

Frozen Emptiness

The Work of Koen van den Broek

148

[ANNE - MARIE POELS]

In 2008 the Flemish artist Koen van den Broek (b. 1973, Bree) won first prize for the best one-man show at Art Brussels, Belgium's contemporary art fair, with his presentation *Who will lead us?* Paradoxically, the show was put on not by a Belgian gallery but by his gallery in Cologne, Figge von Rosen. This is typical of Koen van den Broek's career which, initially at least, seemed to be developing at two speeds: while the artist immediately reached great heights abroad, in Belgium the attitude was a hesitant 'wait and see'. By 2006 his work was already to be found in a number of foreign collections, while of the Belgian museums of contemporary art only the one in Ostend then possessed work by him.

International

Perhaps Koen van den Broek is himself responsible for this situation. After all, it was he who in 1998 chose to exchange Belgium temporarily for the United States to seek inspiration there. At that time he had come to a dead end in his work. From highly expressive paintings produced under the influence of Jean-Michel Basquiat in the mid-'90s, he had started to simplify, ending up with minimalist works, made after drawings, with a single little house, the shape of a tree, or some lines on a white canvas – literally point zero.

He had by then already been enrolled at various institutions: first spending two years studying engineering and architecture at Leuven and then – resolutely opting for painting – two years at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp and another two at the Sint-Joost Academy of Visual Arts in Breda. Neither in Antwerp – where he had to repeat his first year and was sent away at the end of it – nor in Breda was he appreciated by his teachers.

Disappointed by his academy experience, but convinced of his own ability, he boldly took the entrance exam for the Higher Institute of Fine Arts (then still in Antwerp), where he was immediately accepted and had a studio between 1997 and 2000. "The Institute was a very good experience. That's where I met people like Jan Debbaut, who later went to work for the Tate in London. We were a good class: Wim Catrysse was there during the same period, and Charif Benhelima." He also decided, fresh from the Institute, to accept the invitation



of Jay Jopling of the White Cube in London to exhibit there. This exhibition, *Borders* (2001), ended up as part of an international selection, *Art to See*. In other words, Koen van den Broek simply skips the step which is the normal route for most artists - gaining acceptance abroad via a Belgian gallery: he is catapulted directly into the international art scene.

Koen van den Broek,
Wing, 1999. Oil on canvas,
200 x 300 cm. © The artist
and Galerie Figge von Rosen,
Cologne.

The photograph as source material

In 2007 Koen van den Broek wrote of the time when he left for the United States: "I was inspired by the great figures from art history and looking for a new challenge. I thought the art scene at the time was too predictable and I was convinced that somewhere on this planet there had to be a painter who had a different approach, someone who really dared to put the medium of painting up for discussion." He was looking for a new way of painting, something different from the European way. "Everyone was painting very much in the same manner. Either from photos, the way Richter painted, or from maps and their keys, which led to a schematic way of painting." In America he hoped to find a measure of freshness.

Although Van den Broek had to conclude that on the other side of the ocean they paint in exactly the same way, albeit with rather more colour, his stay there still provided him with the inspiration he sought, and in more than one



Koen van den Broek,
Viaduct, 2002. Oil on canvas,
280 x 420 cm. © The artist
and White Cube, London.

way. For instance, he discovered a method that gave him something to go by in his painting. While up till then he had avoided the use of photography, as being 'too obvious, since everyone was doing it', he now bought a camera and began taking photos that would provide source material for his paintings. Being taken through the lens of his camera, which creates a distance between him and the outside world, the photos provide their own frame.

'When I look through a camera, I have the feeling that the world becomes frozen, even though I may be standing in the middle of a busy city like New York. Aided by that sense of distance, I start looking for images.' Van den Broek thinks it is important to take the photographs himself and thus put forward his vision of reality. His background in architecture is clear to see when he photographs the urban landscape with its buildings, streets, sidewalks, viaducts – but he also photographs details, like the shadow on the ground, the wing of an aircraft, the bend in a road, a lonely cabin in a deserted landscape ... roll after roll of film, from which he later makes a selection.

