus Van de Velde
David Claerbout
Ines van den Kieboom
Mariken Vanheusden
Younes Baba Hali
Sara Hamedi

Artist
Delphine Somers

Year of birth
1985

Hometown
Sint-Kruis, Bruges, Belgium

Type of artist
Visual artist, Painter,
Performance artist

Education
Self-taught artist

First Encounter
During the group exhibition, Popcorn, in Mima, I saw different paintings by Delphine Somers. It was the first time I saw her work. What I appreciated the most were the paintings, they showed as part of a bigger collection of paintings, her Book of Miracles series.

Communication
13 email exchanges

Interview
Date
27 April 2024

Duration of the interview
1h 13 min. 51 sec.

Location
1000 Brussels
1080 Molenbeek

Travel time
To go there: 38 min.
To the gallery: 6 min.
To return: 45 min.

Transportation
Bicycle

ARTIST INTERVIEW

DELPHINE SOMERS





Saturday, the 27th of April

I biked from Meise in the direction of Brussels, to meet Delphine Somers. For the interview we met at a café, Walvis in Brussels. Before she arrived, I had soup for lunch and drank ginger beer. When she arrived, she ordered a Chai Latte. In the café there was some rumour, which made it difficult to record the interview. We moved around a bit to find a good spot. We then spoke about art education, the group exhibition in Mima, the importance of the landscape in her work, and the exhibition, A Woman John Called Mary that was displayed at Kusseneers Gallery in Brussels. It was a very interesting conversation. After the interview we went to see the exhibition in Kusseneers Gallery. We did not meet at her studio, like I did with the other artists that I interviewed, because all her paintings were on display in different locations.



Background information

Somers grew up in Bruges, she was raised as an atheist, but she got bombarded daily by all different kinds of Catholic imagery and a Catholic culture. She is interested in the influence of religion on how it shapes somebody's worldview, self-image and how one's life is structured in relation to it. Besides that, she is also curious and captivated by the history of religion and the way those stories have been organised and archived. After all, the stories and the Catholic religion have such a great influence on how society is shaped. This is one of the subjects she likes to research for her work.

In the family where she grew up, art was important, but it was not seen as something that you could make a living off. Her father painted in his spare time. She noticed that it was important to him, but on the other hand he denied it at the same time. At a younger age she could not interpret his work. She thought it was very strange. Delphine father's paintings were hyper realistic and surrealistic. His paintings play with the idea of attraction and repulsion. She finds it an interesting and fascinating theme. Now that she is older and she understands it more, his work gains in value for her.

Delphine Somers never studied any type of artistic discipline. Not because she did not want to, but she did not have the feeling that it was the right fit for her. She studied cultural agogics at the VUB, a university in Brussels. This study is comparable to socio-cultural work, they have some aspects in common. She was however already painting while she studied. Unlike Delphine Somers, her father did attend art school: he studied graphic design at Sint-Lucas. He then became a teacher.

After she graduated, she did a lot of different jobs. Meanwhile she kept painting. Besides that, she started organising events with the non-profit organisation she founded. At Recyclart she had a space where she could organise things, mostly exhibitions and sometimes concerts as well. This was her way of learning to know how the artist industry works.

Her last job was public mediator at KVS, a theatre in Brussels. The job was difficult, but she learned a lot during the period she worked there. Some aspects she noticed are still important for her own art practice nowadays.

Art education: pros and cons

Delphine Somers is a self-taught artist as mentioned before, she never followed any sort of art education. But there has always been a certain type of curiosity for arts, and an urge to create, to paint and to learn more about art in general.

During the interview I asked Delphine if she ever experienced obstacles because of the lack of a degree in visual arts. I told her that I imagine that within the art sector they probably never asked her where she studied or which type of degree she has. She explains to me that the main focus is always on the portfolio, but the difficulty she had in the beginning was to come in contact with the industry and to build a network. Now she has her contacts in Brussels, because she has been living there for a while and because she started organising events in this city at a young age. Besides that, she noticed that artists with an art education express themselves differently than she does, while talking about their art practice. She thinks that she did not necessarily need art school, because she learned things in other places.

She concludes that art education has its pros and cons. Somers believes that if she had attended an art school she maybe would not paint anymore, because she knows which type of person she was back then and how art education works, because she worked at LUCA for a while. Art education tends to influence and to push art students in a certain type of direction. A lot of students attend art school at the age of 18, while they are still very young. At the age of 18 most students do not really know yet who they are and what they want to become. However, she would have preferred a customised education during an intermediate stage of her life, around the age of 27, when she already gained some life experience.



Delphine Somers, *from "Book of Miracles" series*, acrylic on wood, 30×40cm

Book of Miracles

Book of Miracles is an ongoing series of paintings. The paintings are based upon the Oudsburg manuscript, a book with all kinds of pamphlets: a collection of different miracles from antiquity till the renaissance. The manuscript analyses all kinds of 'miracles' that occur: both natural disasters and myths. For example, there has been a flood in a village, a lot of people died, that is seen as a miracle, there are comets, that is another miracle and then there are legends about a hare giving birth to another animal with two heads, and how it has been raining blood and steak, those are classified as miracles as well. They used to see the miracles as a sign that the kingdom of God is coming. She finds it very fascinating to read, because it is a type of logbook of history, a bulletin. She finds it an interesting format for the storytelling, because it works with a timeline. She places events that are happening now in the future, for example two thousand years later. In this way she can more easily criticise today's reality seen from a future perspective, because she creates a distance in time. Meanwhile the way it is written comes from a tradition of the Middle Ages, because of this she can easily write in a humoristic way about the events and include political messages. These paintings are about capitalism, fast fashion shopping, white saviorism, ... There is one thing that all those themes have in common: from Somers' point of view, they should have been in the past already.

In the "Book of Miracles" painting series, the landscape plays a role as well. Instead of creating futuristic landscapes, how someone would imagine what it would look like 2000 years from now, the landscapes she paints are painted as today's landscapes.

Some events she will be more likely to place in the place where she grew up, Bruges. And others fit better for the city where she lives now, Brussels. For her those cities and landscapes represent a type of mentality and a way of thinking that comes with it, the parochial and the metropolitan, the monoculture versus the urban culture. Besides that, those cities also portray a certain period in her life. The landscape has an important value for those paintings, it is not just a background, they contextualise both the place and the time.



Delphine Somers, *from "Book of Miracles" series*, acrylic on wood, 30×40cm



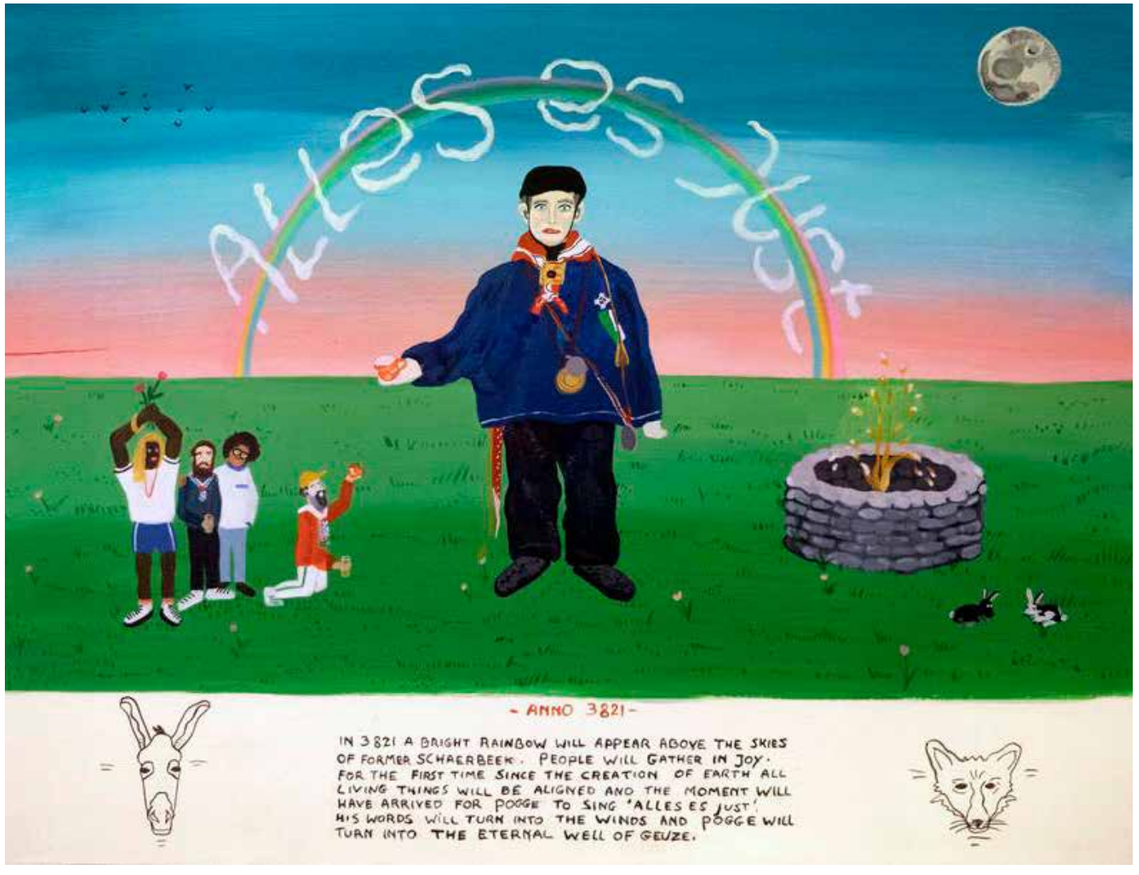
Delphine Somers, *from "Book of Miracles" series*, acrylic on wood, 30×40cm



Delphine Somers, *from "Book of Miracles" series*, acrylic on wood, 30×40cm

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Delphine Somers, *from "Book of Miracles" series*, acrylic on wood, 30×40cm



Delphine Somers, *from "Book of Miracles" series*, acrylic on wood, 30×40cm



Delphine Somers, *A miracle (anno 2599)* , acrylic on wood, 30×40cm

A miracle (anno 2599) for Recyclart

She got invited by Recyclart to create a work for their first architecture publication, "Quelle forme ça prend?" about the Heyvaert neighbourhood and its surroundings. In this book, architects, urban planners and organisations share their thoughts on the issue of public space in a context of full mutation. What shape does shared space take today and how does it develop? She made a painting in the format of a future miracle as part of her ongoing "Book of Miracles" series.

