‘The Paint is the Message’

The Physical Painting of Sam Dillemans

[ERIC RINCKHOUT]

Sam Dillemans has painted boxers, nudes and couples making love. In the last few years he has got his teeth into portraits of writers – all exceptional people whom he admires. Before that he took direct inspiration from the great masters: he transposed Rubens, Giotto, Grünewald and El Greco into his own forms and paint. It was not imitation, but creative reinterpretation. ‘Lots of contemporary artists think they are the be-all and end-all. They are wrong. You need the old masters to be able to put yourself in context,’ says Sam Dillemans.

Dillemans, born in Leuven in 1965, is a painter in whom past and present coincide: his painting is somewhere in between the figurative and the abstract. In his work there is a thin line between form and dissolution. Love and hate, reconciliation and conflict merge with one another too.

Dillemans is a physical painter, he lives in paint, he is paint. He does actually live in his studio, surrounded by hundreds of canvases, tubes of paint and brushes. His paintings are evidence of his struggle with the material: they are challenges and conquests in paint, layer upon layer. Paintings full of churning, quivering paint. Paintings full of life and bodies. It is his form of expressionism.

‘My ambition is to become ninety years old – to realise as much as possible of my painterly dream. I still have so much to do.’

August 2012. In Sam Dillemans’ studio, the spacious back of a house in Antwerp, there are more than a hundred portraits on the wall. Expressive and sketchy. Most in black and white, sometimes with sparse touches of blue, green and red. Their dimensions vary from 30 by 24 to 50 by 60 centimetres. Men and women. Mainly writers, such as James Joyce, William Faulkner, Raymond Carver, Emily Dickinson, Charles Bukowski and George Sand. Composers, philosophers, singers and sportsmen too - Eddy Merckx, Jacques Brel, Schubert and Mozart. Occasionally a painter. They are the great figures whom Sam Dillemans hugely admires.

‘There are so many writers amongst them because I have been reading nonstop since I was twelve,’ he says. Reading has consoled me. The Russians! I devoured Dostoyevsky. In fact I think you ought to read him when you’re young. Yes, most of them are dead writers. They are certainties, they are world literature. You’re not wasting your time with them. I’ve postponed reading Céline for a while

Sam Dillemans, *A Kiss*, 2007. Oil on panel, 40 cm x 50 cm

because I knew he was difficult and pessimistic. But what an author! It's no coincidence that the real greats, like Céline, Chekhov and Schnitzler, all three of them, were doctors. They've had their hands on flesh, they know what death is.'

Dillemans has been working on this extensive series of black and white portraits since January 2012. They are powerful close-ups. He uses a dry brush for its dynamic line and sometimes uses his fingers too. In some places he applies the paint so thinly that the texture of the woven cloth shows through.

Large parts of the canvas remain unpainted. 'I call it etching with paint,' he says. 'It's sink or swim. If I want to correct something I can always try erasing it with white paint or white spirit. But that doesn't always work and even when it does the corrections stand out. That's why these portraits are a leap in the dark. I can allow myself to do that because I've been doing portraits in colour for more than two years.'

Dillemans does not start with a white canvas for these colour portraits, but uses a wide variety of supports, including landscape paintings he buys in the recycling shop. 'These little paintings make a fantastic ground. I sensed that I could really use works like that. It all went very intuitively. I turn the landscape painting 90° or upside down. A rowing boat or a piece of a tree might become an eye. I don't search, I find. Yes, I've overpainted a lot of works by Sunday painters.'

Sam Dilemans, *Lovers*, 1999.
Oil on canvas, 200 cm x 200 cm

Since 2010 he has turned more to black and white, again intuitively. 'The last six months I've painted hardly anything else than portraits in black and white. But I don't start from a concept, if I did it would just get screwed up. It's purely about the experience: I have fun doing the hundredth nostril. My brush wanders and I follow. There's nothing cerebral about it.'

Dillemans paints these portraits while sitting in the lotus position on the floor. A photo of the author or composer in question sits on a chair in front of him. 'It doesn't even have to be a good photo.' The white canvas lies in front of him. He does not do any preparatory drawings. 'The white canvas is the worst thing there is. It was Picasso who said that, not me. And if even he thought so, what must it be like for us? I have to persuade myself that the portrait I'm working on is both important and unimportant. I have to deceive and fool myself, otherwise the fear of failure would be too great and I couldn't get started.'

When the painting doesn't go smoothly, he glances at a big photo of Eddy Merckx, the great Belgian cyclist. To recharge his batteries. 'He is my crucifix. That man knows what solitude is too.'

Dillemans paints his portraits hovering between flamboyance and restlessness. 'I always start with the eyes. They are the most important.' Sometimes chance interferes: on one occasion Dillemans' dirty trouser-leg rubbed against the side of a canvas with a portrait of the American author Theodore Dreiser. 'I left the mark as it was, as a demarcation. The portraits shouldn't be too clean.'

