

# Painting

in Flanders after 1980

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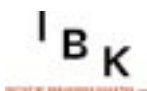
## Painting in Flanders after 1980

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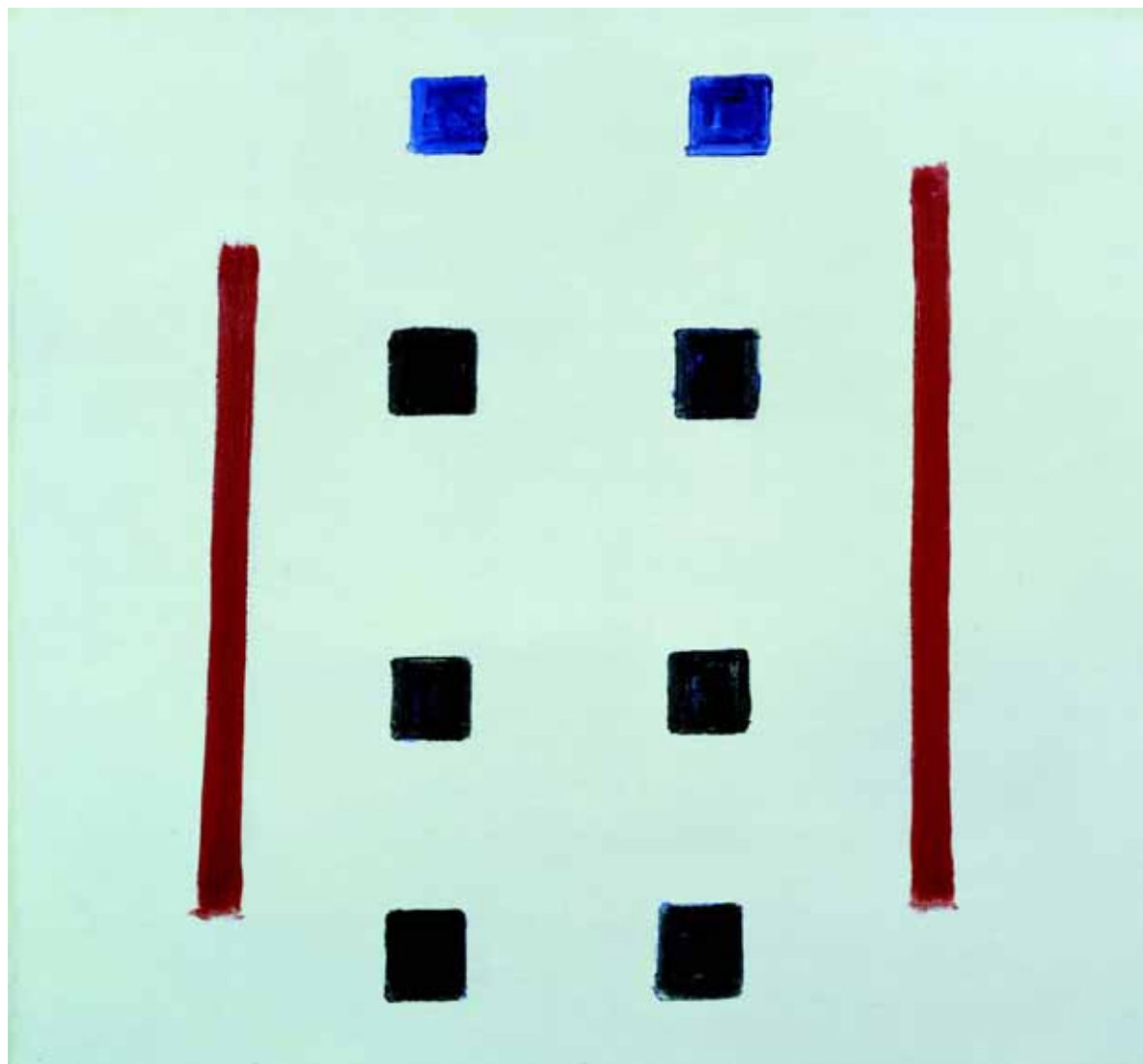
## Introduction

# The Longing for the Pictorial

## Painting in Flanders before and after TroubleSpot.Painting

**Raoul De Keyser, *Untitled*,  
2001, oils on canvas,  
50 x 55**

*Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp*



Until well into the 1960s, 'modern art' seemed more or less to mean 'modern painting'. Unlike sculpture, painting had wrestled free from the grip of tradition early in the 20th century, and in many cases had thereby assumed the nature of an avant-garde manifesto. Just as in North America and the rest of Western Europe, it was quite natural that group exhibitions in Belgium included nothing but paintings. However, from the end of the sixties and especially in the course of the seventies, painting lost its virtual monopoly of modernity forever. Such things as minimalist objects, conceptual projects,

video projection, happenings, performances and installations all presented themselves as more experimental and therefore more progressive artistic practices. This meant that painting was gradually forced onto the defensive. Whereas in 1965 an abstract painting was still a dynamic sign of radical modernity, ten years later the same gesture had fossilised into a static mark of tradition and craftsmanship.



**The first attempt to launch Flanders' new expressive painting on the market: the exhibition *Picturaal 1* (Pictorial 1), at the IC in Antwerp, 1981.**

*Collection of the AMVC-Letterenhuis, Antwerp*

**Export of the new Flemish painting: the Flemish Community organised an exhibition at the newly-opened Flemish Cultural Centre, De Brakke Grond, in Amsterdam, 1983.**

*Catalogue of the exhibition Peinture, peinture. Zeven Vlaamse schilders (Painting, painting. Seven Flemish Painters)*

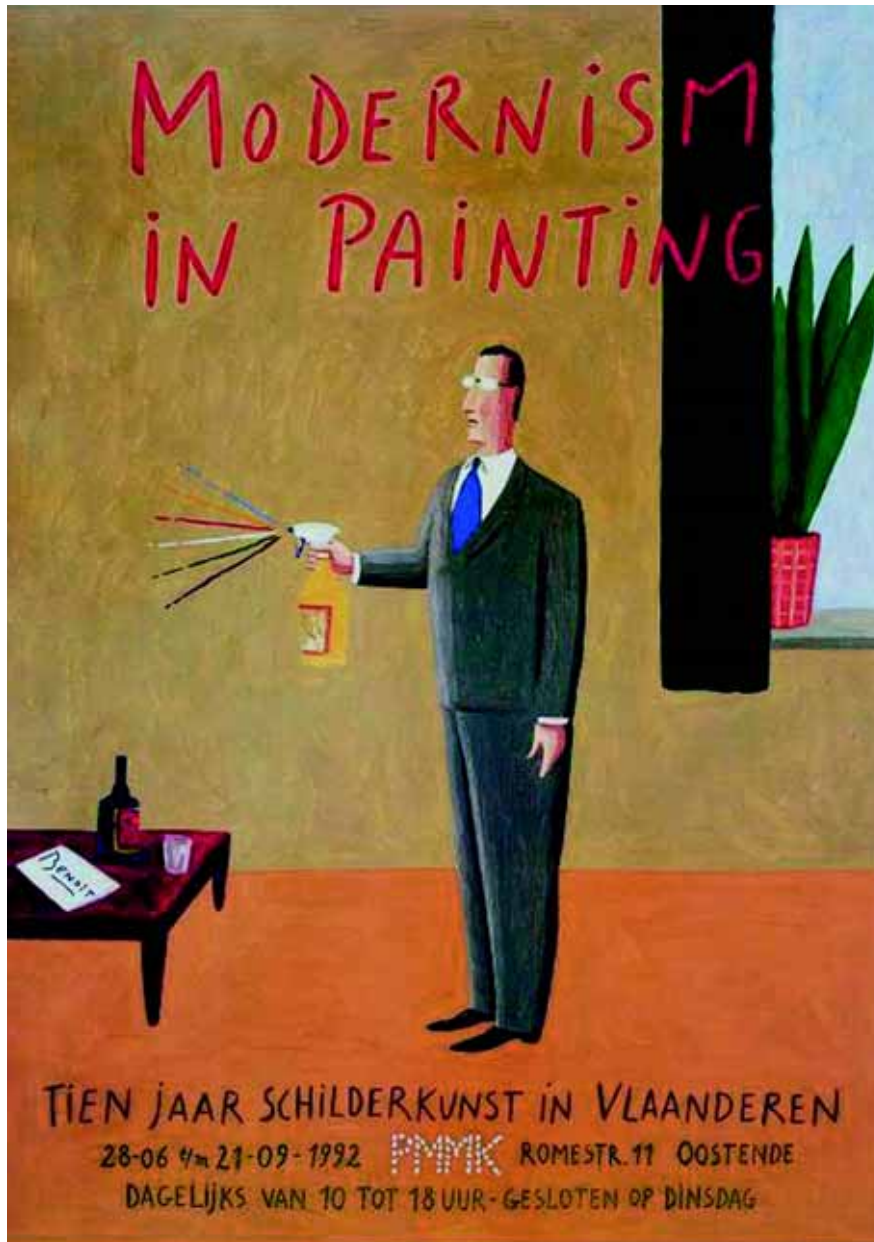


Since then, exhibitions of paintings have always wanted to make a point. In most cases they seem to want to suggest that painting is in fact still alive and has an artistic significance in an art world in which photography, video, the written word, objects and actions seem to be setting the rules.

When such progressive artistic practices as conceptual art and video art in their turn suffered an identity crisis in the late seventies (they appeared not to be able to fulfil a number of utopian expectations), painting seized its chance. Around 1980 there was a boom in exhibitions of painting, in many cases linked to a discourse that sounded rather nationalist (and anti-American): the 'New' Germans (*Neue Wilden*) and Italians (*Transavantguardia*) seemed to provide a suitable response to the avant-garde of the seventies, which was dominated by Americans. Since then, painting and nationalism have been closely linked. In the early eighties various countries and regions tried to market their version of the new, expressive style of painting. In Flanders the first example of this was the exhibition *Pictorial 1. Recent painting in Flanders* (Picturaal 1. Recente schilderkunst in Vlaanderen), which was held at the ICC (International Cultural Centre) in Antwerp in spring 1981. This was the first in a series of group exhibitions of painting that defined the discourse on painting in Flanders that still applies today.

Instead of talking about individual painters, which the critic Marc Ruyters will do elsewhere in this issue, we would now like to look at the choices and exhibitions that have fuelled and steered the debate on contemporary painting in Flanders. After all, we too often forget that it is not so much the work of art itself, but its public presentation and reception that determine artistic developments. The striking thing about the early years of this 'image building', is the rather triumphant tone in which people wrote and spoke about post-conceptual painting in Belgium and Flanders and abroad.

An exhibition in London which in this respect played a pioneering role had the almost hysterical title *A New Spirit in Painting* (Royal Academy of Arts, 1981), while a number of Belgian exhibitions in 1982, compiled by Flor Bex, the then director of the ICC, were given such names as *The Longing for the Pictorial* (Het Picturaal Verlangen) (Galerie Isy Brachot) and *The Magic of the Image* (De Magie van het Beeld) (Palace of Fine Arts). This new Flemish painting was exported too. In 1983 the Flemish Community organised the exhibition *Painting, Painting. Seven Flemish Painters* (Peinture, peinture. Zeven Vlaamse Schilders) at the newly founded Flemish Cultural Centre, De Brakke Grond, in Amsterdam. This and other pictorial presentations expressed an almost euphoric sense of relief: after the cool intellectual and theoretical conceptual art, vivid colours, furious gestures, comprehensible stories and larger formats once again made their appearance. At last, the museums and galleries once again smell of paint.



**With the *Modernism in Painting* exhibition (1992), the PMMK in Ostend wanted to show that Flemish painters had produced substantial results.**

Poster design: Benoît

After this initial enthusiasm things went remarkably quiet as far as the new Belgian and Flemish painting was concerned. This local and national dynamic appeared not to make any real international impression. At *Documenta 7* in 1982, compiled by the Dutchman Rudy Fuchs, where the 'new' German and Italian painting played an important part, there was not a single work by a Belgian painter to be found. At the next *Documenta* in 1987, painting was even less evident, and the Belgians and Flemish were once again conspicuously absent. The malaise seemed to be total. In 1992, *Documenta 9*, headed by Jan Hoet, may well have included plenty of Belgian artists, but here too the painters were limited to Marcel Maeyer, Raoul De Keyser and Luc Tuymans. Hoet had already made clear his doubts about the new painting of the eighties. In that same year the PMMK (Provincial Museum of Modern Art) in Ostend took the initiative of offering its support to the moribund painting scene. In his prestigious exhibition *Modernism in Painting. Ten Years of Painting in Flanders*, (Modernism in Painting. Tien jaar schilderkunst in Vlaanderen) Willy Van Den Bussche wanted to prove that, counter to the views of Jan Hoet, sound work really had been done in Flanders since the revival of painting in the early eighties.