> *"In the year 2599 a new type of public space will appear at the horizon of Brussels. People will drop their bodies and meet in the skies where they will gather with the elements in a dream like union. The space will be transparent, it will have no inherent desire or meaning and will therefore welcome all types of being."*

She researched the public space in Brussels, in the canal zone they wanted to create public spaces that were appropriate for a city like Brussels. In the region of the Ninoofsepoort there are some safety problems sometimes, for instance: women do not always feel safe when walking around. For this reason, they question whether putting a bench, bushes or trees will cause problems. For example, somebody could hide behind a bush and attack you. That is why they made a low flat platform at the Ninoofsepoort that provides a wide and open space, where everything is visible. The platform is in the shape of a square. By doing this, they created the possibility to have an overview at that spot. The platform does not insinuate a specific use, but it is functional, because there are different levels. You can sit on it, but it is not a bench, you can lean on it, skate on it, ... there are no expectations attached to a particular object. In origin this spot served as a park, but with this intervention they created more safety.

> *I then concluded that it is a very accurate problem and a good solution, but at the same time it is tragic that there can not be trees or bushes, because of the problematic situation, where women feel (and often are) unsafe in Brussels.*

Somers created a miracle about the public space in Brussels. For the painting, she extended the idea of creating a safe zone. On the top of the painting there is a kind of black hole in the sky that floats above Brussels. In this black hole, people can enter in the far future by going in that space, but they leave their bodies behind in the city. Once they enter inside the black hole they become equal to the wind, because it is a kind of transparent space.

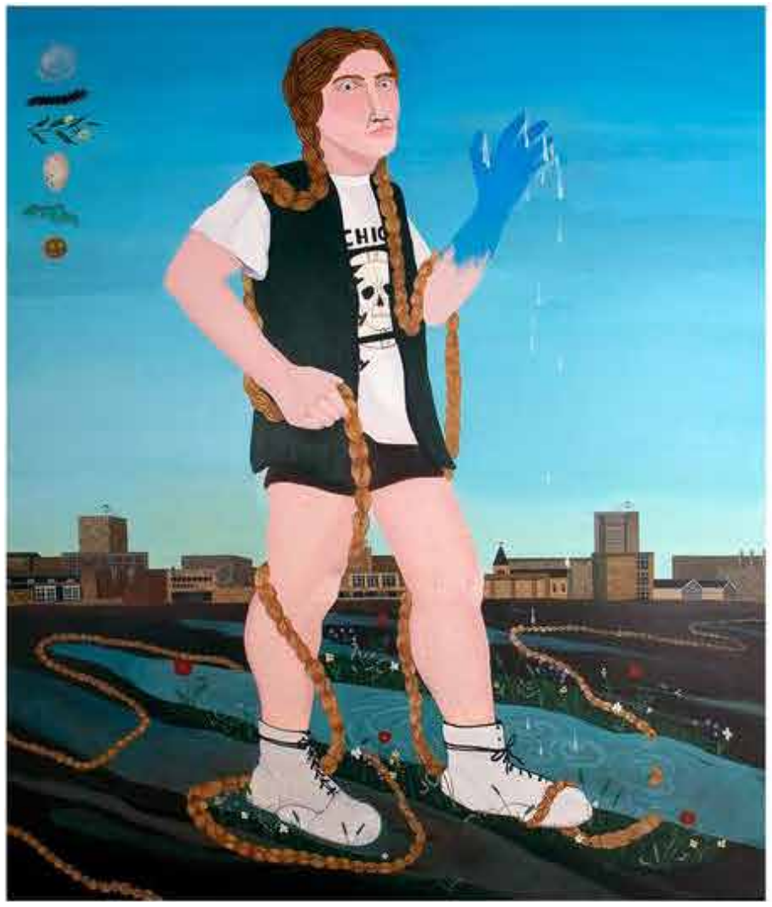
Maiden Mother Crown

Somers often gets inspired by fairytales, myths and archetypes and the psychological analysis of those stories and how they personify certain life stages and behaviour and how you can identify that as a person, this was the case for Maiden Mother Crown as well. The archetype she painted is a three-headed female archetype, which appears in different fairy tales. This archetype represents the three phases of womanhood. This story can be criticised as well, because there id more to a woman's life than motherhood. She questioned what those three phases mean for her, if she would shape herself as this archetype. She created a triptych to represent what those phases would look like for her in a contemporary context, without the fairy tale context.

She represented herself as Maiden Mother Crown in an urban context, because it is about a situation happening now, it can be interpreted as a reference to Brussels or any other urban context. It is situated in a kind of swamp, in relation to the urban area. The water of the swamp symbolises a moment of change, a fertile ground, where things can grow.

Besides that, the prominent presence of the braids going through the landscape is a reference of the fairytale Rapunzel and Baba Yaga and of how virgins are often represented as young women with very long blond hair. She got fascinated by what hair symbolises and the way someone can be attached to his or her hair. Delphine Somers used to have very long blond hair herself, but she noticed that she was not always taken seriously, because of her long hair. Long hair is often related to being a girl, femininity and the idea of beauty. Somers noticed that cutting long hair is often perceived as giving up on beauty, because of all those different layers that are projected onto it, and that makes it actually the symbolism of it as well. The figure on the third panel is an adolescent woman, who is still completely stuck by the stories that are projected on her. It is a more psychological point of view.

I interpreted the work differently at first sight, when visiting Mima, I thought about the woman's braids as a human being leaving their trace and the fact that human beings in general are present, everywhere in the landscape. My interpretation of her work was from an ecological point of view.







Delphine Somers, *Maiden Mother Crone, 2022, Triptych 3 panels*, acrylic on wood, 100×120cm
1. Maiden, 2022, acrylics on wood, 100×120cm
2. Mother, 2022, acrylics on wood, 100×120cm
3. Crone, 2022, acrylics on wood, 100×120cm

A Woman John Called Mary

While she was working towards a new exhibition, she decided to work around the theme of Mary Magdalene. She became fixated by a certain image from the Middle Ages, where Mary Magdalene is captured with long hair. Mary is portrayed as half-human and half-beast. Later, Somers realised that there are several similar images, in the Renaissance the popularity of that figure stopped. For the Catholic tradition it is a totally absurd image, it does not seem quite right and fitting with the tradition according to Delphine Somers. She finds it strange to have a figure, who is deeply Catholic, but looks like an animal, that is in some images carried to heaven.

This religious figure can be easily compared by the wild man. The wild man is a figure that is depicted as a saint as well, he lived in the margins, the periphery. People looked up to him, but at the same time these people were also afraid of him, because he represents everything that threatens the social order. He is seen as a kind of archetype. He symbolises sexuality as well. This figure is very popular and often returns in all kinds of imagery and stories. He is still popular; people dress up as him during carnival and spring celebrations. Somers is interested in the symbolism and what that man did and meant back then and what it still means now and why Mary Magdalene and the wild man overlap. From the moment that Europe comes in contact with the African continent through the transatlantic slave trade, the figure loses its popularity, because all those projections from then on, are related to the black man.

She noticed that there is not a lot of knowledge about the belief systems, before Christianity existed. In the early practices you can sense how images were handled back then.

For her research she read different books about the making off from Mary Magdalene. She is interested in how they describe her and where this story comes from. Over the years she created her own idea of what that figure is and represents, because she encountered this figure daily, in our street scenes. There is a reference of Mary Magdalene in the way women are portrayed in advertising as well.

Mary Magdalene in the bible was never a prostitute, she was a follower of Christ. But then Constantinople and Pope Gregory I rewrote the stories. They decided to describe different women from the bible – and an unnamed woman, who was a sinner – as prostitutes. From then on, that figure becomes an example of the secular woman. Besides that, the figure plays an incredibly important role in the religious experience of that time. And then other stories are written on top of that, folk lore and other absurdity, that has nothing to do with the original story of that figure.

She thought that if that is the system, to write new layers on top of an already existing story, that she could write a new story on top of that herself. Like this she could reappropriate that figure and transform that into something new, which is useful for herself, but which subscribes to a tradition that is hers, where she is influenced by anyway, whether she wants it or not, that is her kind of research. The way she uses these images by adding new layers. It makes her aware of herself and she feels free from the impact that those images have on her.