Dillemans puts music on when he's painting. ABBA, Vivaldi, Mozart... 'But I don't put Verdi on when I'm painting Verdi's portrait. I don't go that far.'

Should the portraits resemble their subjects? 'That's a fascinating problem. There should of course be a certain resemblance.'

It's typical of Dillemans that as he works on a series of portraits they become more and more abstract. The same thing happened in his series of nudes and boxers. 'But Orwell's face should still be Orwell. To me the bone structure is essential. And then come the emotions. I'm much freer, of course, when I paint a self-portrait or the portrait of a model than when I paint a well-known figure.'

Dillemans wants to keep on surprising himself. 'I'm afraid of repetition. I want

Sam Dillemans, *Twins*, 1998.
Etching, 70 cm x 100 cm

to keep on discovering things. How can I paint a nostril so that I surprise myself, so that it doesn't look like the nostril that it nevertheless clearly is? If painting becomes too much of a routine, I change format or choose another subject.'

That is why Dillemans recently started on some large-format landscapes. Two by two-and-a-half metres. Wild, bright, colourful spaces. Not a figure to be seen. 'I wanted to work on a large scale. I needed that physical effort. I wanted to paint standing up again, not sitting down. With broad gestures and thick blobs of paint.' For these works Dillemans relies on photos from magazines or

his own shots. 'I have them enlarged until the details disappear. I don't want any anecdotes in these landscapes.'

A haystack, a river, a tree. Colour, paint, matter. Dillemans is clearly enjoying himself.

A meteorite strikes

It all started for Sam Dillemans when his mother gave him an art book on Vincent van Gogh for his 14th birthday. 'Van Gogh is the source of everything. He was a lucid man, a commonsensical Dutchman. He knew very well what he wanted. Not a lunatic, as people often like to portray him. I'm fascinated by Van Gogh, I've made forty copies of his work. Look closely at his paintings: it's a single layer of paint and it's right first time. That's phenomenal. Just try it. And you have to realise that in the meantime his works have lost 60% of their luminosity. What a shock those paintings must have been for his contemporaries. Vincent was a meteorite that struck the world.'

Dillemans started copying old and modern masters to learn their techniques: Van Gogh of course, and Schiele, Beckman, Soutine and Kokoschka. At a later stage he took lessons. He studied at seven art colleges, including

Sam Dillemans, *Selfportrait*, 1997.
Oil on canvas, 90 cm x 60 cm

Sam Dillemans,
The Left Hook, 2006.
Oil on canvas,
95 cm x 130 cm

Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels, but wasn't happy with the teaching anywhere. In the end he graduated from the Academy in Tourcoing in northern France.

For Dillemans, drawing has always been the basis of his painting: drawing from a plaster or living model or copying the masters. 'The hard business of drawing has to be learnt. Most art colleges don't teach it anymore and that's completely wrong. Degas copied half the Louvre! And when Ingres saw him there, he said: "Que des lignes, monsieur Degas, que des lignes!".'

'I have learned to draw a skull, a larynx and a cheekbone perfectly. You have to know your anatomy. You have to learn to draw with pencil when you're young and make sure you've got drawing in your blood. As a child I drew myself with my eyes shut. At a later stage you can completely forget your knowledge and skills. But you have to be able to draw a foot before you can break it apart. Picasso could draw better than anyone by the time he was 12. As an artist you have to start where Picasso started.'

The old masters

In 1995 Sam Dillemans met Lizy. For five years she was his one and only model, fulltime, 30 to 40 hours a week. This yielded some marvellous nudes, at various stages of distortion. Sometimes only a nipple or an eyebrow is recognisable, or a lock of hair in a single sweeping, virtuoso brushstroke. 'One model, a thousand paintings,' says Dillemans. 'In the end I knew Lizy through and through. What her collarbone and her cheek looked like. I was able to abandon realism. I could pull her apart and put her back together again. I really polished

Sam Dillemans, *Tempest*, 2011.
Oil on canvas,
240 cm x 140 cm

her off as a model, I didn't know I would maul her that much. In my studio I painted almost without light. So she asked me whether she really had to keep on coming, but I needed her, in the end, just as a source of energy.' Dillemans was looking for that one, ultimate image. An unattainable goal.

There are a handful of paintings from 1999 entitled *Lovers*. *Lovers* I is an overwhelming canvas. A naked man is lying on a naked woman. They are staring at each other. The woman's eyes are both predatory and sensual. Her nostrils are slightly flared, the teeth clamped together. The man has a calm look, almost unmoved. They are floating in a white vacuum, outside time. But this relative calmness does not extend to their bodies, which are a tangle of robust black strokes. The paint twists, the colours are formless. The bodies lose themselves on the battlefield of love.

After Lizy, the painter returned to another old love: the great masters. This is not an obvious choice at the end of the 20th century, but in Dillemans' view the old masters are beyond time. 'When I see a Rembrandt, I have a sense of panic. Rembrandt is not the past, like many people think, Rembrandt is not yesterday, Rembrandt is tomorrow.'