The work of Raoul De Keyser and Luc Tuymans was shown both in Kassel and in Ostend. In the course of the nineties, these two painters, each of whom appears to represent a generation, became the pictorial showcase for Belgian or Flemish painting on the international art scene. After his participation in *Documenta 9*, Luc Tuymans' work in particular seems to have been very much to international taste. Several major exhibitions of his work (such as that in the Kunsthalle in Bern) and his participation in *Documenta 11* (*Documenta 10*, compiled by Cathérine David, took a deliberately anti-painting and neo-conceptual course) extended Tuymans' reputation abroad. In about the mid-nineties it actually seemed impossible to talk about Belgian or Flemish painting without mentioning Tuymans. In Antwerp in particular, a group of painters seemed to be forming around him, which the critic Marc Ruyters described as 'the Antwerp School' but which in artistic circles was also sardonically referred to as the 'Brown' or 'Grey' school (because of the reduced range of colours in their paintings).

In 1997 the balloon went up. In that year, as part of a large-scale cultural exchange, two simultaneous exhibitions were held in Barcelona, both focusing on young Flemish painting. One of them, *Reality Revisited. Memory as Longing* (Reality Revisited. De herinnering als verlangen) (at the Fundacio de Caixa) was compiled by Flor Bex, the then director of MuHKA, and took stock of the neo-figurative, intimist and small-scale painting that had developed around, and as a consequence of, Tuymans. Bex saw this painting in the first place as an embodiment of a reaction to a fundamental uncertainty and to a distrust of technological visual culture. The other exhibition was compiled by the critic Luk Lambrecht and bore the title *Trapped Reality* (Centre d'art Santa Monica). For this exhibition the curator and the artist Richard Venlet created a 'Space for Painting', where one painting each by nineteen Flemish painters were hung in a row alphabetically according to the artist's name. In a certain sense, Lambrechts' presentation seemed to be at odds with that of Bex. Luc Tuymans and Bert De Beul, whom the press had proclaimed the pacemakers of the new 'Antwerp School', were deliberately not included. The curator thereby wanted to show that it was possible to consider painting in Flanders without having to bring up the name of Tuymans. But in the end this happened anyway, if only by default. The catalogue of this exhibition contained a polemical piece by the British artist and critic Jon Thompson (*Revivalism and the Luc Tuymans Effect. A Personal View*) in which he labelled Tuymans' painting as reactionary, and tellingly described the number of adepts of this painting in Flanders as 'the Tuymans effect'. The Flemish art community, all present in Barcelona, reacted with shock. Until then no one had dared express this view in so many words.

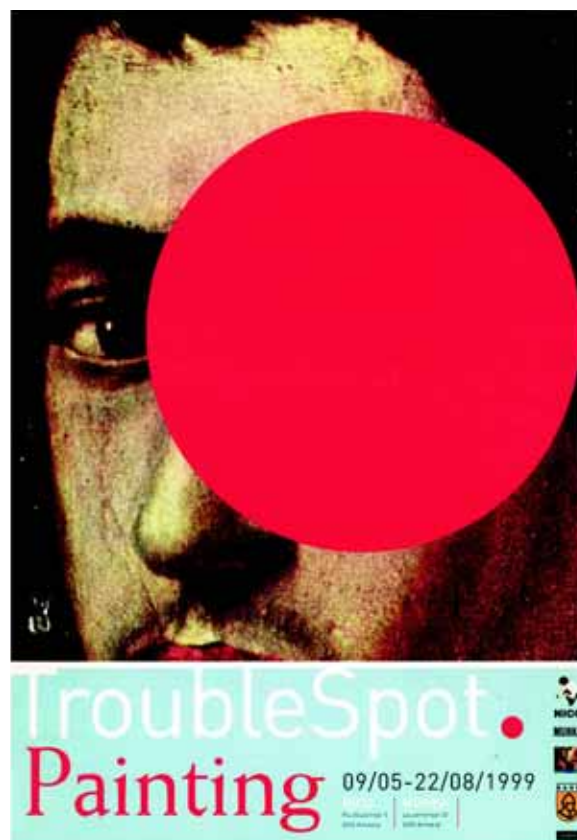
**No Luc Tuymans or Bert De Beul at the *Trapped Reality* exhibition, compiled by Luk Lambrecht, Barcelona, 1997.**





One artist who, strangely enough, had remained aloof from the whole debate on recent Flemish painting was Narcisse Tordoir. He had been represented at *Pictorial 1* (Picturaal 1) in 1981, but in the course of the eighties had started to practise a rather enigmatic, semi-abstract form of painting, with outings into the third dimension, which meant that it seemed difficult to fit his work into a discourse one of whose main constituents was the return of the figurative. While he had a certain success in the Netherlands and other places, in the Belgium of the nineties he seemed a rather peripheral figure. Neither Hoet nor Van Den Bussche, nor Bex nor Lambrecht included his work in their surveys. In the late nineties, it was precisely with this relatively 'invisible' painter that Luc Tuymans organised an exhibition whose aim was to release painting from its media-based solitary confinement. In 1999, the MuHKA and the NICC hosted the prestigious TroubleSpot.Painting exhibition, in which no less than 68 artists took part. The aim was not only to enable the painting of the time to interact with other disciplines (there were also videos, photos and installations on show), but above all to set it in an historical framework (the work of, among others, Robert Ryman and Gerhard Richter was also shown, while the poster even included a self-portrait by El Greco). In TroubleSpot.Painting, painting was for the first time since 1980 no longer conceived as a static product or fixed climax of the pictorial tradition, but as an opening towards other media and the future. After all, the dialectic position taken up by Tuymans and Tordoir saw to it that no consensus was aired about what a painting ought to be. They did not, moreover, pursue an exclusively Flemish or Belgian discourse, but subtly brought a number of Flemish artists into dialogue with foreign artists. In this way, this show was also able to avoid the defensive nature that had characterised so many exhibitions of painting up to that point. However, shortly afterwards this promising ideological opening was once again flagrantly shut. This happened in the exhibition called *The Veiled Image* (Het Versluiserd Beeld), held in Hasselt (Provincial Centre for the Plastic Arts, Beguinage) in 2001, where, oblivious of other developments, a survey of Flemish painters (compiled by Jos Uytterhoeven) was presented, all of whom 'start from the actual observable world or their own experience': 'the picture hesitates between the figurative and the abstract and sometimes the painting is deliberately vague, as if a veil is hanging in front of it. The paint is usually spread thinly.' So *The Veiled Image* and *TroubleSpot.Painting* embodied two opposed positions in the thinking on contemporary painting (in Flanders) at the start of the 21st century. The one wallows in nostalgia and pictorial regression, the other is reflective and experimental. The one was determined by regionalism/nationalism, the other was conceived internationally with an eye for local qualities. And whichever way you look at it, Luc Tuymans played a crucial part in both.

**In 1999 the MuHKA and the NICC hosted the prestigious TroubleSpot.Painting exhibition, in which 68 artists took part.**



In this sense, talking about Flemish painting after TroubleSpot.painting also implies talking about Flemish painting after Luc Tuymans. His recent exhibitions (including Tate Modern, 2004) and commercial successes have in the meantime appeared so much in the media that whether he likes it or not he has become an institution. And institutions are there to be fought. It also looks as if the Tuymans effect noted by Thompson in 1997 is almost spent. Of course, some Tuymans adepts will remain in the art schools, just as there are probably still Richter and Marlene Dumas clones. But in certain cases one can probably say that there is a new generation of figurative painters for whom Tuymans is no longer a guiding light. The *Back to the Picture!* exhibition (De Brakke Grond, 2005), compiled by Thibaut Verhoeven, took stock of the Flemish post-Tuymans school.

Some young Antwerp artists have even set their face against any form of Tuymans aesthetics, such as Cindy Wright, Kati Heck and Tom Liekens, or have opted for a form of painting that translates into objects, installations and performances, such as Sergio De Beukelaer, Boy & Erik Stappaerts and Vaast Colson. Yet others maintain a radical stylistic pluralism that combines a love of the classically pictorial with a healthy distrust of the 'painting-thing': Joris Ghekiere, Vincent Geyskens and Tina Gillen. If 'the Antwerp School' ever existed, it now no longer does. It has been put where it belongs: in the dark cellars of art history.

*Johan Pas*

This article previously appeared in *Achtergrond*, the bimonthly magazine of De Brakke Grond, the Flemish cultural centre in Amsterdam, September/October 2005.





**Cindy Wright,  
*Pieter Vermeersch 2*, 2004,  
oils on canvas, 120 x 105**



**Cindy Wright, *Rosbief*  
(Roast Beef), 2005,  
oils on canvas, 150 x 170**

# Painting in Flanders after 1980

Anyone who talks about the history of painting in Flanders cannot avoid that one almost clichéd adage: the Flemish have always excelled in their powers of expression and their sense of the pictorial. This certainly applied to the Van Eyck brothers, to Memlinc, Rubens, Van Dyck and Jordaens, James Ensor, René Magritte and Paul Delvaux, as well as many others, perhaps even Roger Raveel.

However, anyone who wants to talk about the history of painting in Flanders after 1980 is forced to say that contemporary Flemish painters have as far as possible hidden away their expressive abilities and their sense of the pictorial. They did this in order to be able to keep up with the new, highly conceptual movements that arose in international contemporary art in the mid-sixties, including such things as performance, minimal art and land art, in which pictorial painting almost entirely disappeared.

Painting as something painterly, involving the organic handling of pigment, oil or acrylic, brush, canvas and frame, was already being viewed with some suspicion as early as the seventies. The American abstract expressionists and then Pop Art had gone as far as was possible either in the extreme distillation of the medium or else putting it into perspective. With the rise of conceptual thinking, with such axioms as 'art as an idea, an idea as art', 'art in progress' and 'art as process', the medium of painting, then about six centuries old, was seen, if not as dead, certainly as completely outdated.

And yet the Flemish continued to paint, as they had since the time of the Flemish Primitives. These genetic roots could not simply be erased. The rise of conceptual art meant that painting launched into a strategy for survival. In the early eighties three major pictorial movements rose to the surface in the United States and Europe: Neo-Expressionism in the USA (the big names being Philip Guston and Julian Schnabel), the *Neue Wilden* in Germany (Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer) and Transvanguardia in Italy (Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Mimmo Paladino). To be uncharitable, one might say that the Flemish painters working in the early eighties tended in one of these directions. But this would do them an injustice: each of them was more or less looking for his own direction.

## **Every history starts with a prehistory**

Roger Raveel (b. 1921) is the doyen of contemporary Flemish painting. With his pure, clear brushwork, the introduction of extraneous elements onto the canvas, and by 'letting the painting flow out beyond the frame', he was in the fifties and early sixties a genuine innovator. The poet and critic Roland Jooris called this style the *Nieuwe Visie* (among its many followers was that other doyen, Raoul De Keyser). The only thing was that the rest of the world did not know a thing about him, because Raveel was not a man to shout his insights from the rooftops in an effective commercial manner. And at that time the Flemish (then mainly Belgian) government's cultural structures were not of a quality that would have enabled them to pursue a bold artistic export policy. It was only in the late sixties that Raveel received the recognition he deserved and since then his work has not essentially changed. This makes him less of a 'contemporary artist', but his pioneering role in postwar painting remains important.