The importance of the landscape

It is not that important for her whether people can recognize the landscapes she uses in her work as Belgian landscapes. For her, the importance is the difference between the urban versus the non-urban. It is more about what these spaces symbolise. Some images scream the idea of a city, while other images evoke the idea of a village. Sometimes she finds it funny to have a situation occur in a very specific city, like Ostend or Bruges. Those cities have a different type of psyche. This specificity she finds interesting in the world we live in, where everything is globalised. For example, one of her miracles from the Book of Miracles she placed in a village called Zwevegem, it is a village somewhere in West Flanders.

In some of Somers' work you can see mountains in the background, and I wondered why, because there are not any mountains in Belgium. She explained to me that most of the time this is a pure formal element. In terms of composition mountains can be an interesting element. It is more interesting to have a non-straight line as the horizon. The mountains also can be a reference to nature and a kind of wisdom.



Delphine Somers, *Maria van Egytpe, Maria Magdalena & Sint Onuphrius (2023)* , acrylic on wood, 300×120cm



The ascension of Mary Magdalene

During the video we see Somers performing a passion play, in the same way people used to pray. When they prayed to a saint with an image, they imagined themself in that body, through a religious and spiritual meditation-trance. During this act they take over the attributes of the saint and become part of the saint. People used to look at an image in a very affectionate way and did passion plays to literally embody the saints.

For her passion play she embodied the hairy Mary Magdalene, the deep Catholic image, but also animistic. She made a kind of hair suit and by putting that on she transformed into Mary. During the performance Mary Magdalene was continuously crying and asking for forgiveness in a cave. There are hundreds of paintings, where Mary is weeping and doing penance, while lying naked in a cave. She asked for forgiveness for all her sins, which mainly involved her being an attractive woman. Those paintings were mainly made in the renaissance. They wanted to portray Mary in a decent way, but they never succeeded, because her hair was too transparent to cover her entire body, a part always shined through, which made it look like an erotic print.

During the performance Somers was wearing a hair suit, the long hair covered her body, but sometimes her bare white ass was exposed. The audio for the video was a slow-motion lament that sounded like a Schlager song. Meanwhile you saw Somers crying on rock made of paper-mâché, surrounded by all her research, texts and images of paintings. At the end of the performance, she threw off the suit. This was the first time she did a performance. She wants to further develop herself making performances. It is another way to create a relationship with her images. She appreciates performance, because of her experience of working in the theatre.

Brussel, 2019 - 2020

(170×100cm - Acrylics on wood, Courtesy of Brussels City Museum)

The landscape plays a very important role in this painting. The work was purchased by the museum of Brussels. She made that painting while she was working at KVS. At that time, she was a public mediator, for this reason she had to research the audience in Brussels. The different types of people of the city often live next to each other, there are different types of groups and networks of people.

For her painting she made a type of mind map/visual organiser of the very chaotic city, Brussels. In her conceptual mind map, there are different axes that represent various societal dimensions. At the centre, a vertical axis symbolises power and encompasses finances, politics, media, the education system, and the hospitality industry. Below this, there is an axis reflecting on public response, including protests and police interventions.

The city is mapped not geographically but through clusters of activity. For instance, areas are categorised into transportation stations and entertainment zones, like Marolles, Flagey, and Place Saint-Catherine, and traditional events, such as maypole celebrations and weddings. Shopping areas are segmented into malls, large chains, and small businesses. Besides that, the domestic scenes and local events, like someone throwing eggs at the statue of Leopold II, are also depicted.

At the top of the image, a timeline illustrates the progression from uninhabited landscapes to agriculture, the industrial age, and eventual destruction, highlighting the cyclic nature of societal changes. The city subscribes to this dynamic process.

This mind map captures a pre-pandemic snapshot of the city's social and cultural dynamics, because she created it just before the COVID-19-pandemic started. The impending arrival of COVID-19 was just beginning to make headlines as a distant issue in China at that time.

In this work on the bottom there is a self-portrait. For the portrait she explores the relationship between the hyper personal and the cosmic. The cosmos, represented as a void in the chest, reflects the disconnection between her internal self and the outward appearance.

Inspiring artists

At the age of 15, she discovered that the paintings of Francis Bacon had an emotional impact on her. Afterwards she gained more interest in visual arts and art history. She then picked up on the work by Jheronimus Bosch and started really appreciating it. After a while she noticed that she preferred dark-themed artworks.

Another influential moment for Somers was when she watched the movie, *Moulin Rouge!* by Baz Luhrmann. She was fascinated by the main character of the film, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Afterwards she wondered who the character of the movie was based upon. She then discovered the drawings by Toulouse-Lautrec, which inspired her to start drawing as well.

A lot of her fascinations and her drive to make images, comes from her environment, her culture and the place where she grew up. She explains that Bruges is a very Catholic place, but a lot of citizens are not religious anymore, because of that there is a disconnection. For example, she grew up in a anti-Catholic family, but at the same time she attended a Catholic school and got baptised. There are all these religious stories and symbols in Bruges, but she rejects them. That tension between these facts, she finds fascinating.

Paula Rego is one of her favourite painters. David Hockney has been a source of inspiration for her for a long time. There are many painters that she appreciates, but she avoids looking at other painter's work, because if she looks at other paintings, she often starts to question her own work constantly. When that happens, she does not manage to work on her own things anymore, because she gets stuck in an endless comparison. There are phases in which she looks at painters to see what other materials and techniques they use, but most of all she gets influenced by stories.

I asked her if she also got inspired by Frida Kahlo's work. Because in 'Brussel' for instance, I can see different similarities such as the self-portrait, the importance of the landscape and a surrealistic, magic realistic approach. She agrees and thinks that Frida Kahlo's work is a good comparison for her work. However, she is not one of her biggest influencers. Her work is not what she is most touched by, but the narrative character and the magic realism are similar to the way she creates her work.

Other artists that influence her are: *Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth* and *Genesis P-Orridge*. Those artists work more in the field of music, performance and visual arts. She thinks that it is an interesting combination, because those three different fields are the foundation of industrial music. They used a very collective way of working and were situated in England. They were famous in the 70s and 80s and came from a hyper Catholic background in a very strict establishment. And important: the political situation was very complex at that time. A lot of their influences came from the international music industry, and the rock and roll scene. Their goal was to change the behaviour of society and to bring changes within the society. They manifested that in the form of arts and rituals. Somers is intrigued by that.

Her work at KVS, the theatre in Brussels, had a big influence on the way she deals with her work and thought process. She found out that it works in a similar way as theatre makers and performance artists do. She researches, analyses and tries to understand stories. That is something theatre makers often do as well. She is especially captivated by performance artists. In Brussels she often visits Volksroom to see the program of Ne Mosquito Pas, which is runned by Micha Goldberg, Simon Van Schuylenberg and Rosie Sommers. There is a layer of anarchism in the way they run the group of performers. They deal with the subsidy system in such a clever way, that it becomes an indictment on the production of art. Most of the time she finds their performances very hilarious. After each performance, she always leaves the space with a lot of energy and joy.

She is interested in the practice of performance and thinks that her paintings follow the same idea. Except for Book of Miracles, those are different types of paintings, here storytelling and humour is important. She paints and writes in those works, loose thoughts in the form of pamphlets (D. Somers, personal communication, April 27, 2024).



Delphine Somers, *Brussel 2019 - 2020 (Courtesy of Brussels City Museum)*, acrylic on wood, 170×100cm

Mentioned artists
Francis Bacon
Jheronimus Bosch
Baz Luhrmann
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
David Hockney
Frida Kahlo
Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth
Genesis P-Orridge
Micha Goldberg
Simon Van Schuylenberg
Rosie Sommers

Artist
Beppe Geerts

Year of birth
1999

Hometown
Meise, Belgium

Place of residence
Gent, Belgium

Type of artist
Visual artist, Cross-over artist, Illustrator, graphic designer

Education
2017 – 2020
BA Graphic Design
LUCA Gent, Belgium

2019
Exchange
Graphic Design,
Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles, U.S.A.

2020 – 2021
MA Graphic Design
LUCA Gent, Belgium

2021 – 2023
BA Illustration, LUCA Gent, Belgium

2023
Exchange Illustration, ISIA U, Urbino, Italy

2023 – 2024
MA Illustration
LUCA Gent, Belgium

Interview
Date of the interview
6 August 2024

Location
1860 Meise

Duration of the interview
46 min. 59 sec.

ARTIST INTERVIEW

(self-interview)

BEPPE GEERTS





Tuesday, the 6th of August

I decided to do a self-interview. I wrote down a list of questions, similar to the questions I asked during the other interviews included in this thesis. I read the questions out loud and recorded my answers. During the interview I speak about my artistic path, different artworks, my work process, where I grew up and the way it influenced me. During the interview I drank a glass of water.





Background information

I grew up in Meise, which is a town on the outskirts of Brussels. It is a rather rural, but urbanised area. It could be described as a place in the countryside in Flanders, but at the same time you feel the influence and proximity of the city and, depending on the wind direction, you hear the noise of cars driving over the highway, A12. This is in contrast with the quiet dead end street that I live in, where I had the privilege, as a child, to play on the street and in the surrounding fields, with the other children who lived in my street. Besides that, my bus stop, where I took the bus every day to school, was next to a farm, which might sound quite rural, but that farm was located on a busy street, where many cars passed. On one side of the street there were chickens behind a fence and on the other side there was a field with horses.