The artist may base himself on reality, yet he never literally shows it. That is due to the translation process, from reality to photograph to painting, in which all superfluous details are jettisoned. And especially because of the odd way of framing he chooses for his photographs. That is particularly noticeable in the *Borders* that meander like a constant thread through his oeuvre. This series is made up of paintings with ground-level details in which one can observe sidewalk kerbs and drains and the edges of fields - narrow bands of red, yellow or blue that guide your eye down the canvas and separate the different blocks of colour.

There are never any people on these canvases, only elements that imply their existence: the buildings they erect, the roads they build, the urban landscapes they create. Figures, to Van den Broek, are disturbing elements that break up his emptiness. Absence, he has already made clear, is more important in his work than presence. *Ghost Truck* (1999), a painting of an abandoned truck in a desolate landscape, is a good example of this.

Building up the space around us with a few lines within the space of his canvas and working from photographs that depict reality, Van den Broek creates paintings that straddle the borderline between the figurative and the abstract – sometimes it is only the title that brings them back to reality. *Eighth Avenue* (1999), for example, consists roughly of one black and one white block, representing a pavement and a building. Except for the title, nothing in this image refers to the long avenue that connects North and South in New York City.

Sabbatical

The year 2006 brought a period of doubt. With his constant fear of falling into the trap of merely continuing to produce, he again found himself in a dead end ('I thought that my way of working might become predictable'), so he decided to stop painting altogether. He also moved, from a studio with white walls throughout to one with hardly any white wall surface. "I suddenly had to buy an easel." The situation made him think about the purpose of his work and to go back to its foundation, his first paintings. On the basis of these old works he made a series of new paintings, *Angle*, which are completely disconnected from their photographic source material and do not refer to any geographical location. Because of this the details in the paintings, unlike, for example, the kerbs in the *Borders* series, are totally detached from their background and seem almost to float in a vacuum. For Van den Broek it was a way to find out whether a painting, even when disconnected from reality, could still hold up.

Although after *Angle* the artist again reverted to photographs as source material, the influence of the series can also be detected in his most recent work. The objects he paints now are treated more independently of their surroundings than before. Stripped of all superfluous detail, they create a sense of space. More than ever, Koen van den Broek is balancing on the borderline between abstract image and representation of reality.

Collaboration

During his stay in the United States in the late '90s, Koen van den Broek also found inspiration in the dynamic art scene of Los Angeles. Compared to New York, when it came to contemporary art the city was then still the underdog - until then art had been very badly served there, certainly when compared with film and



Koen van den Broek,
Hillstreet, 2008. Oil on
canvas, 200 x 300 cm.
© The artist and Galerie
Figge von Rosen, Cologne.

music. But as a result of this the people he met there were a lot freer: they operated quite independently of the official art world and were not afraid to take risks.

Van den Broek got to know some interesting artists there, among them Mike Kelley, Ed Ruscha, Charles Ray and John Baldessari. And he encountered a mentality that was much more generous than he had been accustomed to in his own country: he was invited to studios, attended dinners and was taken to museums and galleries where he was introduced. Through Jan Debbaut he made the acquaintance of John Baldessari – a contact that developed into a friendship and years later, in 2008, would lead to a collaboration. Together the two artists created a series of works, *This an Example of That*, with Baldessari sending Van den Broek a number of enlarged black-and-white stills from old B-films to which Van den Broek then takes his brush. He didn't paint over the images but added stripes, blocks of colour and various accents, which prompt one to read the images in a different way. The works remain recognisable as photos, but at the same time become part of the pictorial abstraction that is so typical of Koen van den Broek's output.

Baldessari also inspired the artist to accept the invitation of director Bart De Baere of Antwerp's Museum of Contemporary Art to organise a show from the Museum's collection. In the spirit of the exhibition *Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images* compiled by Baldessari for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2007, Van den Broek in *Fantasy* looked for links and similarities between different works, oeuvres and artistic practices and made connections as only an artist can.