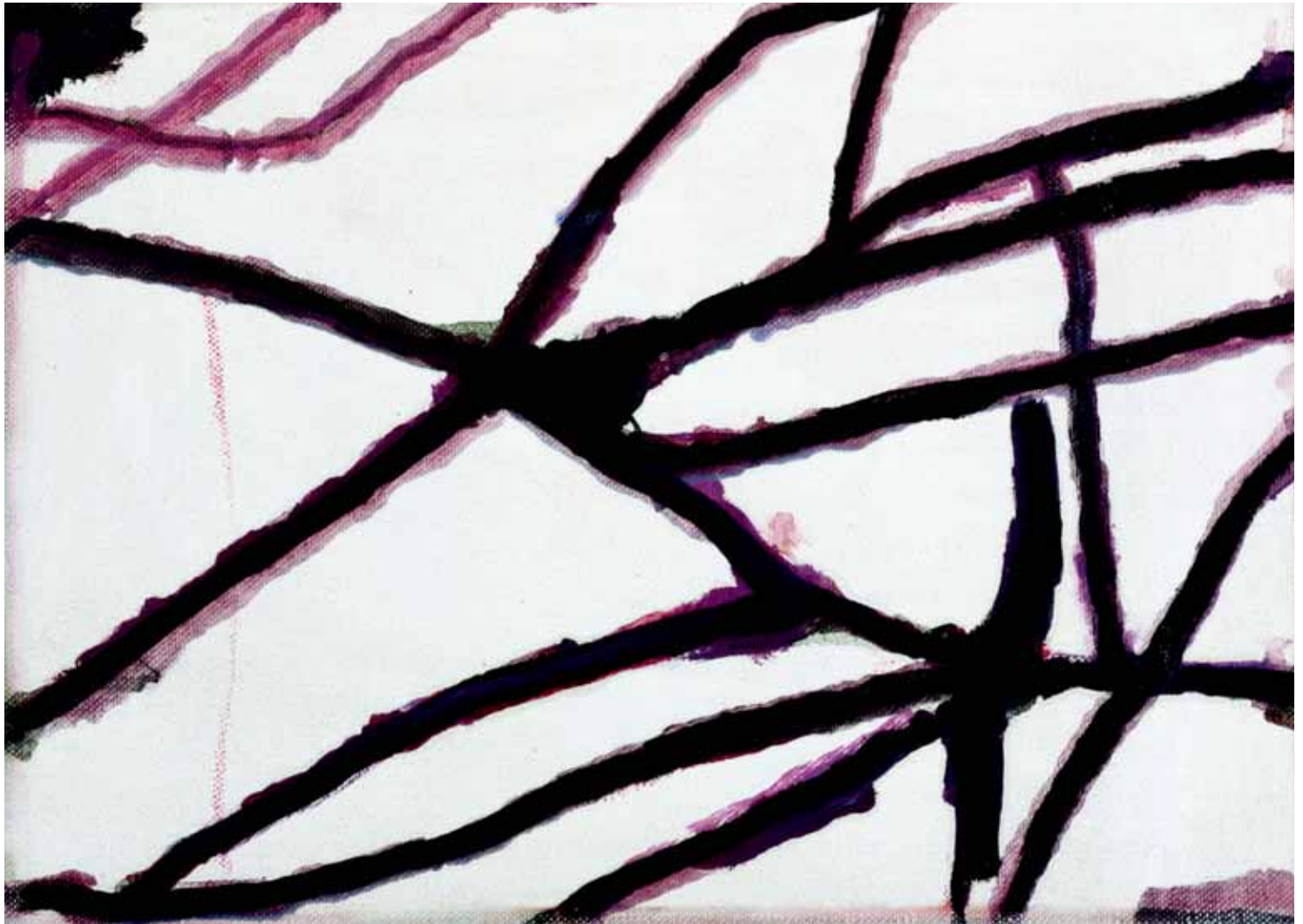


Roger Raveel, *Ontmoeting met het blauw van de vrouw* (Encounter with the Blueness of Woman), 1983

Roger Raveel, *Wij zijn vrij* (We Are Free), 2001, oils on wood/mixed media, 220 x 250 x 151  
Galerie Pieters (on loan)







Although he is now 75, Raoul De Keyser (b. 1930) is still counted among the contemporary painters. This is because, after his early years in the footsteps of his teacher Raveel, De Keyser went in a direction entirely his own. He linked small, autobiographically-tinged images (a piece of a football pitch, the branch of a tree in his garden) with an increasingly extreme abstraction, nevertheless always succeeding (and still succeeding today) in giving his canvases, large and small, an incredible tactility and subtlety. He has always had the talent for generating considerable tension and pregnancy between these two poles, the banal-figurative and the 'contentless' abstract.

**Raoul De Keyser, *Retour 9*, 1999, oils on canvas, 43 x 60**  
*Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp*

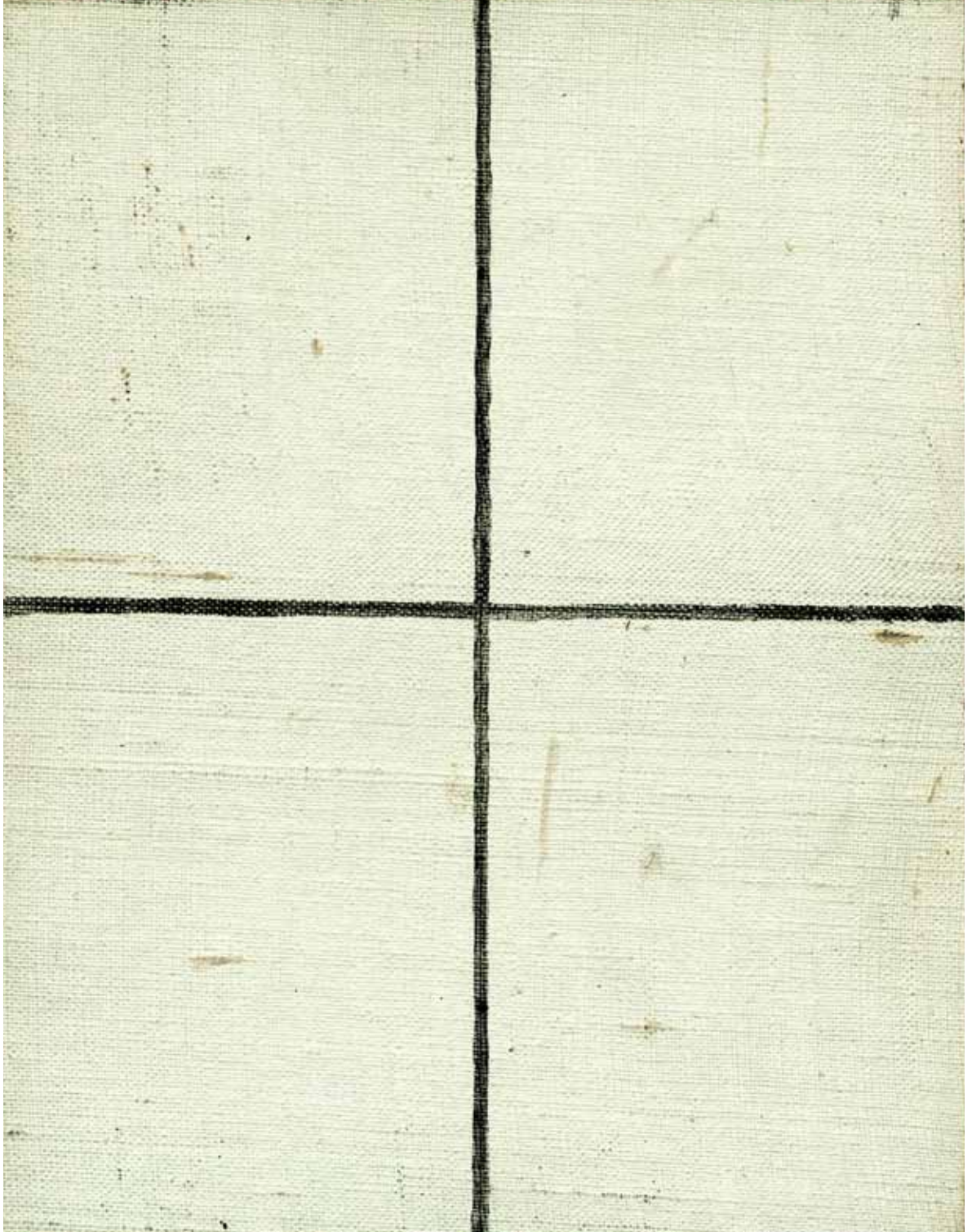
**Raoul De Keyser, *Untitled*, 1988, oils on canvas, 167 x 124**  
*Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp*

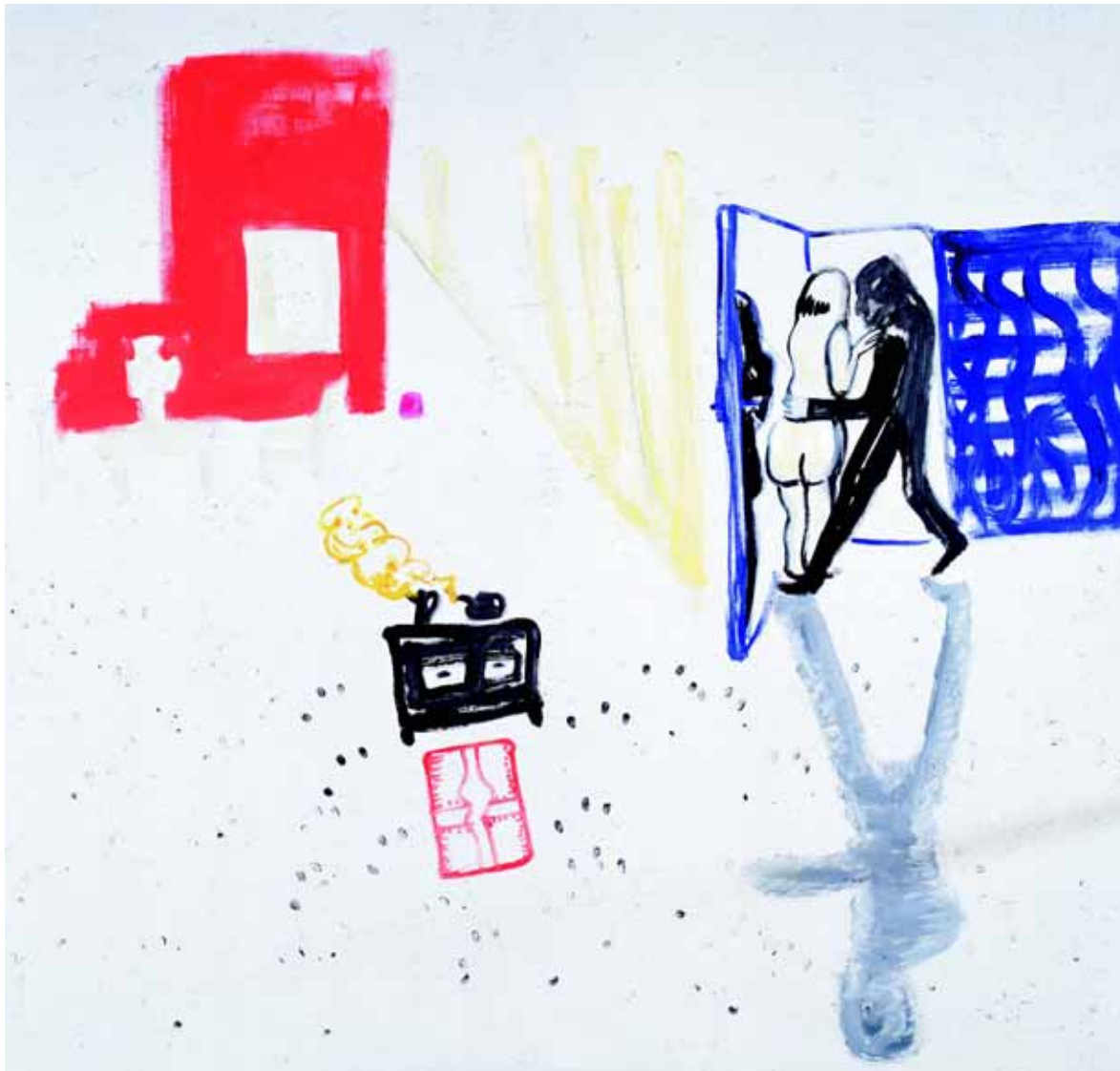
With his minimal-looking work, Dan van Severen (b. 1927) would seem to be the perfect example of extreme abstraction. In his early works there was still a certain amount of lyrical expression, but for the last 40 years he has been using a frame structure, with horizontal and vertical lines, as the basis for paintings which are essentially about exploration and reduction to the essence. However, even this cerebral method retains a certain warmth and commitment that was often lacking in the geometric abstract painters.

Together with Raveel, De Keyser and Van Severen, a whole series of other, older painters were also still at work in the eighties, each with their own form of expression: Octave Landuyt, Jan Burskens, Pol Mara, Gilbert Swimberghe, right up to Hugo Claus.

**Dan Van Severen, *Untitled*, 1990, ink on canvas and wood, 18.5 x 14.5**

*Courtesy of Richard Foncke Gallery*





**Fred Bervoets, *Zelfportret in huiskamer* (Self-Portrait in Living Room), 1991, acrylics on canvas, 194 x 205**

Courtesy of MuHKA,  
© Ludo Geysels

### **Critique and irony, search and collision**

A younger generation of artists, born in the forties, came to the fore in the sixties and seventies and also claimed a leading role in the early eighties. They came face-to-face with modernism and postmodernism: how is one to deal with the medium of painting in the new way, ranging from critical to ironic? How do you position this medium within the whole new, highly intellectually-oriented framework of contemporary conceptual art? It was not only the Flemish painters who were asking themselves these questions. They saw the rise of the *Neue Wilden*, *Transavanguardia* and yet other styles, the one more powerful than the other, and sought to join them. But the notion of 'style' was in decline, and individualisation in painting as elsewhere would continue to grow.