From my room, on the first floor, when I look outside of my window, I have a view of several hedges that overlap, obstructing the possibility of looking in the garden or house of the neighbours. In Belgium, everyone lives on their own island. From a property and garden point of view, Belgium has an individualistic mindset.

Every village in Flanders looks the same, (a gothic) church, a café on the corner, a village square, a church street, ... Yet nowhere it really looks the same because of the freedom in architecture styles. The same goes for my street, you will find a diversity of different types of houses, modern, timeless and rural. On the corner of the street there is a Spanish villa and on the other side there is a white modern minimalist cube house. My street is no exception to the rule. There is an immense chaos in the architectural landscape in Belgium because of the freedom to build however you like. This chaos is visible in various architectural elements such as the style of a house, the post box, the house number, the front door, ... This chaos also reflects itself within the garden borders, something I have been fascinated by ever since 2020, when there was the pandemic. This fascination grew over the years, through research and analysation.

When it comes to the architectural landscape, I do not want to convince anybody to hate or love the Flemish landscape, let alone to discuss whether it is ugly or beautiful. I want to analyse it and interpret it. I wondered why there is so much freedom to build as one wants in Belgium. And whether there still are some pieces of nature that remain untouched and spared from human traces and imprints.

Besides that, I started drawing at a young age, whenever and wherever there was a spare moment. Most of the time, I brought paper and pencils with me whenever I went somewhere. And when I did not have any materials with me, I still found a way to draw. For example, when my family and I went to a restaurant, I would draw on the paper placemat, or I would ask for a ballpoint pen and a beer coaster. That way, I could draw both before and after the meal. My parents loved this because, in general, I was quite a restless child, but when I drew, I was always very focused and quiet. For me, it was a way to decompress and reconnect with my inner peace.

My parents do not have any background in visual art, but they supported my choice to study art starting in university. My mom has an interest in art and enjoys visiting museums from time to time, but my dad doesn't have any particular feeling or connection with visual art. I remember when I was little, I did not like visiting museums because I had to stay quiet there. My attention span was not long enough to focus on looking at art.

At the age of 15, I gained more interest in art and wanted to go to the highschool of *LUCA* in Brussels, my parents did not allow this for various reasons, but instead I attended part time art education, in the academy, *Portaelschool* in Vilvoorde. I developed my skills there in drawing, painting and different types of techniques, such as etching. I went there after schooltime on a Wednesday afternoon.

In 2017 I continued exploring my artistic path and decided to study graphic design, although I had a very little knowledge of graphic designers. I think I mainly chose graphic design with the idea of having some job opportunities within that field. Nevertheless, even before starting this study, I created some custom logo designs and postcards.



Beppe Geerts, photo research in Meise for my masterproject, *Privaat Domein*, 2023



Beppe Geerts, photo research in Meise for my masterproject, *Privaat Domein*, 2023



Beppe Geerts, photo research in Meise for my masterproject, *Privaat Domein*, 2023



Beppe Geerts, photo research in Meise for my masterproject, *Privaat Domein*, 2023



Beppe Geerts, photo research in Meise for my masterproject, *Privaat Domein*, 2023



Beppe Geerts, photo research in Meise for my masterproject, *Privaat Domein*, 2023

The influence of living abroad

In 2019, I lived in the United States for four months and in 2022, I lived in Italy for six months. Both countries are very different, but they do have something in common. Both countries have a high level of patriotism, especially the United States. Belgium is a rather un-patriotic country, and I wondered why. I noticed that Belgians are modest and more likely to highlight the negative aspects when speaking about their country, landscape, culture, history, ... There seems to be a negative national self-image.

These experiences have been really influential for me. Especially for the fact that I stayed somewhere other than Belgium for a longer period than just a holiday. By the time I was returning, I realised a lot of new things about my own country that I did not notice or appreciate before. I showed my new international friends around, either in real life or by sending them videos or taking pictures of my environment. When I did that, I looked at my own country through the eyes of foreigners and that has been a really interesting perspective as well. Which made me realise more new stuff about my own country and its landscape.

Living in Los Angeles was quite a cultural shock, not just because it was a really big city. But most of all because I really missed my bike. Although, the area I lived in, which was close to the seaside, was very bikeable, but nobody used a bike there. Los Angeles has a big car culture, because the distances are bigger, you cannot bike from one side of the city to the other in a few minutes. But I did not have a bike, nor a car or even a driver's licence. I had to do everything by walking, taking public transport or sometimes I took a shared Uber. While the locals were going everywhere by car and made a point of driving as close as possible to the location. Up to me, it was very lazy behaviour. Everything has to be done by car, and preferably by sitting alone in the car.

Something else that I missed was stepping on natural grass. In the residence where I temporarily stayed, there was fake, plastic, artificial grass in the garden.

There is the difference of the landscape, but also in the psyche of the country. I experienced Los Angeles as a very individual city, the inhabitants there seemed to be very focused on themselves. For instance: they did not take the time to eat dinner together. I experienced it as a very fake environment with a quite depressing lifestyle, due to the bad work-life balance. They pretend to live in the land of prosperity, but they seem to have a lot less time for social gatherings.

In Urbino I missed my bicycle as well. On the other hand, it was almost impossible to bike there, because of the difference in heights: Urbino is 451 metres above sea level. Urbino did however have a beautiful panoramic landscape, everywhere you were surrounded by hills.

In Italy, they mostly spoke in Italian about food. In the beginning I could not follow nor understand any conversation. And when I actually understood, I did not really feel like I had a lot to add to the conversation. They often asked me about the Belgian food. But I did not really know what I had to talk about. Belgian cuisine seems to be more limited, of course we have fries, chocolate, waffles, *stoofvlees, speculoos, vol-au-vent*, ... But do I really need to brag about that?

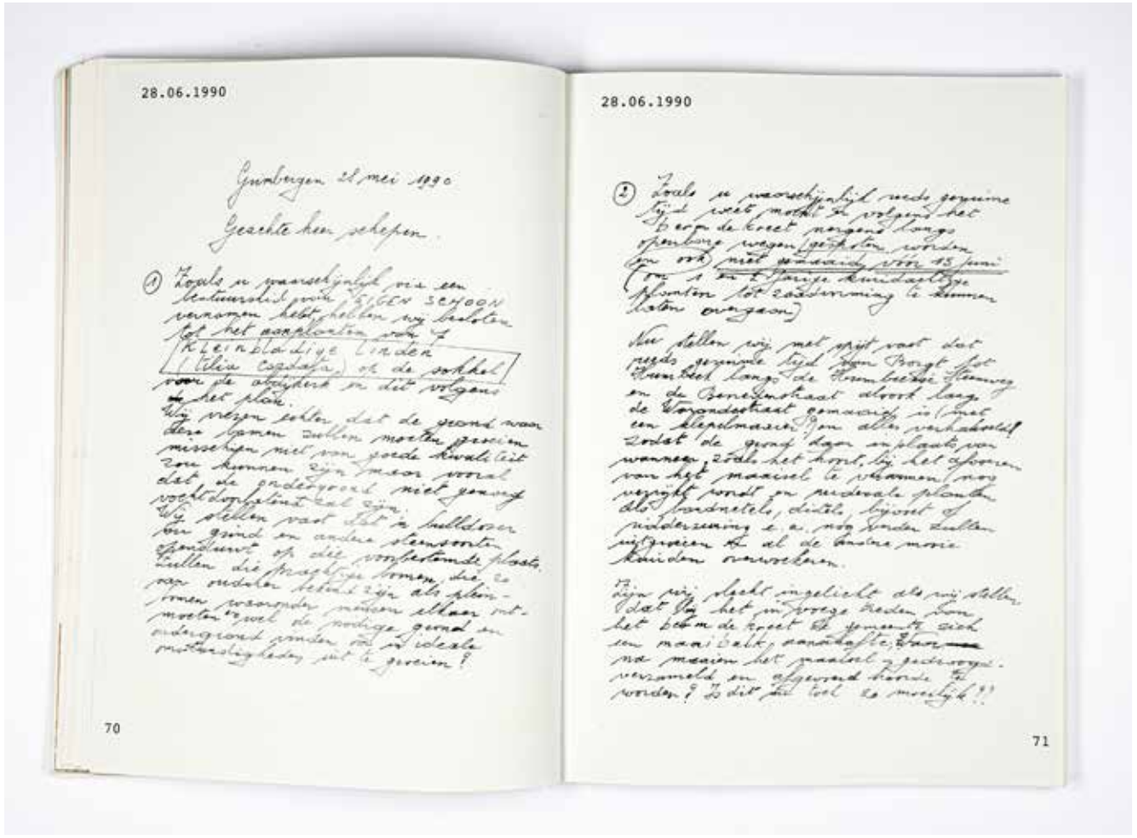
Graphic design

Within the study of graphic design I mostly worked on projects about my surroundings: different family members and different important political thematics. For the third year I made a book about my grandfather on father's side, Pierre Geerts, because I think there as well, I wanted to do some type of storytelling. I compared my grandfather's life to world events: the local and intimate (family)stories, versus the distant and global newspaper headliners.

For the monthly calendar for *Het Lab*, a creative space at Entrepot in Bruges. I worked together with my grandmother; she wrote down all the information of the events and gave me the iconic Flemish calendar from *De Druivelaar* to scan. When I design something, I like to use already existing graphic elements. The work was commissioned by the Entrepot to show their events/important dates/workshops/open studio days to keep their community well informed of what is happening in Het Lab.