Nor does Van den Broek shrink from less obvious collaborations. With Fred Bervoets, the one-time teacher at the Antwerp Academy – who never taught Van den Broek but did visit him in his studio and constantly encouraged him to continue painting during his years at the Academy – he creates a number of paintings in 2007. It may seem an odd combination, the expressive work of Bervoets and the near-minimalist details of Van den Broek, but in Van den Broek's view they have a similar outlook. 'Art is about making decisions. It's not *how* you paint, but *what*, that's important. Every painting needs a reason to exist. If you have nothing to say, you shouldn't create anything.'

And even less likely is the scenery he designed in 2008 for Pol Heyvaert's stage play *René* about his uncle René Heyvaert. An artist, who like Van den Broek has a background in architecture and with whom, for that if no other reason, he feels a great affinity.

Koen van den Broek,
Museum, 2008. Oil on canvas, 89 x 115 cm.
© The artist and Galerie Figge von Rosen, Cologne.

Making up for lost time

The collaboration with Antwerp Museum in the form of an exhibition put together by Van den Broek and the invitation to design the scenery for a play: these are just two indications that Koen van den Broek has been making up for lost time in his own country and is being received there as an artist with enthusiasm. His paintings are now also to be found in the collections of the various museums of contemporary art in Belgium. 'I think that at first my work

Koen van den Broek,
The Edge # 3, 2009. Oil on
canvas, 120 x 180 cm.
© The artist and Galerie
Figge von Rosen, Cologne.



was regarded as too easy. I have never worked with political or sociological propositions. My work looks very straightforward, but it has a different kind of layering, one that is harder to take in; that's why my paintings were regarded with suspicion. But they couldn't go on ignoring me. Artist friends would talk about me and I was being exhibited in leading galleries - it's no small thing of course when at the age of twenty-seven you are asked to come up with the closing piece for an exhibition at MOMA in San Francisco on the influence of Matisse on art history.'

In Spring 2010 the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent presented the first major exhibition of Koen van den Broek in Belgium, with new paintings and work from the previous decade: not only paintings from collections in Belgium and London, but also canvases that had to be flown in from, for example, San Francisco and Sydney. *Curbs & Cracks* was built around some well-defined clusters of works that are related by their form, theme or content. Van den Broek was assisted by curator Andrew Renton, who is attached to the prestigious Goldsmith's College in London and specialises in contemporary painting, in providing a fresh outlook on his work.

The Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp also scored a first, again in early 2010: here, in a small project called *Preview*, works on paper by the artist were shown for the first time. These are works Van den Broek created a year earlier in a studio in a Case Study house in Los Angeles, not only to find out if he could really create new work there (an earlier experience of working in a studio in Los Angeles had not gone well since he had been quite unable to work there) but

also to find out whether working on paper was something for him. He wanted to achieve a certain spontaneity in this way and surprise himself once again.

Since the exhibitions at the museums in Antwerp and Ghent, paintings by Koen van den Broek have also been shown at two big group exhibitions: the 14th *Vilnius Painting Triennial: False Recognition*, at the Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius, Lithuania, and the *Biennale of Painting: Beyond Sublime*, in both the Dhondt-Daemens Museum and the Roger Raveel Museum.

In September 2010 Koen van den Broek again had - for the first time since the results of his collaboration with John Baldessari were shown there - an exhibition of new paintings at his Belgian Gallery Greta Meert. The works were based on photographs taken in the immediate vicinity of The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA (Museum of Contemporary Art) in Los Angeles, and once again presented highly abstracted images of its surroundings: a viaduct over a freeway, the shadows cast by a number of buildings, the kerb of a sidewalk. ■

Translated by Pleuke Boyce

FURTHER READING

Crack: Koen van den Broek Painting (Wouter Davids ed.)
Lannoo, Tielt/Valiz, Amsterdam, 2010

Koen van den Broek,
Pitstop, 2009. Oil on canvas,
75 x 50 cm. © The artist and
Galerie Figge von Rosen,
Cologne.