One painter who still adhered closely to the now almost nostalgic concept of the *peintre maudit* was Fred Bervoets (b. 1942), but at the same time he also developed a highly personal touch which one can summarise in a single word: fervour. He is a painter in heart and soul, who records his own world on canvas in a highly expressive manner. He is sometimes called the Antwerp version of the *Neue Wilden*, but this conveys a one-sided picture. He uses a great many techniques (for example, he is also a master etcher) and themes, and has been through several periods which often ran parallel with particular events in his life. He became well known for his 'spaghettis': large-format canvases with fantastic wriggling forms and figures. He has also had 'grey' and 'white' periods, each of which brought a sober tone to his work, and also intense periods such as the 'Scars' series, focusing on plastic surgery operations.



Pjeeroo Roobjee (b. 1945) is a painter carrying on a lucid one-man guerilla war. His style is figurative, phantasmagorical, baroque and mystifying and evokes a world of jesters, fools, randy goats and tyrants. His paintings are a bombardment of a visual pinpricks large and small, which one might almost call ethnic art, the way arrogant Westerners might refer to African or aboriginal painting. But in this case the aboriginal is from East Flanders, and regards his fellow tribesman with as much malicious pleasure as sympathy.

**Pjeeroo Roobjee, *Kapoenen in café De Kolk (Rascals in De Kolk Café)*, 2001, oils on canvas, 180 x 220**

*Photo: Valcke - Waregem*



Karel Dierickx (b. 1940) is in terms of expression a more introvert painter, although his canvases are also small explosions of paint and tonality. He starts out from the familiar image or subject (he has done whole series on heads), and continues working on them layer by layer and seeking out the possibilities of painting to the very core. This results in abstract work that ranges from light to dark series depending on his state of mind and in which the colours are mixed either on the palette or on the canvas itself. A lot is painted out or left out, as if the painting itself were ultimately a symbol of unavoidable transience.

Yet other painters sought a way towards a renewed handling of paint and expression. Willy de Sauter made paint into a two-dimensional sculpture, with tightly delineated painting in many layers. Hugo Heyrman explored every possible interpretation, from experiments in the style of Gerhard Richter (the *Belgiëlei* series) to computer images (the pixel paintings). Renaat Ivens experimented with the texture of paint, canvas and other materials. Marcase, Cel Overberghe and others examined the possibilities of abstraction, while painters such as Yvan Theys, Etienne Elias and Jean Bilquin retained the recognisable image and started from there. Hugo Duchateau performed every possible two- and three-dimensional experiment with paint.

This generation, born in the forties, still had this in common: they had little or no feeling for the conceptual aspect of art (except perhaps the later work of Hugo Heyrman and Hugo Duchateau), and it was the painterly aspect itself that took priority. This regularly brought them into conflict with the artistic spirit of the age.

**Karel Dierickx, *Omsloten situatie (Enclosed Situation)*, 1985, oils on canvas, 250 x 199**  
Courtesy of SMAK





**Philippe Van Snick,**  
**Territorium, Venice, 1999**  
*Photo: Dirk Pauwels*

### The in-between generation

After each generation that brings change there comes an in-between generation; this is an inevitable cycle in history. And however strong and brilliant the figures it produces, they have the greatest trouble in emerging from the shadows of their predecessors. It is something like this that happened to the generation of Belgian artists born in the early fifties, and certainly the painters among them. The international art scene was dominated by various forms of conceptual art: performance, minimal art, land art, arte povera and suchlike. Belgium had Marcel Broodthaers, Jef Geys and Panamarenko (nor should we forget Lili Dujourie), but in those early years of the eighties this country was nowhere to be found on the world contemporary art map. There was not a single Museum of Contemporary Art, not a single Kunsthalle (art centre) worthy of the name (the ICC in Antwerp and the Palace of Fine Arts in Brussels made praiseworthy but entirely undersubsidised attempts), and art galleries with any degree of character could be counted on one hand. Things had even been better in the sixties, with Ad Libitum and Wide White Space in Antwerp, MTL in Brussels and Richard Foncke in Ghent.

In this climate, young artists, and especially painters, had to struggle against the greatest possible indifference. But they turned out to be hugely important to the revival that was to follow later.

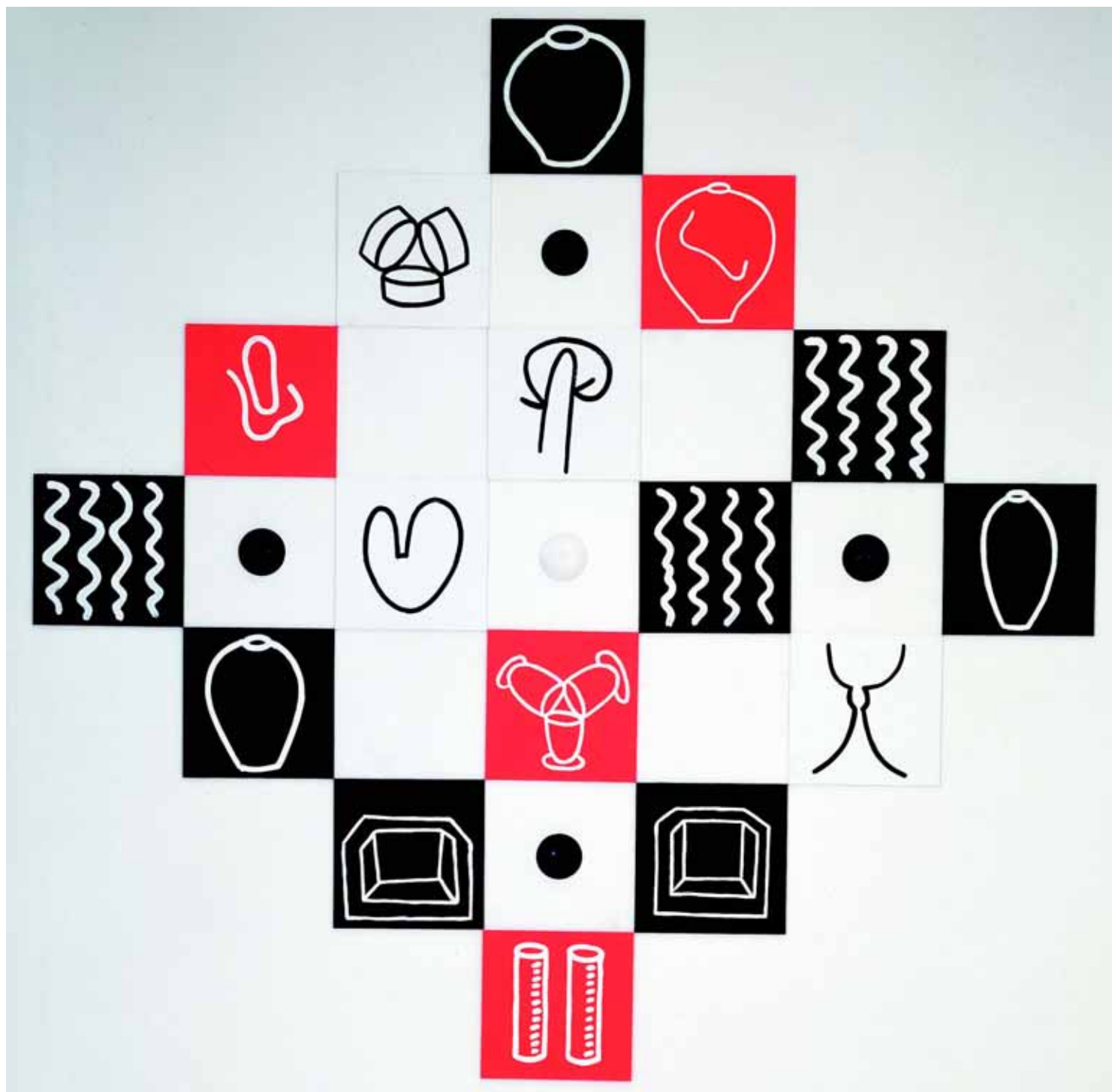
It is true that Philippe Van Snick, for example, was born in 1946, but he only started to develop a concept of colour from the early eighties. Using the three primary colours, three secondary colours, the non-colours white and black and the metallic colours gold and silver, he built up an oeuvre that gradually became increasingly three-dimensional and whose essential elements were the combination of rational observation, aesthetic representation and the interaction between the natural and the synthetic.

Walter Swennen was also born in 1946, and just like Van Snick was a late developer. By dealing with archetypal images, common forms, cartoons, the written word and suchlike in his paintings, he also sought a path between Neo-Expressionism and Surrealism in which shifts of images, symbols and meaning came to play an important role. He was to have a great influence on younger painters.

**Walter Swennen, *Untitled*, 1982, oils on paper glued to canvas, 231 x 150**

*Courtesy of MuHKA, © Syb'L S. Pictures*





**Narcisse Tordoir, *Untitled*, 1985, acrylics on wood/ acrylics on plaster, 40 x 40 (x 16), diam. 12.5 (x 5), total 280 x 280**

*Courtesy of MuHKA, © Syb'1 S. Pictures*

This also applies to Narcisse Tordoir (b. 1954). He is a painter in constant search of the frontiers of painting. After a brief venture into performance in the late seventies, he painted in a variety of styles and was always trying out something new: he did work in which the depiction extended outside the canvas and was repeated in three dimensions on the background behind it, he painted with standard forms on small wooden panels hanging at right-angles to the wall, and he did letter paintings. In the last five years he has been working with various other artists in duos. In the eighties he was considered one of the major innovators in the painting medium.



**Philippe Vandenberg,**  
**De grens (de boodschappers)**  
**(The Border (The Messengers)), 1998-1999,**  
**oils and charcoal on**  
**canvas, 80 x 100**  
 Courtesy of Richard Foncke Gallery

**Willy Van Sompel, Denk an**  
**uns (Think of Us), 1986,**  
**acrylics on canvas,**  
**200 x 200**  
 Courtesy of Richard Foncke Gallery

In the eighties, a great many contemporaries tried to go against the spirit of the age in their use of paint, canvas and countless new ideas.

Philippe Vandenberg (b. 1952) painted large canvases in which tormented existential questions were converted into exuberant images in an obsessive mixture of the figurative and abstract, plus words. Vandenberg painted seas of blood, wanderers, flagellants, beheadings, dancing bears and suchlike, all full of references to *eros* and *thanatos*.

In the eighties, Willy Van Sompel (b. 1948) also did large paintings, though seemingly more cheerful and full of kitsch than those of his fellow townsman Vandenberg. But behind this layer of jolly flowers, mountain peaks and other decorative elements was an undercurrent of equally existential rebellion and artistic anarchism.



In Thé Van Bergen's work (b. 1946), gesture has always played the leading role: movement in the act of painting is essential, whether it be rational or emotional, abstract or figurative. Emotion can be expressed through the gesture of painting, and this can give shape to new forms. Van Bergen sees images and common forms as simply archetypes that allow him to continue his explorations in paint and movement.

Similar things can be said of Marc Maet (1955-1999). He used every possible painting technique and introduced equal numbers of figurative and abstract elements into his works, all on the basis of one single certainty: that he was a painter (a left-handed one) and that this was where everything started and ended.

Fik Van Gestel (b. 1951) is also on the side of gesture and archetypes, but with the added dimension that the experiences he gained on his travels in Africa make themselves felt in his work.

**Marc Maet, *Naakt (Nude)*,  
1984, oils on canvas and  
wooden bedposts,  
180 x 222**

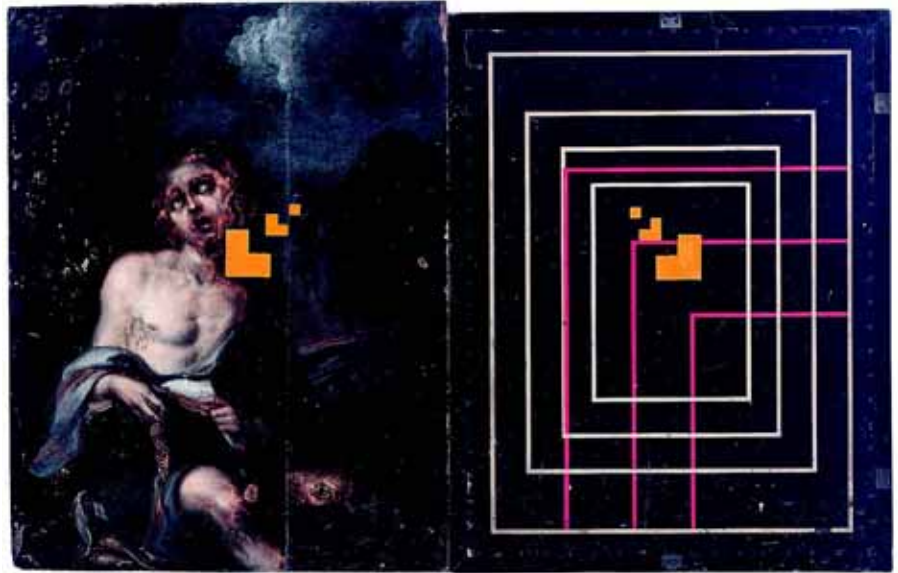
*Courtesy of SMAK*





**Fik Van Gestel, *Wenende boom (Crying Tree)*, 1998, acrylics on canvas, 200 x 130**  
*Collection of nv Van Roey, Rijkevorsel*

In that period there were also painters who continued in pure abstraction, the distillation of colours, forms, lines and planes: even today, Ignace De Vos (1954) and Ingrid Casteleyn (b. 1953) are still seeking harmony and balance above all else. Hans Van de Kerckhove (b. 1957) combines human figures with stylised abstraction and constructed images of nature. There are also a number of loners such as Frank D.C. (b. 1957), who does not actually create any new images, but recycles and manipulates old ones. He raises the question of unique authorship, and also the originality of works of art. Is the old image, the support, really less important than the new image, created by the contemporary artist? And Werner Mannaers (b. 1954), who in his subjects is the most iconoclastic painter, attacking as he does every possible sacred cow. Frans Gentils (b. 1951) depicts a highly mythological world of creatures that are sometimes human, sometimes animal (or both). In his large canvases they confront the 'civilised' viewer with darkness, danger and industrial decline.