During my master year in graphic design, I expressed myself by an important issue of the 21st century: the climate crisis. I compared my other grandfather's life, affected by dementia at that time, to this important issue. He used to have a very great knowledge of the Belgian flora and fauna, he was particularly an expert in birdwatching. He was so dedicated, that he even had a degree as a nature guide. Besides that, he was also co-author of a book concerning Belgian wildlife. Because of his dementia this knowledge slowly started to fade, and disappeared completely in the end. In my master project of graphic design, I compared his memory loss to the extent where nature is disappearing nowadays.

At the beginning of my year as a master in graphic design, I started to work around the issues involving the climate crisis. I wanted to use my voice as a graphic designer to bring attention to the problem of environmental change, but I easily fell into clichés, because I had not chosen one specific topic yet. Climate change is a complex issue with many aspects. Later that year, I decided to make the project more personal. Starting from my grandfather's notebooks, in which he wrote down all his nature observations, I reinterpreted and relived this practice by photographing birds in my area with an analogue camera. My goal was to create awareness in a more personal way.



Beppe Geerts, An archive of my grandfathers letters (book), 2021



Beppe Geerts, Masterproject (book design and typography), 2021

In June 2020, my grandfather's book collection came to our house, because he was moving to the dementia department in the retirement home. His book collection and especially the books about nature were really impressive. The book collection came to our house, because my mother often sells things online, on a second-hand website. Being ecological is important to my mother. I grew up with the rule of never throwing away stuff that could have had a second life.

I made a book based on a lot of letters written by my grandfather, Jos Jacobs (he always kept a copy of his letters). I tried to connect with my grandfather by studying his way of thinking and solving problems. My grandfather on my mother's side was a teacher, bird watcher, an ornithologist, a nature guide and a climate activist. He was active in his own community and his town. At the end of the first semester, I made an archive of all his letters, documents and newspaper articles.... To have an overview of everything he wrote. He wrote letters to the mayor's office, for example, to make them aware of a tree that is dying or sick and that they should remove the other trees in the area. He also did a few actions, such as ferrying toads or frogs. He maintained a high importance to help keep nature safe and alive in his town. And then he also co-wrote a book about hunting, which may sound contradictory, but hunting is also a way to keep the ecosystem in balance. His idea was: it is important that hunters get the right instructions, so they do not harm the wrong or rare animals. In this book, he wrote mostly about the birds.

As a result of this master's project, I made an archive book that contained all his writing that was important for the subject matter I was working with. Based on that book I made another book with my own graphic interventions and pictures, combined with his letters and portraits. Besides that I also made bird cards, and another booklet, my thesis, that contained a timeline of his events combined with important ecological changes and climate environment research, and last but not least I made a font of his handwriting that I used when talking about personal events and history.

Ilustration

After my master's in graphic design, I decided to further develop myself within the visual arts. As drawing was a passion since my childhood, I wanted to discover it further.

During the covid pandemic I started actively drawing on a daily basis in a sketchbook, because I was very frustrated to stay at home the entire time. Drawing was something that made me feel better. I mostly drew the space or environment I was in, or I went for a walk or a run and took pictures meanwhile and then afterwards, when I was back home, I made drawings based upon the pictures I took.

My background of graphic design is visible, in the way I approach illustration, in the way I think and create a project, but also in the layering, the collage approach, the structures, the line work, the patterns and the contrast. In the beginning, when I started illustration, I worked in black and white, with a lot of contrast and different line strokes. Later on, I created very colourful work with a big contrast, because of the complementary colours.

Material use

I often recycle material. I try to do it as much as possible, for example, the work, dog fight, I made of cardboard that I found in the trash can at school or from cardboard boxes of things that I ordered online. At least in that way, I already do not have to spend money on the materials I use, and I like to do so because it is more ecological.

During my bachelor in illustration, I started to work with oil pastels. I enjoy this material, because it is something in between painting and drawing . My work with these oil pastels are often very bright and colourful. I start by drawing with a pencil and the oil pastels on the paper. And then I start blending the oil pastel and by doing that, it feels more like how I used to fingerpaint as a child. Very often a lot of people think they are paintings as well.

Dogs fighting

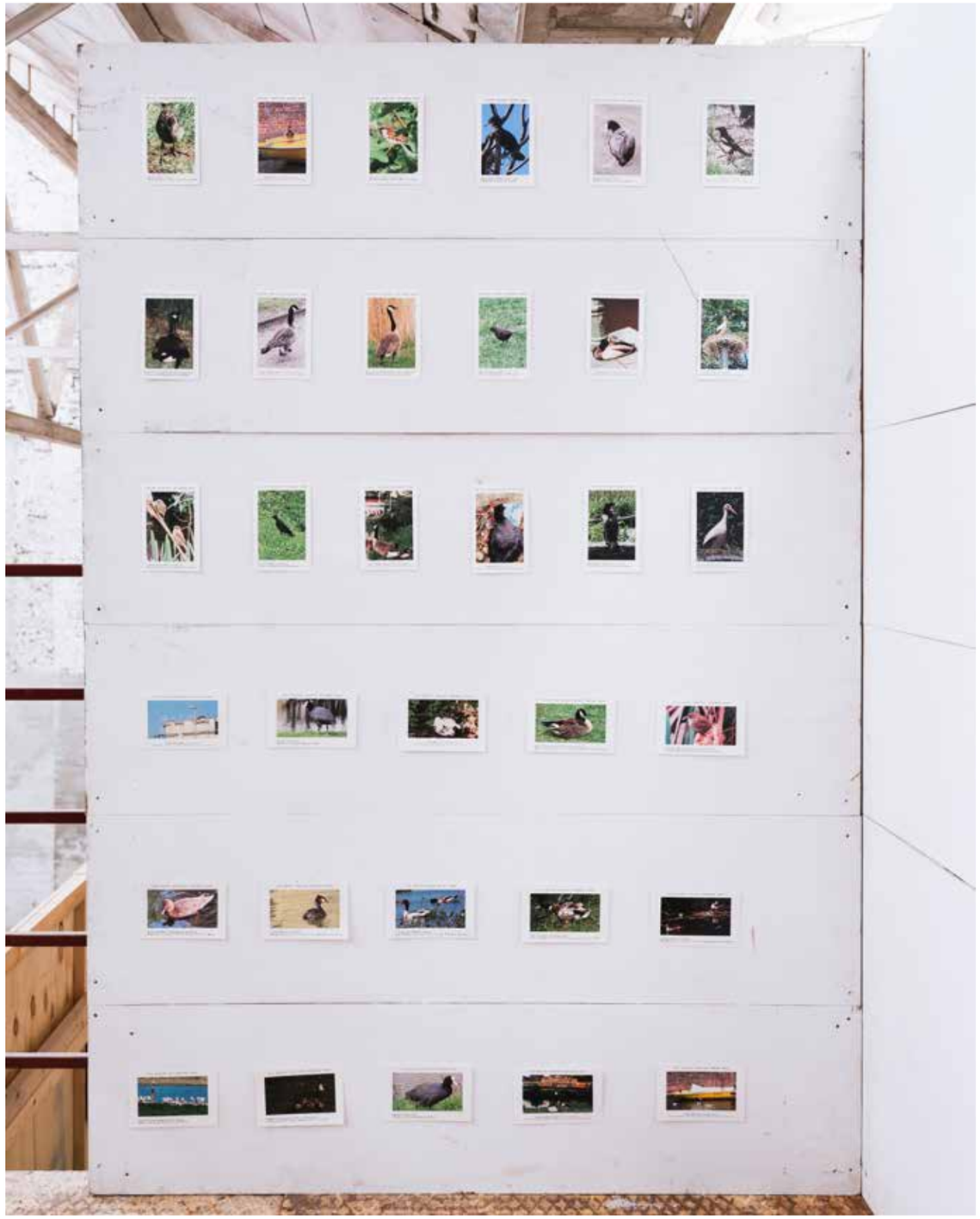
After being asked to draw things I am scared of. I started drawing heads of dogs on recycled cardboard with a Posca marker. Later on I made dogs fighting. After this project, I actually started appreciating dogs more again. It was helpful to deal with a childhood trauma: when I was a little girl and playing in the garden of a friend, a dog was running behind me and trying to bite me.

I started from the heads, and it then grew into a whole scenery, by adding the body of the dogs and a background. I also created a scenery of fighting dogs. In the end, the work that I made became really big, almost like a backdrop of a theatre. I made the project this big, because my illustration teachers really wanted me to create different types of characters, a background and a situation that occurred between those characters. But only later I realised that this was not the way I wanted to present my projects.

For instance, for my master's project, Privaat Domein, I did not include any character at all, nor a situation. Storytelling is still my aim, but in a different way. I like to have a type of concept in mind and to create my artwork around this concept, and to show what it is about. For me every concept asks for a different type of approach.



Beppe Geerts, *Dog fight* (Cardboard installation), 2022, 1.800 mm x 3.000 mm, marker on cardboard



Beppe Geerts, *Birdcards* at exhibition *HIER WAAK IK* at *de Verffabriek* (exhibition view), 2023



Beppe Geerts, *HIER WAAK IK*, poort poster 10 (intervention on the gate door of *de Verffabriek)*, 2023



Beppe Geerts, exhibition *HIER WAAK IK*, *de Verffabriek* (exhibition view), 2023

HIER WAAK IK, verffabriek

In May 2022, I had the opportunity to do a solo exhibition in de Verffabriek, in Mariakerke, Ghent. For the exhibition, HIER WAAK IK [I GUARD HERE], I wanted to bring together my two different artistic practices: graphic design and illustration.