'In my eyes, Tintoretto and Rubens are alive. When I look at a Rubens, it's as if I'm looking at a beautiful woman. For me it's the same. The old masters comfort me. They paint the great ever-recurring emotions – and that affects me. But above all it's the way they paint: it's the hand of the painter that consoles me.'

'Any confrontation with the old masters is lost before you begin. They thrash you, force you into a corner. It's a lesson in humility.'

Unlike the copyists of the 19th century, Dillemans never intended to get as close as possible to the original. 'You shouldn't try to copy them, that's pointless. I just wanted to declare my love' Dillemans is above all concerned with their style and technique. 'Rubens painted the shadow on a thighbone in blue. So in certain senses he was already an impressionist. If you look at every square centimetre, Goya turns out to be an expressive revolutionary.' 'A lot of people wonder why they have to look at all those Madonnas and all those cherubs yet again. You have to look at 'how' the light falls on the wing of one of Rembrandt's angels. Look at 'how' the Madonnas are painted. It doesn't really matter whether it's Christ or a bunch of bananas. Cézanne turned art history upside down with his peaches. The paint is the message, nothing else.'

In 2005, Sam Dillemans showed his 'creative interpretations' at the Rubens House in Antwerp: Rubens, Van Dyck, Velazquez and Titian. According to Dillemans, the Descent from the Cross hung in the middle of Rubens' studio. The silhouettes of Jesus and Mary are still vaguely recognisable, but within these outlines the paint churns and squirms. It is applied thickly, in 8 to 10 layers. The longer Dillemans works on a painting like this, the more it changes from innocent to evil. Ultimately it becomes a revenge. The paint explodes, the forms disintegrate.

Dillemans painted his version of Christ's descent from the cross on the floor. 'I dance around the canvas as I paint. Yes, that does make you think of Pollock. The most important thing is that there is no top or bottom because the painting is lying flat. There is no more normal perspective. I almost gave up, I couldn't get an overview of it anymore.'

Endurance is essential

Dillemans was tired after the old masters. He had done 300, possibly 350 copies. A series, which is the way Dillemans works. He works all the time, too. 'If I don't paint for two days, I feel bad. No, I don't see it as work, I'm permanently on holiday. I tackle a particular painting depending on my mood – rage, sadness, jealousy, a sense of eternity. Painting is like the hundred-metre hurdles. You have to be in condition, otherwise you won't succeed.'

And Dillemans does work on his condition, and also unremittingly. He learnt boxing from the Belgian light-heavyweight champion Freddy De Kerpel. Dillemans still boxes, but no longer at the club. He has a punch bag in his studio and practices on his own. He also does an hour of skipping every day. 'Endurance is essential.'

At a certain moment Dillemans realised that he could also use the boxers in his work. 'Boxers or Rubens, it's actually the same. I'm always involved with bodies. And with pain. A large part of a boxer's body is naked. It's all well developed. You can clearly see the muscles and bones, as in Rubens' paintings.'

He paints anonymous boxers, but also a fight between such resounding names as Sugar Ray Robinson and Carmen Basilio, a portrait of Rocky Marciano, or Archie Moore knocked out on the floor.

The boxer paintings are explosions of power. Sweat and blood spatter around. A left hook is applied vigorously to the canvas. These are fights in and with the paint. Snapshots, film stills, frozen movements and strength.

In these boxer paintings there is also an evolution from expressive realism to an almost Bacon-like abstraction. In other cases the figures seem to dissolve into the whiteness of the canvas. A boxing match is an image of the human condition, life between pain and ecstasy. There's not much difference between this and lovers kissing. In Dillemans' work a kiss often looks like a bite and a chew, as if the lovers were going to tear each other apart. 'Boxing and kissing are both physical confrontations,' reacts the painter. 'I'm concerned with the bodies. How do they relate to each other, how do they clash?'

Dillemans considers painting to be an endless quest and an unceasing struggle. And he paints with utter dedication. 'There is no such thing as a part-time painter. There are no compromises in art, there is only sacrifice.'

When he's really stuck, Dillemans starts on a self-portrait. It is rarely flattering. 'A self-portrait is like going back to the source. I know myself through and through – from the outside. That's where I start from. Then all my knowledge and experience go into a new self-portrait.'

Paint becomes skin, and through this tight skin the skull is dimly visible. As if every portrait is ultimately a vanitas painting. Dillemans is painting against time. ■

Translated by Gregory Ball

FURTHER READING

Marc Ruyters & Jozef Deleu, *Sam Dillemans* (Rubenshuis, Antwerp, 2005) (bilingual Dutch-English edition)
Jon Thompson, *Sam Dillemans* (Ludion, 2007) (English edition)

Statements are taken from:
Luc Lemaître & Sam De Graeve, *Sam Dillemans: De waanzin van het detail / The Madness in the Detail* (Dutch, with English subtitles) (DVD, Woestijnvis, 2007)
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www.samdillemans.com

Sam Dillemans, *W. Somerset Maugham*, 2010.
Oil on canvas, 24,5 cm x 22 cm