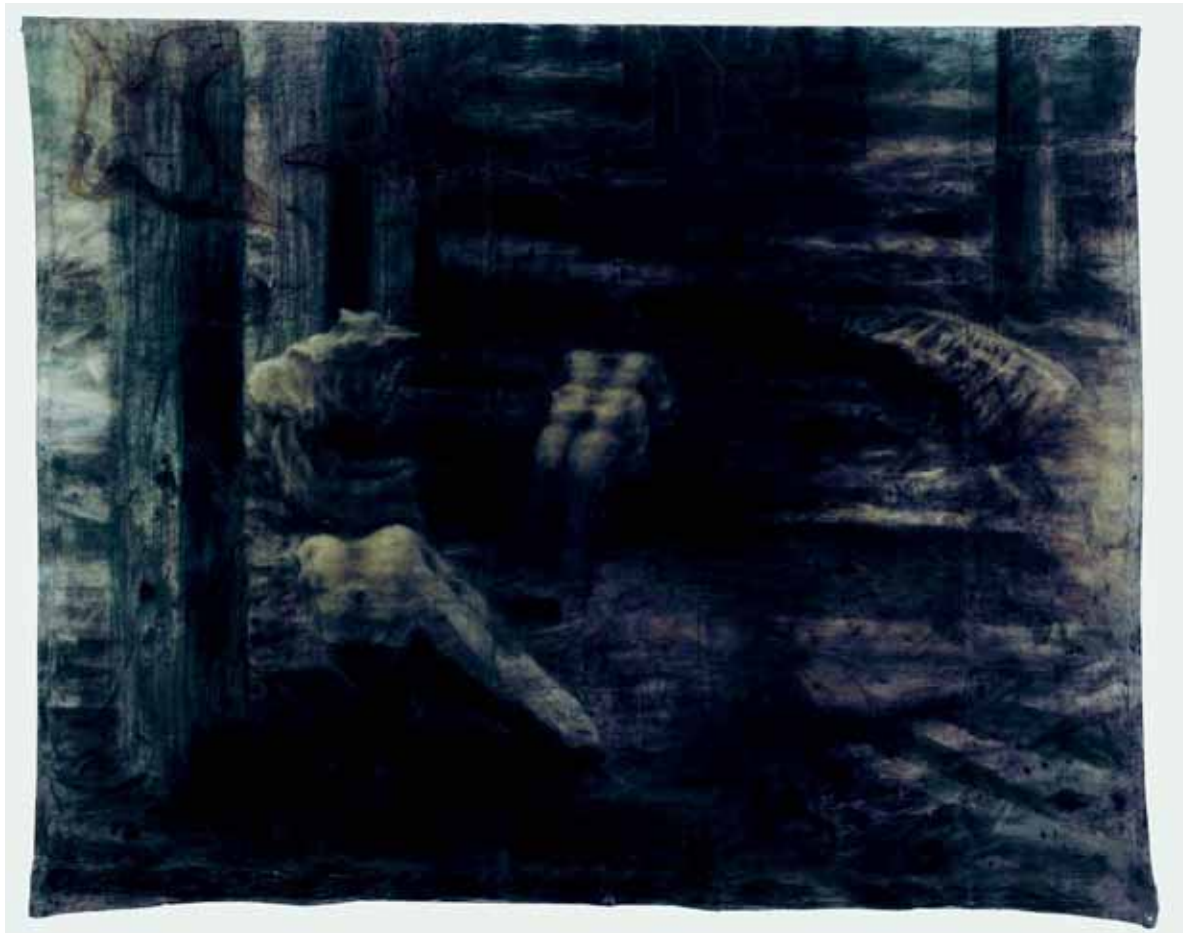


**Franky D.C., *About Balloon Help*, 1995, oils on piece of 17th-century panel, Heyden cassette for x-ray photos, alkyd paint, 48 x 75.5**

*Courtesy of SMAK*

**Frans Gentils, *Untitled*, 1995, charcoal and pastel on canvas, 295 x 370**

*Courtesy of SMAK*



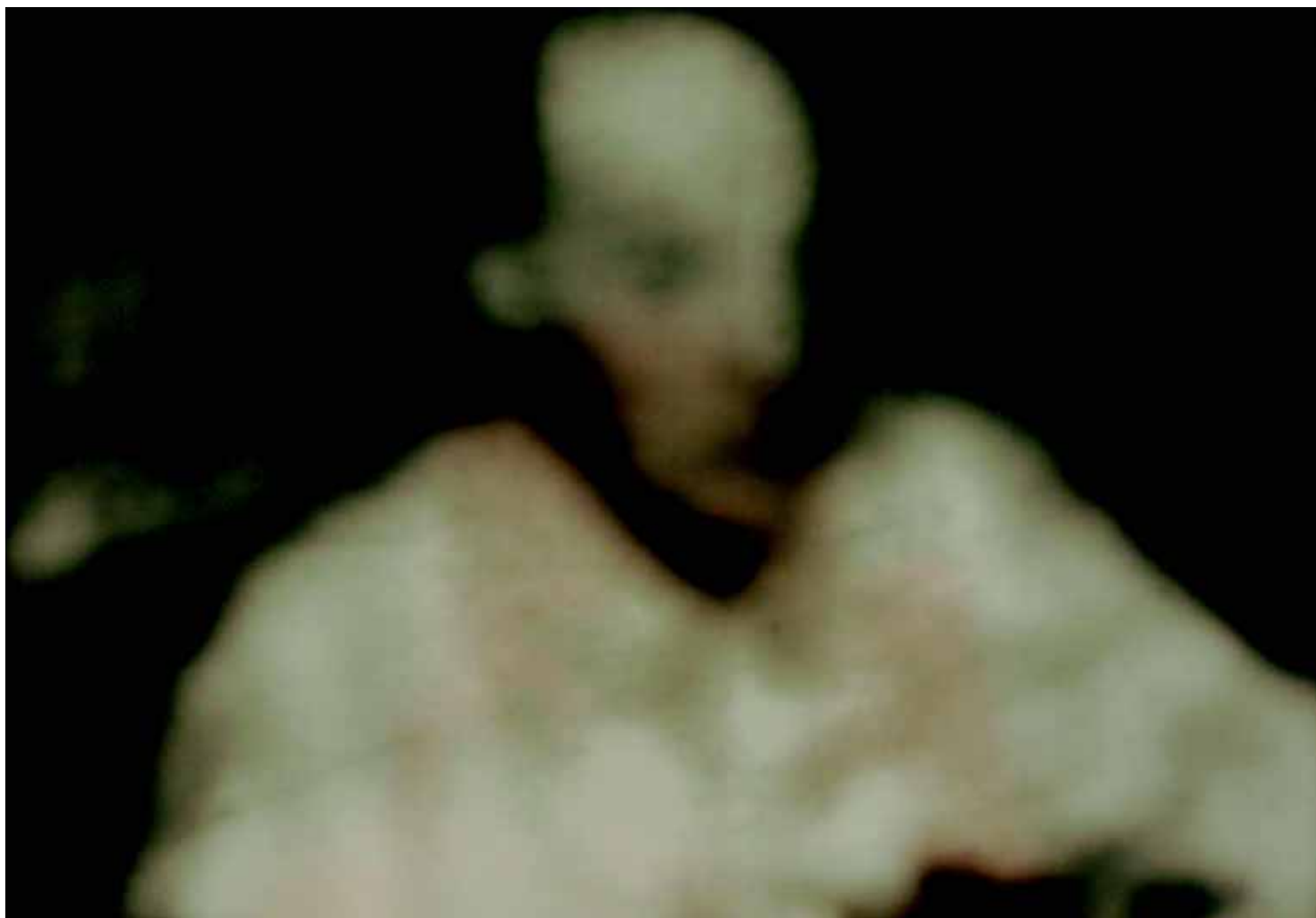




**Jan Vanriet, *Compte à Régler*, 1988, oils on canvas and wood, 200 x 260 cm**  
Collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul

Paul De Vylder (b. 1942) was a late-developer and has an idiom entirely his own. He is an outsider in the small Flemish art world, and only had his first one-man show in 1980. His work is distrusted by the art establishment, which considers it too rational, constructed and difficult. The ambiguous relationship between symbol and meaning occupies a central position in his work. One cannot indeed view his paintings, drawings, sculptures and installations simplistically. There is more going on here than these 'unsolved media riddles' at first sight reveal. De Vylder is always referring to the power balance hidden in the world of everyday language and symbol.

Jan Vanriet (b. 1948) deliberately confines himself to the sidelines even more than the others. In his drawings and paintings he makes connections between Classical Antiquity, the Bible, the Renaissance and the twentieth century, the most violent the world has known. He comes to some obvious conclusions: *homo homini lupus*, man is a wolf towards others. And also: beauty and violence are a part of every era. Vanriet has his very own style: very few if any hard lines or planes, no sharp outlines. Sometimes colours and planes exist alongside one another, sometimes they bleed into one another, and sometimes figures appear out of an abstract background. The whole picture is immersed in a sense of subdued melancholy.



### A change of fortune

So although there were quite a few painters in Flanders in the early eighties, they felt rather discouraged. Painters were rarely to be seen in the few exhibitions that were held. If one checks the list of exhibitions from 1980 onwards in the book *Kunst in België na 1975* ('Art in Belgium after 1975', Flor Bex *et al.*, Mercatorfonds, Antwerp) one soon sees that it was a period without much energy and that the Belgian art scene was limited in size and had no clout.

But in and around Antwerp things were stirring. A few young painters were at work in their studios and meeting each other or even sharing a studio. They had a different attitude, in which they were no longer seeking the tension between lines and planes, figurative and abstract, symbol and meaning and so on. They were engaged in a completely different quest: they were concerned above all with the reinterpretation of existing images. They selected these images from their surroundings, from photos, film, video, magazines and newspapers. What is more, they undeniably had several things in common: they worked on a small scale (certainly to start with), their painting was flat, often in pale colours, and the themes were abandonment and/or dehumanisation. It was, in a word, 'cool' work, that appealed to both critics and public and was soon somewhat ironically referred to as 'the grey Antwerp school of painting'. Most of these painters were not very happy with this term, since they did not consider themselves as part of a 'style', let alone 'Antwerp' and 'grey'. But there is at least one who dares admit there was indeed 'something' going on at that time and that one can hardly ignore it.

**Luc Tuymans, *Waterloo* (nr. 13-15), 1989, photo on paper, 41.7 x 49**

*Courtesy of MuHKA*



**Luc Tuymans, *Still-life*, 2002, oils on canvas, 347 x 500**

*Courtesy of Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp*

In addition, there was the revival of the 'conceptual' aspect. These painters fitted their work into a concept, in which the act of painting is 'only' a means by which to develop an idea, often in series.

The one who most perfected his concept – that of the diagnostic eye – is Luc Tuymans (b. 1958). He observes existing images, views them with as much detachment and distance as possible, interprets them as a painter and then gives them back. They become the highly distilled end product of a long rhetoric process. An image comes to life in slowness, in what Tuymans once called the 'memory-free zone', the zone between the almost unconscious seeing of the image and its recording. This creates a mental shift, a generation of countless images which in the end do not end up on the canvas, or only partly, or differently.

Tuymans sees painting not simply as an 'interesting medium', but mainly as a mobile and constantly self-renewing medium, because the artist can visit the whole range of the imagination, from the smallest nuance to the most subtle point, and this in its most extreme form: the film-photo, the end (provisional) of the movement. From the one film-photo to the next, from the one canvas to the next: the images are related to each other in a series of three or more, such as the 1991 *Embitterment*, or in series such as *Suspended* (1989), *Disenchantment* (1991), *Intolerance* (1993), *Heimat* (1995) *Mwana Kitoko [Beautiful White Man]* (2001), *Niks* (2002) and so on.