My master project from graphic design had a lot of elements from nature, such as the bird pictures. Whereas my work from the 2nd year of illustration, where the dogs on cardboard. The two artworks looked very different but nevertheless they had some things in common: both had animals as their subject and both were based on observations. As these were all natural elements, I decided to work around the idea of the Flemish garden.

To realise this I used the canvas of the gate as the biggest and central artwork of my exhibition. The gate was the main entrance of de Verffabriek. Upon this gate, I painted a green hedge structure as the first layer of the work. The second layer was an enlarged life size drawing of a blue gate on blue back. The third layer was a white fence, with brown paint that suggested a wooden structure. The fence I attached to the gate. The fourth and final layer were flower boxes filled with flowers, hanging on the fence. The result of this artwork was a sort of trompe l'oeil. Next to this you could find the continuation of my exhibition inside the building. There I made an installation of a green mat, some white plastic chairs and some gnomes displayed on the mat. With this I suggest a typical Flemish garden.



Beppe Geerts, The fish buffet (still life), 2023, Oil Pastel and pencil, 109,5 mm x 53,5 mm

The fish buffet, June 2023, “De zee! De zee!”, Villa Verbeelding, Hasselt

My first still life, *Het visbuffet* [The fish buffet], I made for the exhibition, “*De zee! De zee!*” at *Villa Verbeelding* in Hasselt. The work was based on a story, *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* [Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas] by Jules Verne. A teacher from Illustration read the story out loud to us and in the meantime, we had to draw from imagination. The story was about the seaside, and about seamen and sailors eating fish for breakfast. I made a type of still life from different type of fishplates and playing cards. The playing cards are laid out over the table in this way you can feel the human presence and activity. Like that I was able to narrate the story. By showing those playing cards, I suggested that there were people, without actually drawing them. The still life that was drawn from an aerial perspective and presented on a table.



Beppe Geerts, The last supper, New Horizons Dieric Bouts festival (installation), 2023

The last supper, New Horizons Dieric Bouts festival, November 2023, Leuven

The end of September 2023, I took part in an open call by Curating The Young. They were looking for young artists to create a work in public space for the New Horizons festival, which honoured Dieric Bouts. They wanted the exhibition to focus on unusual perspectives, still lifes, portraits and landscapes. The work needed to have a strong link with one of the works by the Flemish master, Dieric Bouts. The things that primarily interested me in the paintings by Dieric Bouts were the tiled floors with graphic patterns, and the everyday objects.

For this arts festival, I created a still life drawing, from an aerial perspective, and presented it on a table. The materials I used for this work are oil pastels and pencil. The drawing is based on ‘The Last Supper’ by Dieric Bouts, which I saw in M Leuven on the 2nd of November. I drew the elements from the table, I kept the same composition of the way the elements were displayed on the table, but I drew them from another perspective, from above. Underneath the table you can see the tiled floors with graphic patterns that I got inspired by to create the work.

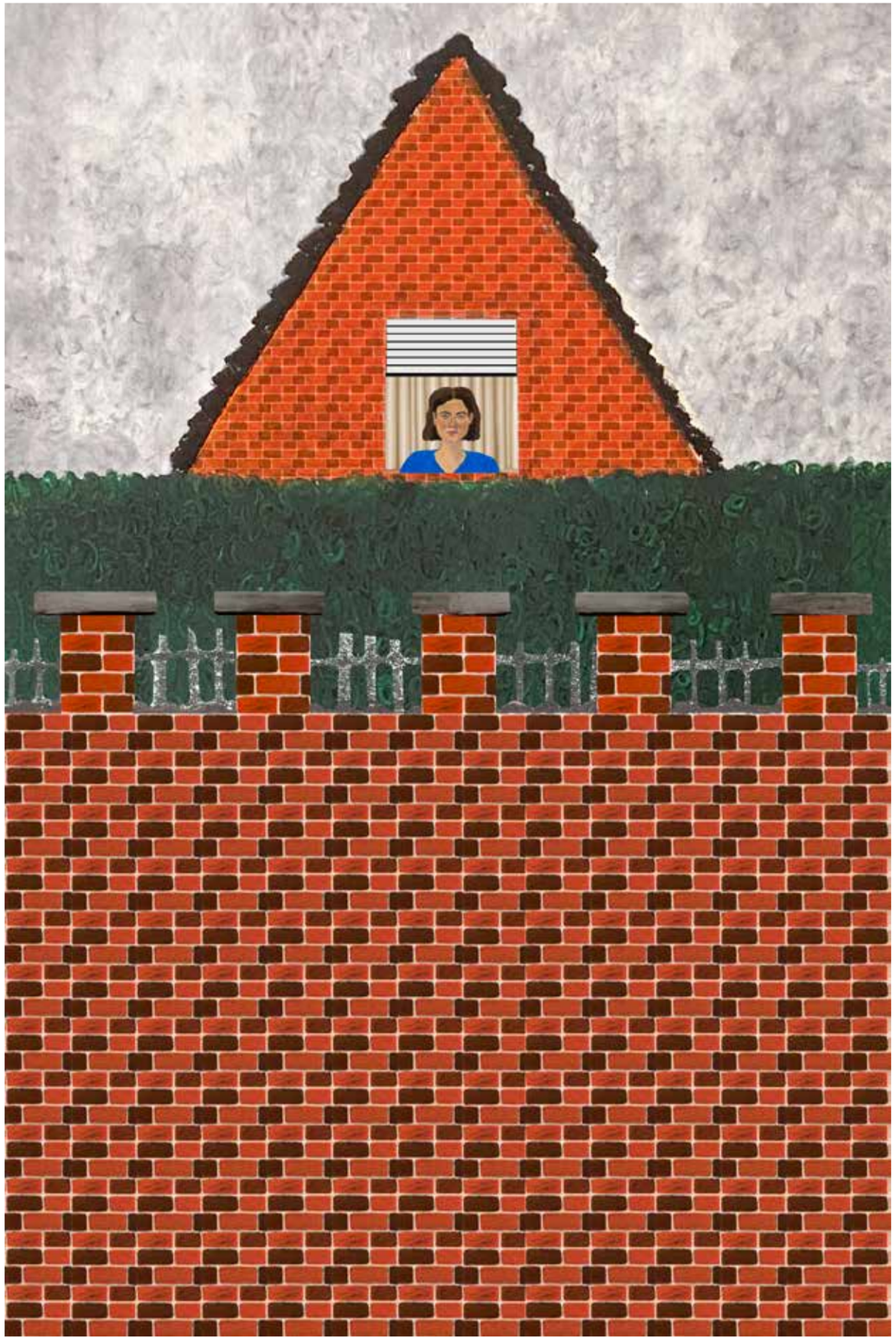
For the same exhibition, I made another still life that was drawn from an aerial perspective, but this time a contemporary version of the last supper. In the area close by where my work was situated you can find the Stella Artois brewery. For this reason, I inspired the table on a table of a traditional old brown café in Belgium. The work reflects the idea of old men drinking beer and having a bite in the bar.



Beppe Geerts, *The last supper*, New Horizons Dieric Bouts festival, November 2023, Leuven (BE)



Beppe Geerts, *Bruin café*, November 2023, Gent (BE)



Beppe Geerts, *Oost, West, ...*, 2024, 2000 × 3000 mm, Oilpastel on paper

Master Project, Privaat Domein

In September 2023 I started my research for my Master's in Illustration at *LUCA school of Arts* Ghent. On one hand I wanted to highlight the beauty of Flanders by trying to maintain a positive vision, but on the other hand, my own starting point was already mostly negative regarding the landscape and the way of living in Flanders. I struggled with finding my position and with writing about this subjective topic, that implements speaking about a type of mentality without generalising.

In the beginning I wanted to understand the essence of Belgium, the country where I lived until then and more specifically of Flanders, the region where I grew up. I had the feeling that I did not understand what it was about and at that time being, I wanted to delve into the history of my homeland. In an early stage I bumped into clichés like the traditional dishes such as fries, waffles and beers; popular celebrities, the Flemish Masters, ... Things the country is therefore known by tourists.

Questions I had in the beginning were:

What can figurative landscape painting teach us about how we approach the landscape today? What defines the Flemish landscape? How can I raise awareness about the changing landscape? As an artist, how do I depict the loss of natural elements and the dominance of human influence in the landscape? What part of nature remains untouched and free from human impact? What changes have shaped the contemporary Flemish landscape? Why are Belgians so modest? Why is there so much freedom to build as desired in Belgium? Why are only the negative aspects of the Flemish landscape emphasised? Is there a negative national self-image regarding our landscape? Can there be Belgian pride without nationalism?

In the beginning of the year, for my artistic practice, I had the idea to build a lifesize maze of garden fences, hedges, walls, screens and other barriers. The installation was supposed to present my interpretation and a contemporary version of the Flemish landscape. I was particularly interested in the isolation happening and the great need for privacy and wanted to reflect upon the chaos and layering in the landscape. In May 2022, I already touched upon this theme with the big scale artwork, on the gate door of the *Verffabriek*.

I wanted to continue working with physical borders and fences, and the way layering is happening in our landscape. But initially I wanted to make a type of maze of all different types of fences, to create the feeling of being on the outside of the landscape and being lost within the landscape. The idea of creating a maze would reflect the chaos of the landscape as well. I wanted to create a big life size installation, but because of financial, logistic reasons and the lack of knowledge and space, I did not execute this idea. At least not yet.

In order to create that maze, I started working on small pieces of cardboard, to make a small model. To see what it would look like in life size. But in the end, I actually continued making drawings on these smaller pieces of cardboard.

Besides that, I also wanted to make drawings from an aerial perspective, but with those borders and with those walls and poles and hedges the perspective from above, seemed a less interesting idea and a rather abstract approach.

I also photographed the fences sometimes, but visually that looked too chaotic. I wanted to make a stylized version of those fences, that the attention goes more to the object in itself, the colours and the shape.

The idea of *Privaat Domein*, is really about the visualisation and enlargement of the demarcations, while the images might look very colourful and may be attractive as well. The message behind the work tells something else. I had the aim to create the sensation of having the feeling that you have to stay out of the landscape I depicted.





Inspiring artists

A very inspiring artist is Joseph Willaert, a Belgian artist, who had been in my life unconsciously, for longer than I knew. He had been present in my life, ever since I started taking the metro line 6 to Brussels. Only in September 2023 I found out that he was the man behind the paintings in the metro station Clemenceau. On Sunday, 29 October 2023, I went to *De Klare kijk*, a solo exhibition by Joseph Willaert, curated by Els Vermeersch. The exhibition took place at the seaside in Ostend. I remember during the exhibition I was quite shocked, and I thought and almost felt like I was copying him, without knowing his work. My work seemed really similar, both in thematic and in the way of drawing the perspective, either frontal or aerial. Luckily his material use is different and the visual outcome as well. But in any case, I was really touched by this exhibition.

On the same day I saw his work in another museum in Ostend, in *Muzee*, a museum of contemporary art. And a bit later I saw even more work from him in *S.M.A.K.*

I think something I appreciate about Willaerts' work is the recognition that I felt, because there were so many things, situations and objects that I recognized and that feel familiar, but then there were also a lot of elements, from a different century, things that I do not recognize anymore.

Another memorable moment was the day when I went to visit Frida Kahlo's house in Mexico, in June 2023. It is somebody I have admired for a long time. I was so excited, that it almost felt like I was going to meet my favourite rockstar. I do not get excited very easily, so it was a complete new feeling for me. That day, the day I got the closest to Frida Kahlo's life, I will not easily forget.

With social media and Instagram I have this impressive feeling a lot less. A lot of images pass by, from which I am sure that some are not even worth looking at. But it goes so quickly, it is a very different dynamic of experiencing artwork. I feel it more when I go to a bookshop or during an exhibition, when I really have the chance to take my time to dive into somebody's work.

Mentioned artists
Craig Green
Daniel Arsham
David Hockney
Delphine Lecompte
Ellsworth Kelly
Ferdinand Cheval
Iris van Herpen
Jan Arends
Jan Van Eyck
Joseph Willaert
Mark Rothko
Raf Simons
Raoul De Keyser
Roger Raveel
Rogier Van der Weyden

CONCLUSION

Privaat Domein [Private Property] shows an overview of the way the Flemish landscape, the Flemish psyche and the Hortus Conclusus (in Flanders) are depicted in the (more or less) contemporary art scene by a variety of artists.

The Flemish territory is mainly privatised, even natural areas can be privately owned, such as forests and nature reserves. Only 10% of Flanders are fully natural areas. Even these are not untouched nature, because that can no longer be found in Flanders. The so-called natural areas are under effective nature management, by human beings.

The privatisation has been empowered by the Belgian Government as they promoted individual house ownership since 1889. Later, privacy became an important factor due to the building regulations of 1909. The architect not only designed the house, but the garden wall as well.

The Flemish psyche was very difficult to research as it is more a state of mind, a Genius Loci, rather than written facts. That is why I made a list of typically recognisable points that determine how the Flemish Psyche comes across to me. For example staying local to things, such as your order at the local frituur [fry shop] around the corner.

The self-mockery is also part of our Belgian identity. Maybe this could explain why many artists criticise or comment on the Flemish landscape (and psyche), especially on the urban planning in Belgium.

The reason why the Belgian landscape appears so chaotic and nonchalant mainly comes down to a lack of urban planning rules and the Belgian Government that promoted individual house ownership since 1889. That resulted in many thousands of individual decisions, which created a disordered, confusing, but inspiring landscape?

ARTIST INTERVIEWS

The artists that I selected to interview are a mixture of young and middle aged artists, and on top of that, to be gender equal, I interviewed four men and four women, not counting myself into account. With these different artists the Flemish landscape adds in one point or another influence on their practice. The outcome of their work and the role the landscape plays in their work differs from one artist to another.

Background information

Their hometown and current residency is spread all over the Flemish territory, in urban, suburban and rural environments (Ghent, Kessel-lo, Mol, Maldegem, Sysele, Roeselare, Bazel, Brussels and Sint-Kruis). Artists in general often get inspired by the place they grew up in, their hometown. This is the case for the work of Daemen, Vermeulen, Van Canneyt, Decuyper, Heyndrickx and Somers. But for Cafmeyer and Vasiljević it was more about a place they often used to visit. Cafmeyer maintained higher importance to Brussels than to his hometown, whereas Vasiljević grew up in Serbia and visited her grandparents from mother's side each summer in West-Flanders.

Relationship with the surrounding landscape

All artists that I interviewed had a different relationship with their surrounding landscape. Some artists were fascinated by it, while others found it rather frustrating, did not hate it nor like it, found it rather chaotic and disturbing and for some it aroused many questions. The way those artists approach and interpret the landscape, and what the outcome of the work looks like is quite diverse as well. Although, I found some overlapping points of interest such as some of the artists were inspired by, the urban planning in Belgium, the narrow-mindedness (that some detest while others find it rather fascinating).

While for some artists the landscape rather functions as a background, for others it is the main subject. Besides that, not all artists agreed with the fact of their work being associated or described as a Flemish landscape.

Jana Vasiljević especially depicts the loss of untouched nature, by creating very artificial, straight and unnatural lines in her work and by suggesting different sources of light. While she is commenting on the landscape, her work mostly seeks a sense of security, safety, belonging and familiarity, which is quite contrasting. She does however strongly appreciate the Flemish landscape. One day she would like to buy a house in the countryside.

Dieter Daemen mostly gets inspired by biking in his area. The series, No Place Like Home embodies a state of mind that is reflected in those enclosed gardens. He describes hedges as a soft kind of violence. This work is about what those demarcations, these hedges and these fences represent. Besides that, he is very fascinated by textures. These textures can be found in his pictures of curtains, hedges, trees and bricks.

Lin Vermeulen paints about her frustrations, traumas and fears from growing up in a Catholic atmosphere to where women were seen as second citizens. Her landscapes are rather a state of mind that closely align with how I described the Flemish psyche. She does not depict the narrow minded because she idealises it, but rather because she detests it.

Sebastian Van Canneyt paints the "rural" environment and the small world that he is surrounded by. Besides painting, he creates sculptures, portable installa-

tions and fashion as an art object, he is a so-called cross-over artist. In his work he enlarges the idea of anti-socialism. Next to that, he strongly appreciates the Flemish landscape, the quiet, the habits and rituals of daily life.

Renske Decuyper appreciates the Flemish landscape because of the mixture of all those different elements within the landscape. Especially posts that demarcate a field, she is strongly fascinated by. During the interview with Decuyper, we discussed the difference between the landscape in the Netherlands and the one in Belgium. She has a good view on this, as she lives on the border of those two countries. She finds it an interesting contrast. She does however prefer the Belgian landscape for its chaotic look. And she is not the only one who appreciates the Belgian landscape over the Dutch one, C. Weeber, Dutch architect does too. I discussed Belgian urban planning not only with Decuyper, but also with Vasiljević, Vermeulen, Heyndrickx, Cafmeyer and Somers as well. As this was one of the most prominent topics of my research.

Elias Cafmeyer is deeply fascinated by metropolitan areas, wayfinding and urban planning since a very young age. He mainly explores this in his practice through installations. Besides that, he has a strong opinion on Belgian politics and problems such as disneyfication and gentrification.

Michell Heyndrickx for sure has een baksteen in de maag [a brick in the stomach], as you can see in the way he constructs and creates. It feels like an ode to the bricolage [do-it-yourself] type of mindset, that he clearly inherited. He is fascinated by the characteristic features of Flanders such as the farmette, the church tower, church street and the sheds. Besides that, he claims to get more inspired by the local artists, the so-called village or sunday painters, rather than artists like Luc Tuymans.

Delphine Somers is interested in the influence of religion and the way it shapes somebody's worldview. She grew up as an atheist, but was often surrounded by catholic imagery, as she lived in Bruges, a city with a Mediaeval catholic atmosphere. She does not find it important whether her landscapes in the background of her paintings show if it is in Flanders. But they do have to communicate the mentality or psyche of those landscapes, as they are mostly parochial or metropolitan. And sometimes there are mountains or hills in her work as well, but that is rather an aesthetic choice.

Inspiring artists

Something remarkable that I noticed was that some artists prefer not to let themself get influenced by other artists working around a similar subject, out of fear of copying the artworks or losing their own initial point of view or being confused about their own practice. But I must admit that by interviewing all those different artists, who were working more or less around the same subject, I experienced a similar feeling, of doubting my own way of thinking, and perspective on the Flemish landscape.