## The phenomenon

No one can ignore it: it is thanks to Luc Tuymans that there has been an undeniable revival in painting in Flanders (and all over Europe, say the foreign critics). This has now lasted at least fifteen years, so one can hardly call it a flash in the pan.

How did this happen? Luc Tuymans was the right man in the right place at the right time.

The right man: he is internationally recognised to be a talented, original and intelligent artist. But that is no longer sufficient in these media-dominated times: Tuymans is also an excellent speaker and debater, is able to interpret his own work very well and has a pronounced opinion of the art world, which is just what the media like.

The right time: in the late eighties the art scene was thoroughly anaemic. The hegemony of conceptual art had made it all a matter of intellectual seriousness, distanced from aesthetics, and what remained was leaden and hermetic. There was no freshness in the air, and the need arose for 'something new'.

The right place: his emergence, initially in his own country, coincided with the revival of the plastic arts scene. After the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent and the Provincial Museum of Modern Art in Ostend, 1986 saw the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp (MuHKA) at the 'South', around which countless galleries sprung up. It was in one of these galleries, Ruimte Morguen, which still exists, that in 1988 Tuymans had his second exhibition, entitled *Josefine c'est pas ma femme* (his first exhibition was in the gallery of the Thermae Palace Hotel in Ostend in 1985, but hardly a single visitor came to see it). Two years later he moved to Frank Demaegd's Zeno X Gallery, which still represents him today. What probably also played a part was the fact that in Tuymans' wake a generation of other painters crowded around and thus made up a 'scene': Bert De Beul, Guy Van Bossche, Eddy De Vos, Marc Vanderleenen and others.

This successful combination of person, place and time was later consolidated in an almost virtuoso manner, in a smooth interplay between the artist and his gallery. When Jan Hoet selected Tuymans for Documenta IX in 1992, Frank Demaegd invited the director of the prestigious Kunsthalle Bern, Ulrich Loock, to visit Antwerp. Loock was so impressed by this work that he gave Tuymans a one-man show at the Kunsthalle just before Documenta. This laid solid foundations for his international recognition. Then, by means of exhibitions in galleries, art centres and museums, Tuymans and Demaegd got down to conquering the German and American markets. The prices of the works were also raised to the international level, meaning ten times what they had been. Because if a thing is cheap, it cannot be any good, or so the international art market would have it.

A major one-man show (*The Purge*) at the Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht, which went on to the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, was an important stepping stone in this development, as was Tuymans' presence in the Belgian pavilion at the 2001 Venice Biennale. The big Tuymans show at Tate Modern in 2004 (which went on to Dusseldorf), and several very high prices at international art auctions (the record for the time being is 1.16 million euro for the painting *Sculpture* at Christie's in New York in May 2005) did the rest.

**Luc Tuymans, *Sculpture*,  
2000, oils on canvas,  
155 x 64 x 2,2**

*Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp*



### The 'boom'

The early nineties were a very interesting period. There was undeniably young artistic talent to be found in Flanders, Jan Hoet's Documenta IX appeared to have put the region on the international art map, and the Flemish authorities started to see the benefits of better support for artists. In the late nineties this euphoria was to ebb away quite rapidly, but in the early days it was possible to call it a movement. Many galleries, museums and art initiatives were open to the work of these new painters, and the media joined in, publishing very favourable reviews.

The new painting 'boom' was led by Luc Tuymans and Bert De Beul (b. 1961). The story goes that they had a studio together and obviously often looked at each other's work. Tuymans was the first to emerge publicly, while De Beul did not yet 'dare'. The rest is history.

In any case, Bert De Beul developed a highly individual, personal and innovative style. He makes small, veiled paintings in several layers, in which one might say he paints out his own memories. His views on painting are different from those of Tuymans: De Beul is silent in comparison to Tuymans' highly communicative vision; his view into the small, closed environment contrasts with Tuymans' view of the broad international world; his is an introvert modesty compared to the extrovert self-confidence of Tuymans.

De Beul likes to take photos of interiors, houses, streets and the people who sometimes move around in them. He then does a painting of these photos, in other words a picture of a picture. Their crucial elements are framing and zooming in on details, and also perspective. It is as if a veil hung in front of these works, as if you were looking at this small world through a steamed-up window. There appears to be little or nothing to see in De Beul's paintings, and yet the viewer has a powerful sense of recognition and familiarity, which sometimes simultaneously arouses unease, or even anxiety.

**Bert De Beul, *Untitled*, 1994, oils on canvas, 53 x 45**

Courtesy MUHKA, © Syb'L S. Pictures





**Bert De Beul, *Untitled*,  
1994, oils on canvas,  
53 x 45**

*Courtesy MUHKA, © Syb'L S.  
Pictures*

Another name that was associated with those of Tuymans and De Beul at that time was Guy Van Bossche (b. 1952). He is older than them and in the early eighties painted figuratively. His painting later became more subtle and enigmatic, and he also used photos from newspapers and magazines as his starting point. He created spaces from which any form of human presence seemed to have been banished: hospital wards, prison cells, empty buildings, and so on, or else he painted scenes of anonymous people, such as beach scenes with bathers. Another of the themes in his work is the way the viewer always gives new substance to the images he sees, depending on the spirit of the times: for example, in the post-Dutroux era the painted image of a child is interpreted completely differently from the past. The powerlessness and anonymity of violence are also constantly recurring themes, as in his 1999 work *Untitled (Disagreement about violence)*, a key work in his oeuvre. In the strikingly contrasting colours of black, red and pale yellow, it shows two male figures against an even background. They have masks, execution hoods or bags over their heads: Van Bossche is here painting about loss of identity, imminent violence, false harmony and mental cruelty. At the same time, this is not narrative painting, but a rendering of images of mental pollution.

Eddy De Vos (b. 1950) only started painting at the end of the eighties. Photography is important to him too, but in a different way: his paintings look like snapshots, in which the moment the photographer presses the shutter or the moment the painter applies the paint is important. Eddy De Vos captures flashes of images. And colour is essential: each subject is linked to a colour, which may not necessarily be realistic, but conveys a feeling or an atmosphere regarding this subject. For fifteen years De Vos painted series of trivial objects such as ruins, landscapes and people, and also a great many erotic scenes. Here it was the voyeuristic aspect that predominated, because this is essentially the viewer's gaze: he makes use of the fetishist's eye. Several years ago De Vos developed a new and specific way of painting, both technically speaking and as regards the interpretation of the image. The original image in the photo is completely deconstructed and then put back together again, like the thousands of pieces in a puzzle. In the same way as an image can crumble into dots and pixels if something goes wrong with your computer screen, here too you, the viewer, are brought face to face with the manipulative aspect. But even so, the viewer continues involuntarily to interpret and look for meaning. He is confronted with the unavoidable question of authenticity: are we looking at the work of the photographer, at the painter's reconstruction, or at our own interpretation of a piece of history (collective or otherwise)? This question may well be essential to the work of such painters as Tuymans, De Beul, Van Bossche, De Vos and Marc Vanderleenen (b. 1952).



**Guy Van Bossche, *Untitled - Kinderkleedje V (Child's Dress V)*, 1995, oils on canvas, 207.5 x 127**  
 Courtesy of MuHKA, © Syb'L S. Pictures



**Eddy De Vos, *Transgression*, 1988, acrylics on canvas, 90 x 105**  
 Courtesy of MuHKA, © Syb'L S. Pictures



**Karin Hanssen, *View*, 2003, oils on canvas, 100 x 70**

The last of these is probably the most 'pessimistic' painter of this generation. His often dirty-green, grey-blue or pale brown paintings show implicit images of decline, loneliness, anonymity and implosion. A human figure on a woodland road in fading light, a blurring part of an interior, a half-collapsed house, an empty suit: nothing is what it seems; Vanderleenen does not tell stories, but shows images of existential despair. He himself calls them 'Exercises in not or barely articulating'. In the act of painting each movement is the consequence of the one before, each random line pushes the story towards a different outcome, a different image. Life is doubt, according to Vanderleenen.

Quite a few Flemish painters have in their own way worked in this vague and figurative, slightly enigmatic way: Patrick Vanden Eynde, Chantal Chapelle, Jan de Vlieghe, Florent Vermeiren, Jürgen Voordeckers, Koen Broucke, Laurent Cruyt and others.

The Swiss Robert Suermondt (b. 1961), who lives in Belgium, does small paintings of empty-looking villas, parts of green woods and/or rampant vegetation. But it is precisely the easy identification of these visual scraps that enables the viewer to look at the underlying image and see that Suermondt is painting an existential void.

The subjects chosen by Karin Hanssen (b. 1960) once again derive from pictures from magazines; from petty bourgeois family scenes to artificially fashionable scenes in which modern man presents himself as a perfectly happy being living in harmony. But because of the veiled manner in which Hanssen works, this harmony has a suffocating, routine and desolate effect. With their smaller dimensions, the drawings are more merciless and subversive than the paintings, which sometimes still have a realism that is not quite disturbing enough. But this is the artist's intention: she regards too weird an atmosphere to be too easy a way out.



## Talent but no space

The new painting talent that has emerged in Flanders since the late eighties and nineties came up against a network of galleries, centres for the plastic arts and museums, that was insufficiently equipped to publicise and export this 'Flemish wave' in a consistent and high-quality manner. Far too many contemporary painters have wasted far too much energy in frenetically looking for a gallery that wanted and was able to promote their work, and for 'art centres' and museums of contemporary art that wanted to exhibit their work and present it internationally.

On the Belgian gallery scene there are essentially just a handful of galleries that work on a truly international basis. Zeno X in Antwerpen is the best-known example, with its successful promotion of Luc Tuymans, Raoul De Keyser and Michaël Borremans. A few others follow at some distance: S65 in Aalst has introduced Bert De Beul into the international forum. And with a degree of goodwill, such galleries as Tim Van Laere, Stella Lohaus, Annie Gentils, Kusseneers, Annette De Keyser, Micheline Szwajcer and Koraalberg in Antwerp, Richard Foncke and Jan Hoet Jr. in Ghent, Mulier Mulier in Knokke, Fred Lanzenberg and Xavier Hufkens in Brussels and Deweer in Otegem (this list is not exhaustive) are also making praiseworthy attempts by taking the work of contemporary Belgian artists (in this case painters) to such international art fairs as Art Basel, Arco in Madrid, Art Köln, The Armory Show in New York and FIAC in Paris. But the infrastructural and logistic basis was lacking at a crucial moment. The Flemish museums of contemporary art (MuHKA in Antwerp, SMAK (as it later became) in Ghent, and PMMK in Ostend) did hold solo and group exhibitions in the nineties, but hardly if ever succeeded in passing them on to other European or American museums. The brand new centres for the plastic arts could not or did not do it either, partly because they were not so interested in painting and went wholeheartedly for conceptual installation, photographic and video art. The wave that had certainly existed in the early nineties then ebbed away. Ten years after Jan Hoet's Documenta IX, several critics observed that no consistent government policy on the plastic arts had yet been established in Flanders (and by extension, Belgium).

Only recently has a new movement emerged, especially in Antwerp, where a number of institutions (MuHKA, Extra City, Objectif Exhibitions) are collaborating to create a platform with international appeal. The SMAK in Ghent wants to pick up the thread again, and new opportunities are appearing, with plastic arts activities at Bozar and the new Wiels centre in Brussels, Netwerk in Aalst and Kunsthal Loppem in Loppem-Zedelgem. The question remains whether present-day Flemish painting will get enough space in these new initiatives.

**The SMAK in Ghent:  
picking up the thread  
again in a new plastic arts  
network**

**Extra City in Antwerp:  
creating a platform that  
elicits an international  
response**





### New directions of its own

Other, sometimes younger, painters have made a name for themselves in the wake of Luc Tuymans and co.

The Ghent artist Michael Borremans (b. 1963) has been put on the international art map in no time at all. He sees the essence as the indestructible power of the medium of painting. 'Doing beautiful paintings has long been taboo, but now it's allowed again,' is one of the things he has said on this topic. He represents a new generation that now has little sympathy with conceptual thinking and is once again opting for a reassessment of the medium of painting as such, with respect for the old masters.

Borremans says that since conceptual art came to dominate in the seventies, painting has been taboo. He calls painting the archetypical work of art, and that it ought not simply to be swept aside. Not that it is enough for it to be beautiful; it must also be of interest. In Borremans' work this 'interest' is expressed in several other layers apart from its purely painterly qualities. Take his piece *Four Fairies*, purchased by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles: neither we nor Borremans know what the four women are doing with their hands on or under the dark surface. Or else there is the surrealistic element in quite a few of his paintings, such as *One at the Time*, in which various elements are illogically stacked on top of each other, creating an intriguing scene. This work is based on a photo from the thirties in which black servants are laying a table, but at the same time it has the brilliance of a seventeenth-century genre painting. The fact that Borremans paints in oils helps create this atmosphere. While much contemporary art delights in acrylic paint, Borremans is not keen on it at all. He finds that one has much less depth with acrylics, while 'with oils you can make slower images'.