Although, Roger Raveel definitely left a great impression on many artists with his paintings, depicting the Flemish landscape as he got mentioned in five different interviews. Joseph Willaert has been an influential painter as well, who inspired both Vasiljevic, Van Canneyt and myself. Jean Brusselmans is a quite remarkable painter as well, and both for Decuyper and myself of great influence. Besides that, some artists suggested that I had to read the book: *Weg Van Vlaanderen* by Jeroen Laureyns. I actually already did, before starting the interviews.

Besides that obviously, all the artists I interviewed get inspired by their surroundings as well, but in different ways, Vasiljević, Decuyper and Van Canneyt by the landscape itself; Daemen and Decuyper by the demarcation happening; Vermeulen, Heyndrickx and Somers by the Flemish psyche; Van Canneyt by the anti-socialism; Cafmeyer especially by urban planning and wayfinding and Heyndrickx especially by the *bricolage*.

I however do not want to convince anybody to hate or love the Flemish landscape, let alone to discuss whether it is ugly or beautiful. I wanted to analyse it and interpret it. And to give you my point of view, on how I feel about the place where I grew up, Flanders.

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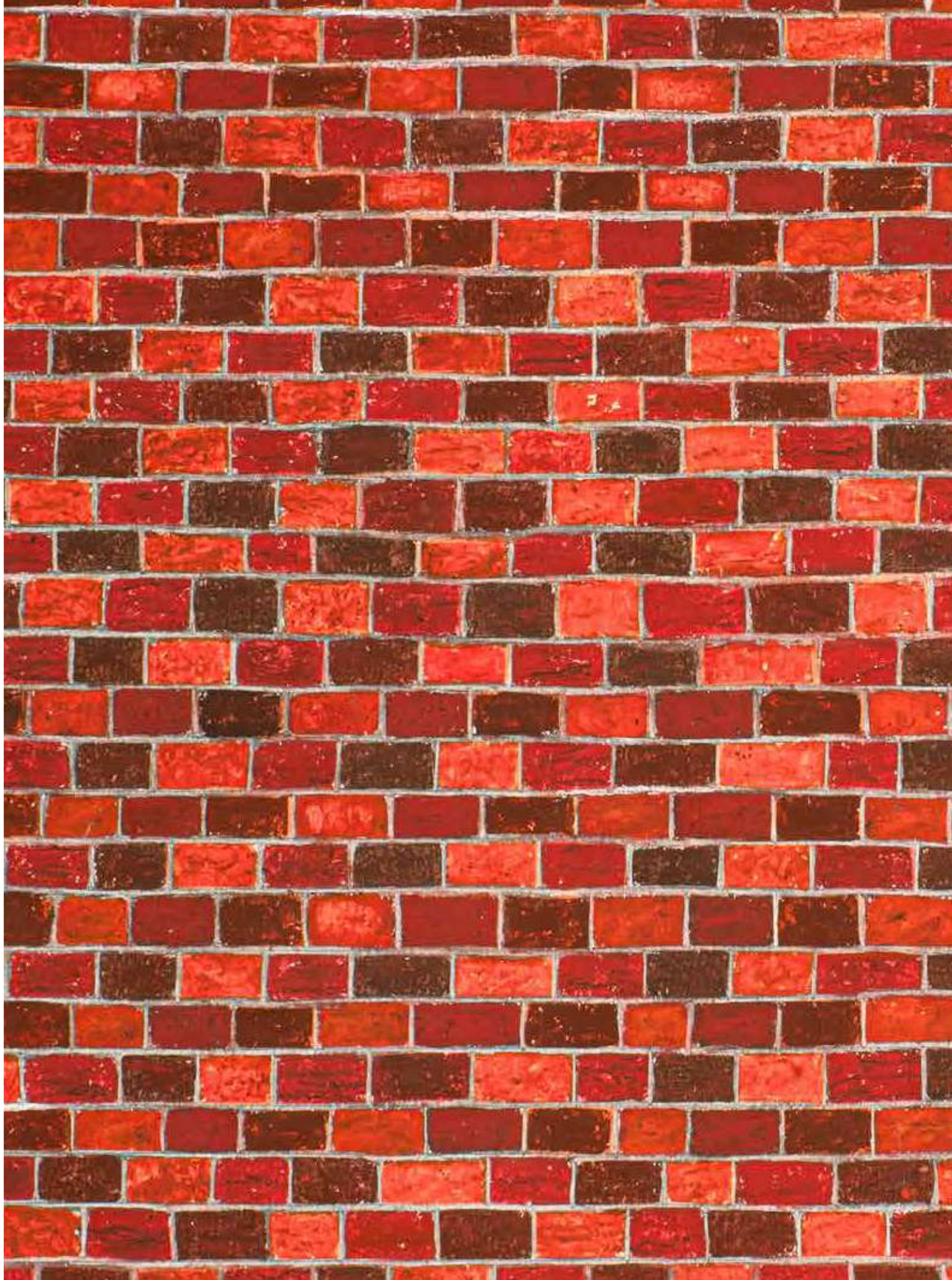
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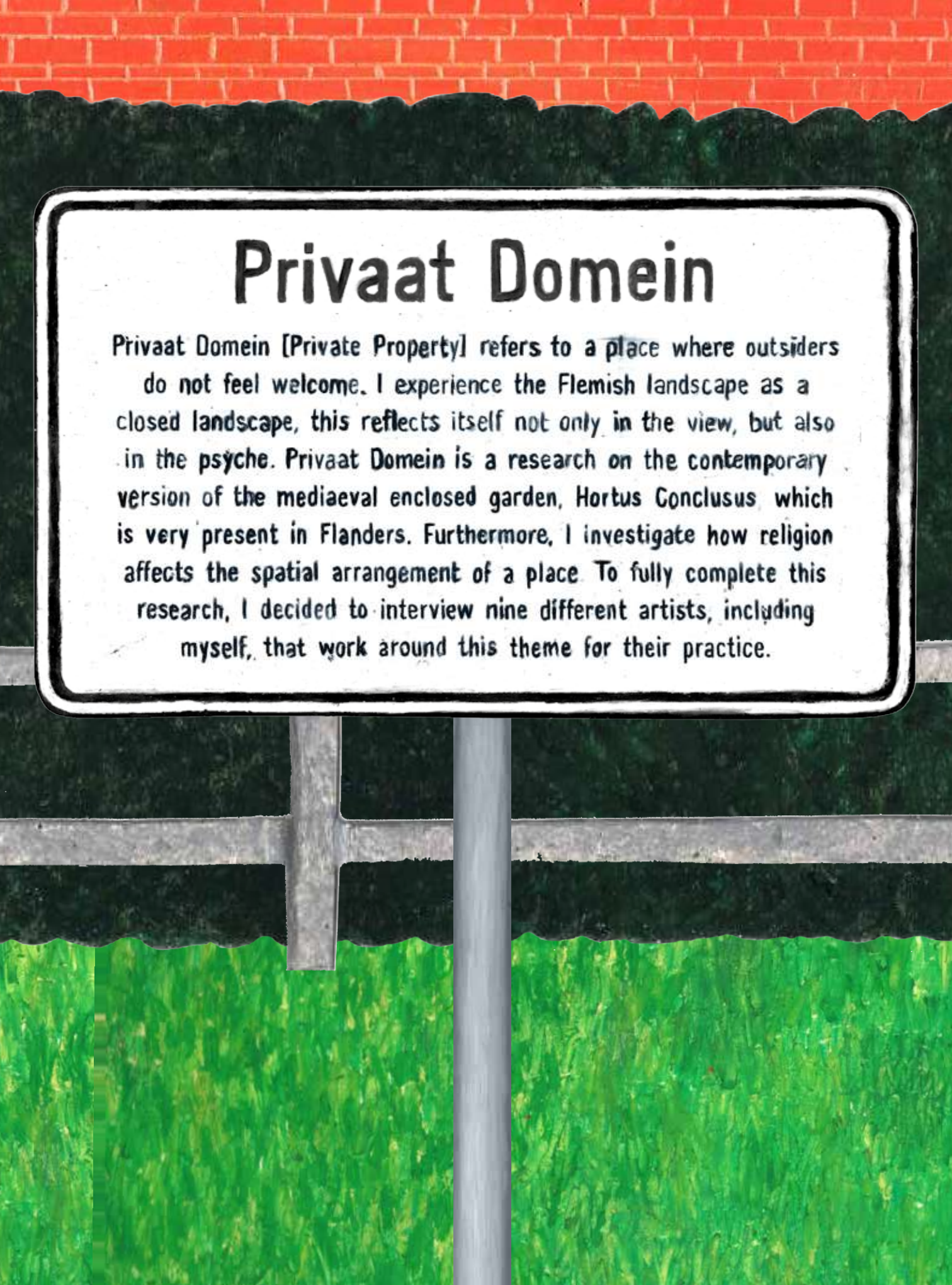
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Privaat Domein
Privaat Domein [Private Property] refers to a place where outsiders do not feel welcome. I experience the Flemish landscape as a closed landscape, this reflects itself not only in the view, but also in the psyche. Privaat Domein is a research on the contemporary version of the mediaeval enclosed garden, Hortus Conclusus which is very present in Flanders. Furthermore, I investigate how religion affects the spatial arrangement of a place. To fully complete this research, I decided to interview nine different artists, including myself, that work around this theme for their practice.