**Michaël Borremans,**  
***Four Fairies*, 2003,**  
**oils on canvas, 110 x 150**  
*Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp*

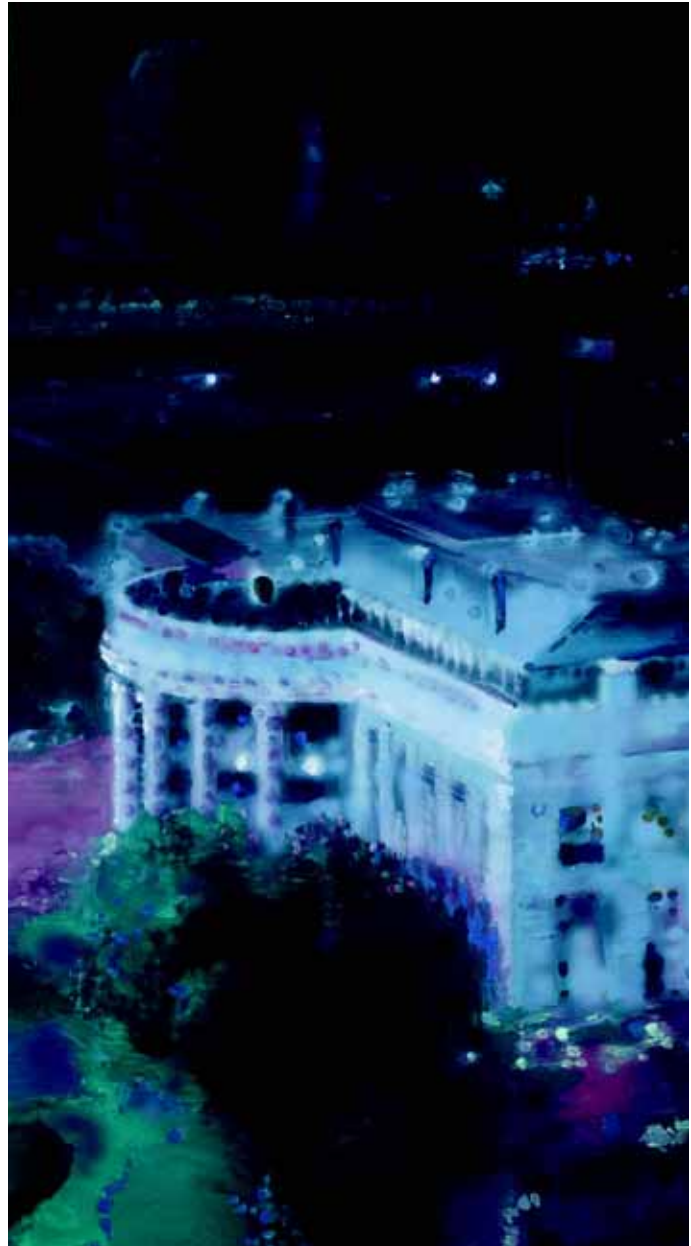
**Michaël Borremans,**  
***The Performance*, 2004,**  
**oils on canvas, 71 x 83**  
*Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp*



The Ghent painter Jan van Imschoot (b. 1963) is the same age as Borremans, but his career started earlier. Van Imschoot's paintings are figurative bombardments of themes involving *eros* and *thanatos*, of Old and New Masters, of horror and passion. Many centuries of art and sociology make their appearance. Van Imschoot plays with iconography, constructs new stories with old elements (from art history) and new elements (today's society), and plays words and images off against one another.

2002 saw his 'major' exhibition at the SMAK in Ghent, then still headed by Jan Hoet. After that things went quiet. Van Imschoot was against the commercialisation and mediatisation of contemporary art and even considered stopping. In 2005 the monograph *The Testimony of a Barking Dog* was published. It includes all Van Imschoot's important paintings, plus texts the artist himself chose. In these writings, by Michel de Montaigne, Arthur Schopenhauer, Peter Sloterdijk and other cultural philosophers, the essence is revealed: for slowness, against false acceleration; for erudition, against dilettantism. Van Imschoot is now once again hard at work drawing and painting.

**Jan Van Imschoot,**  
***The Offering*, 1993,**  
**oils on canvas, 55 x 45**  
Courtesy SMAK





**Joris Ghekiere, *Untitled*, 2004, oils on polyester, 100 x 80**  
Courtesy of Koraalberg Gallery, Antwerp

Nowadays, it requires some courage to do 'beautiful' paintings. Joris Ghekiere (b. 1955) does so with an almost sardonic pleasure: his scenes of flowers, branches, birds, girls, jungles and other seemingly paradisiacal delights assume a clean and enchanting gleaming effect when placed under several layers of artificial resin. But there have always been snakes in the grass, or scratches and irregularities under the gloss: the jungle turned out to be a war zone, the birds were bleeding, the girls had been violated. In more recent work the shine of the resin has been abandoned, as in the 'nocturnal painting' of the White House from a bird's-eye view. Ghekiere plays an ambiguous game with paint: he pleases the unsuspecting viewer, and shows a substantial amount of virtuosity, but makes entirely artificial and contrived images. This immediately negates its figurativeness and he safeguards himself with a strong dose of irony and relativisation (of himself too). At the same time he enters into a furious struggle with his material, paint, and every possible aid (geometry, photography) to explore all that can be done with the 'real image'. In this country, quite a few painters are engaged in their own way with this problem of representation.

After a rather traditional start, Robert Devriendt (b. 1955) made his name with his tiny paintings (often that no more than 10 cm square) showing animals, plants and even mountain peaks. For example, he paints the bodies and heads of dead animals in accordance with the rules of fine painting, as if he were a 17<sup>th</sup>-century master. Yet he is far from being a copyist: in fact by painting in this way he contrarily questions the contemporary handling of the medium of painting. His little paintings are illusions, the stuffed animals he uses as models and the fragmentation of their depiction are a metaphor for the manipulation behind every painting, however large or small, however coarsely or finely painted.

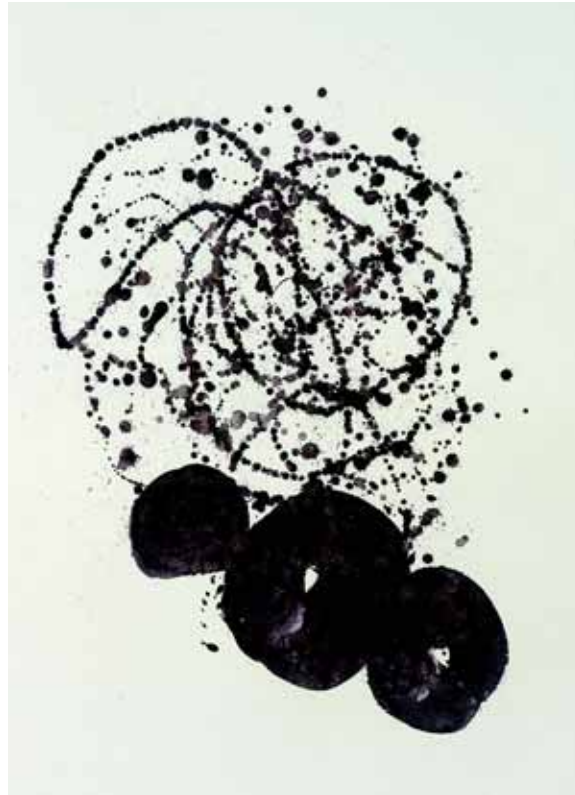
**Robert Devriendt, *Sans aigle, sans paysage*, 2004, oils on canvas, 12 paintings, 13 x 189**



**Ronny Delrue, *Untitled*, 1994,**  
pencil on paper, 29.7 x 21  
Courtesy of MuHKA, photo: Maertens



**Kris Fierens, *Untitled***  
(from the *Kommt Gut* series),  
2005, acrylics on paper,  
140 x 100  
Courtesy of Koraalberg Gallery,  
Antwerp



### Abstraction

A great many painters have since the eighties been engaged above all with formal elements and abstraction rather than with figurativeness.

Those taking this route include Ronny Delrue, Kris Fierens, Dirk Vander Eecken, Yves Beaumont, Bart Vandevyvere, Jus Juchtmans, Alex Michels, Mario de Brabandere and Benoît (Van Innis).

Ronny Delrue's work (b. 1957) lies on the borderline between figurativeness and abstraction. He made his name with his faceless heads and anonymous characters whose main characteristics are alienation and inner pollution. The thematic essence of his plastic work is the memory. In his drawings and paintings he tries to capture his own memories, however abstract they may be ('whitened' is one of his expressions). They seem like solidified memories, but at the same time the heads (the archetypal representation of memory) are painted over, usually in dark, suffocating colours and always such choking materials as paint and also tar.

The painting and drawing of Kris Fierens (b. 1957) is just about the most difficult there is, certainly for anyone who has to write (or talk) about it. At the same time it is fascinating because it seems entirely stripped of any form of prehistory, anecdote or story. Fierens does not start from an image, an idea or a concept, but builds up a work in a combination, never to be repeated, of the gestural, the emotional and the subconscious. He never deliberately creates a unique work, but makes dozens, perhaps hundreds of attempts, from which he then chooses one, or rather from which the work chooses itself. After all, his work makes itself, and the artist's hand is only the intermediary between its succeeding and its not (quite) succeeding. The fundamental thing is the almost detached movement: a single false brushstroke, line or mark and the magical element, the 'rightness', is gone.



**Dirk Vander Eecken's studio**



**Bart Vandevijvere, Time Tapes, 2005, acrylics, medium, canvas, 50 x 100**

Dirk Vander Eecken (b. 1954) has since the eighties been combining printmaking with collage and painting. The woodcut has always been important in his work as a graphic medium. He uses it to make templates and simple forms: structures which he then combines and adapts with his own pictorial insights. In the nineties, Vander Eecken went to live in the rural district of Watervliet in East Flanders, where he became fascinated by a new structure: the furrows of the ploughed fields. For some time these lines dominated his work, which was largely done in earth colours. In the meantime he took the next step: works constructed from patterns in sewing magazines, on which he continued to 'work the field' by applying lines, forms and templates. Even the seemingly monochrome works turned out to be built up from a patient grid of horizontal and vertical bands.

Bart Vandevijvere's (b. 1961) abstract painting is based on music. In his case, the action of painting yields a contrary aesthetics related to a dissonant score. While painting, he listens to the music of contemporary composers, especially Morton Feldman. He likes to let the material speak for itself, but he is not indifferent to the language in which it does so. He improvises linear structures and patterns, but also admits disruptions. Spontaneity and mood continue to play a part in his paintings. The canvas is a support for paint: layered, vibrating and transparent, ready for sensory perception.

## Cerebral

Several other younger painters handle the medium in a more cerebral way. Jean-Marie Bijtebier (b. 1963) paints 'mental landscapes' in which he sometimes refers to a theme he retrieves from literature, sometimes to the world of dreams and the subconscious. His series of 'portraits' of anonymous scientists is well-known, in which he replaces the heads of his characters by a symbol of their mental activity. Other works show the evolution of the thinking processes in the brains in a tangle of lines, points and streaks. And sometimes it is simply a piece of landscape or interior that has remained in the painter's eye. His paintings are intended to be safety nets for everything that is banished from the memory. The subjects are stripped of all their anecdotalism and are converted into abstract or blurred outlines in pale or subtle pastel colours that possess an aesthetics entirely their own.

**Jean-Marie Bijtebier,**  
**Untitled, 1997, acrylics on**  
**linen, 100 x 140**

Courtesy of MuHKA, © Syb'1 S.  
Pictures







**Johan Clarysse, *J'ai dit ça?*, from the *Ceci n'est pas de la tristesse* series, 2003-2004, acrylics on canvas, 50 x 72**

**Johan Clarysse, poster project in Roeselare during the election campaign in April 2004**

Johan Clarysse (b. 1957) has been exhibiting since 1990: paintings, often in the form of a diptych or triptych, in which a figurative and an abstract-mono-chrome image are inseparably rivetted together with a philosophically-inspired phrase. In his painting, Clarysse follows a course entirely his own, in which it is above all his obsession with the manipulative and the hybrid that splashes into the image formed on the canvas. He does this, for example, on the basis of a series of Japanese prints or stills from films by Hitchcock, Bergman, Fassbinder and others: in a way that is not quite virtuoso, male and female film icons are confronted with a purely abstract counterpart and/or a text in the middle of the canvas. Not quite virtuoso, because the artist deliberately avoids smoothness and allows his works to retain a certain roughness.





Gery De Smet's painting (b. 1961) is above all concerned with the disruption of such terms as nationalism, popular solidarity, and native territory. He has built up an oeuvre around ideologies and the way they make use of images. He made a name for himself in the early nineties with a series of paintings that seemed to balance on the verge of far-right extremism, but it was precisely as a result of this provocativeness that they broke down a number of taboos. His intention is to force into a different direction meanings that are accepted as self-evident, by means of his 'disruptive paintings'. He is also known for his work on such subjects as 'ways of living' and 'land and property', examples being a series of 24 paintings of houses and a painting of a mountain landscape called *That is Where I Want to Live*. We get the feel of Flemish arterial roads in such paintings as *Set Menus in 300 m* and *New Waitress*. In addition to the critical-ideological context, the visitor also has to look at the paintings themselves very closely: De Smet is uncommonly on-target in his visual expressiveness, so that one brushstroke may do all the work.

**Gery De Smet, *Kost en inwoon (Board and Lodging)*, 2001, acrylics on canvas, 60 x 80**

*Courtesy of MuHKA*

This is the right point at which to go off at a tangent, or two, to look at painters whose work is not easy to put in any particular category.

Michel Buylen's painting (b. 1953) is hyperrealistic, but bears absolutely no relation to the style that goes under that name: he is concerned with returning an image to the viewer in the most personal way possible. As he himself puts it: 'At precisely the time when everyone is able to capture reality so accurately with high-performance cameras, right at the moment when digital techniques have lowered the threshold for the creation of perfect images more than ever before in human history, it is exactly then that the painter re-emerges. This painter assumes an essential role: he takes a considered, focused look at this reality and thereby arrives at a pertinent vision.' A vision he passes on to the viewer. According to Buylen the role of the painter is that of a 'seer': he or she reveals paths, ways, patterns, ways of decoding, in the chaos of images that can give the viewer new insights.



Sam Dillemans (b. 1965) is a painter who fights. With the paint, with the canvas, with the subject, with the form, with himself. Whether he is doing a self-portrait, a portrait of a woman, a nude, an old master or a boxer (all of which are series which he has indeed painted), no story is ever told. Except this: how, using pencil, etching needle or brush, can I achieve that one inaccessible image? The subject, in which the artist goes right to the bone, is not an end but a means. Dillemans is perfectly able to switch from Titian, Michelangelo or Rubens to Mike Tyson, Muhammad Ali or Freddy de Kerpel. And then to return, as a form of meditation, to the portrait or self-portrait.

For Sam Dillemans, painting is the direct continuation of his inner urges. This may sound old-fashioned, but he sees it as essential: 'When I am painting I only have to go a short distance from my head and heart to my hand. I find myself very quickly in my work.'

**Sam Dillemans, *Sugar Ray Robinson - Carmen Basilio*, 2005, oils on canvas, 80 x 120**

© De Wit/Cerstiaens 2005,  
Congo Blue Photography



Vincent Geyskens,  
*Self-portret*, 2001,  
collage on wood, 49 x 35

### The young generation

Now, halfway through the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the work of young Flemish painters is by no means at a dead end. Young artists are looking for and developing new approaches, the most important element of which is the emergence of their own discourse.

Although Vincent Geyskens (b. 1971) does declare painting to be dead, that does not mean it has to be given up. On the contrary, he sees his work as an act of resistance against the way 'contemporary art meddles with the medium'. Geyskens likes to start out from extremely distinct images: photos of women provided the basis for portraits such as *Sylvia* (1998) and *Encore une fois* (2000), which make a lasting impression, while a photo of himself with his face made up produced a fascinating *Self-portrait* (1999), and a lobster and some oysters led to the still-life entitled *The Mardi Gras*. All these pieces have something in common: the seemingly easily consumable figurative effect is subtly disturbed, and by the very fact that Geyskens does everything to make it clear to the viewer that this is a painting comprising oil paint on canvas. This is even clearer in the abstract works he does as a sort of counterpart and which are based on the same subject. In Geyskens' opinion, three essential painterly qualities make a painting what it is still able to be at the present time: the inseparable link with the past, the fact that the painting is a consequence of a physical activity and the awareness that the painting is a material construction (a fiction). But in contemporary art it is precisely these three qualities that are usually hushed up and concealed. This is precisely what Geyskens wants to bring out again.





Pieter Vermeersch (b. 1973) stems from a well-known family of Flemish artists. When he graduated from the Higher Institute of Fine Arts in Antwerp, he made an big impression with a large-scale perspective work called *Painting with Door*, and with a series of eight small paintings that repeated the image of a wiper on a car windscreen. Simultaneous with but outside the *Over the Edges* exhibition in Ghent in 2000, he painted the display window of an empty shop in a different colour every day.

**Pieter Vermeersch,  
Untitled, 2003**  
Photo of the installation in  
the landscape at  
Speelhoven-Aarschot,  
90 x 120

Courtesy of Koraalberg Gallery,  
Antwerp

Another of his works was a gigantic fluorescent line he made across the landscape: in this case colour became a substance in its own right. Vermeersch makes the world into a painting, or rather, he imposes his paintings on the world, not in the form of the usual 'canvas on the wall', but in the form of painted gallery windows, painted walls, and a gigantic 'canvas' on the floor which can only be taken out of the room if it is destroyed. Vermeersch plays with colour and space in such a way that the space appears more changeable and temporary than the colour itself. He goes beyond painting, and seeks a temporary sublimity that questions the unique nature of a work of art.

**Pieter Vermeersch,  
Untitled, 2005**  
Photo of an installation at  
an exhibition in Koraalberg  
Gallery, September-  
October 2005

Courtesy of Koraalberg Gallery,  
Antwerp



**Tina Gillen, *Jockey*, 2004,**  
oils on canvas, 140 x 210  
Courtesy Crown Gallery, Brussels

Tina Gillen (b. 1972), who is from Luxemburg but lives in Antwerp, often uses vivid colours in her paintings, which nevertheless convey a desolate atmosphere. She paints rigid, measured, fragmented landscapes in which the architectural elements (houses, villas, etc.) are reduced so much to their essence that they come close to abstraction. She does most of these paintings on the basis of a photo or postcard, and the 'real' photographic images are converted into an enigmatic image that can best be described as a mental space. Tina Gillen makes a new reality by enlargement or the addition of details. But her even, almost unnatural use of colour means that any hint of recognition or anecdote is immediately put paid to. Each painting is like an over-illuminated world of desolation: it is the result of a process of choices, omissions and transformation. She is interested in the way images are perceived, whereby the struggle between the figurative and the abstract leads to a certain transcendence.



**Yves Beaumont,**  
***Majorcan Landscape*, 2005,**  
oils on canvas, 50 x 40

Yves Beaumont (b. 1970) is a painter of sublimated landscapes. He underwent an entire evolution, in which the landscape element was increasingly reduced to its essence both in form and colour. His expressive abstraction and meditative sublimation ultimately led to work that was almost monochrome. This resulted in a mental block, which about five years ago Beaumont responded to by taking a more figurative approach, based on a number of Iberian and Ardennes landscapes which, probably typically for this sort of mental 'escape attempt', shimmered in a greyish blue-green mist.

But the trigger worked: the fear of systematic monochromy made way for a stronger technical awareness and an even more self-confident, bolder interpretation of the notion of 'landscape'.



**Sergio De Beukelaer,**  
**Installatie: Fat canvas,**  
**2003, acrylics on canvas**  
 Courtesy of Tim Van Laere Gallery,  
 photo: Johan Luyckx

Sergio De Beukelaer (b. 1971) takes as his basis an international environment, more specifically such post-war painting styles as abstraction, pop art, geometry, monochromy and minimalism. Using the attainments of these styles, he creates a mixture of striking originality and lightness. But this lightness is deceptive: he also points out the datedness of these styles and looks for a new balance between forms, colours and proportions.

Maryam Najd (b. 1965) is of Iranian origin, but has lived in Antwerp for many years. It was there that she learnt about international contemporary painting, which at that time was in the midst of a crisis. Things have now changed and she is making a contribution to the rediscovery of painting. She is not interested in the idea of the contrast between man and woman, Muslim and Westerner, or the abstract and figurative. Her paintings are the images she herself dreams. This may range from a vague figurativeness (*Retranchement I*) through abstract works (*Sun, Dream of Earth*) to extremely searching images (*Self-Portrait*).

Maryam Najd's work is apparently becoming increasingly focused: primary images become sublimated. This devisualisation represents the peeling off ever more layers of oneself, in search of the ultimate core and self-knowledge. This gives rise to a new visualisation, a 'better' world which Najd herself dreams and to which she gives plastic expression with an uncommonly powerful painting technique.



**Maryam Najd, Zelfportret**  
**(Self-Portrait), 2005,**  
**oils on canvas, 80 x 60**

Private collection, Antwerp  
 Courtesy of Tim Van Laere Gallery,  
 photo: Felix Tirry





**Koen van den Broek, Zion,  
2002, oils on canvas,  
100 x 150**

© Koen van den Broek,  
photo: Diane Bertrand  
Courtesy of Jay Jopling/White  
Cube, London

Lastly, Koen van den Broek (b. 1973) is the youngest rising and travelling star. He does not even have a Belgian gallery, but is represented by one in London (White Cube). He does large, bright and plain paintings and is very much aware of what has been created in painting in recent years and centuries. In painting landscapes, motorways, stretches of road, or simply the edge of a pavement, he composes powerful structures in which the contradiction between the banal subjects (which come from snapshots he takes on his many journeys) and the intensity of his painting summons up a surprising tension. It is surprising because the works look easily interpretable and light, whereas in fact they have been cleared of everything that is not of the essence. Van den Broek shows in an almost painfully perfect way that the line dividing the figurative and the abstract can be virtually nonexistent.

*Marc Ruyters*

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Vansompel Willy: 21 [www.muhka.be](http://www.muhka.be), [www.smak.be](http://www.smak.be),  
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Vermeiren Florent: 32  
Voordeckers Jürgen: 32 [www.muhka.be](http://www.muhka.be)

### W

Wright Cindy: 8, 9 [www.cindywright.org](http://www.cindywright.org)

**Page numbers in bold indicate an illustration of the artist's work**

## Authors

**Marc Ruyters** (b. 1952) is a journalist and art critic. He works for De Morgen, Knack, Humo, De Tijd and other publications. In spring 2006 his book *Roger Raveel* will be published by Snoeck Uitgeverij. He is currently working on the publication of a new magazine on contemporary art.

**Johan Pas** (b. 1963) is a doctor in art studies and lectures on art history and current art affairs at Antwerp Polytechnic. He compiles exhibitions and his publications include *Nature Morte? Kunst, natuur en biotoop* (1995), *Binnen & Buiten. Visies op en door het actuele landschap* (1998) and *Beeldenstorm in een spiegelzaal. Het ICC en de actuele kunst 1970-1990* (2005).

# IBK

INITIATIEF BEELDENDE KUNSTEN

The 'Initiatief Beeldende Kunsten - Visual Arts Initiative' (IBK) is an independent non-governmental organization that functions as a support centre for anyone in Flanders professionally involved in the visual arts. The IBK promotes contemporary Flemish visual arts in Belgium and abroad and provides information about the visual arts in Flanders. The IBK was founded in December 2001 and became operational in 2002 as the first organized effort to support artists and other actors in the visual arts. In a short time it became a stimulating and coordinating centre for the visual arts in Flanders, in an international context. The main goal of the IBK is to stimulate the visual arts and to enhance the quality of activities in this area of culture.

One of the IBK's goals is to support the promotion of Flemish visual arts abroad.

Although our organization mainly operates on a Flemish level, it also opens doors to the world.

For this reason the IBK organizes international visitors' programmes offering curators and critics from all over the world the opportunity to get acquainted with the contemporary Flemish visual arts scene. Furthermore, an international newsletter allows the IBK to inform the international scene of new developments in the Flemish visual arts.

For anyone interested in the visual arts in Flanders, the IBK is the best doorway to the local scene.

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More information about Flemish contemporary art is available from [www.kunstonline.info](http://www.kunstonline.info), which is an online database devoted to contemporary Belgian art since 1945. It focuses on the artists, work but it also features biographies, bibliographies, texts, images, video, events and institutions.



**Koen van den Broek,  
Mattress, 2003, oils on  
canvas, 190 x 145,5**

© Koen van den Broek  
Photo: Diane Bertrand  
Courtesy of Jay Jopling/White  
Cube, London

cover  
**Luc Tuymans, Der  
Diagnostische Blick, 1992,  
oils on canvas, 57 x 38**  
Courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp

backcover  
**Tina Gillen, Horse, 2004,  
oils on canvas, 140 x 210**  
Courtesy Crown Gallery, Brussels

