

A conversation with Koen Van Den Broek

Artist, Belgium

Anna Dickie | Hong Kong | 7 January 2014



The work of Koen van den Broek refuses to be neatly defined. It bears strong affinities to the tradition of European painting, while at the same time inhabiting the landscape of the street and the vocabulary of American abstraction. Having studied architecture, the artist explores the geometric spaces of roads and transportation structures. Indeed van den Broek's fascination with the street as motif might be understood as much in relation to the history of conceptual practices as to painting – John Baldessari has been a collaborator, for example. His paintings often originate from photographs of streets; but in the process of transferring this imagery onto the canvas, abstractness is applied.

For his second solo exhibition at Baton Gallery in Seoul, van den Broek presents work that has developed significantly since he last exhibited with the gallery. The title of the show, *ZYLON*, references a synthetic polymer material that has an exceptional thermal stability and is used in a number of applications, including in the making of Formula 1 car cabins. Yet, despite the title, the work is more aggressively abstract than his earlier work. In this interview, the artist discusses his influences, the show he did with John Baldessari, this new body of work and the title, *ZYLON*.

You originally trained as an architect, but became a painter. What motivated this change?

At college (KU Leuven) I started to study architecture and became very interested in how culture and urban life were being shaped. The way an architect deals with space and monumentality related to abstract shapes was something that caught my interest very early in my life. While studying architecture I came in contact with the work of Matisse and became interested in the history of painting. Somehow I wanted to be part of this canon. You could say that I grew out of architecture towards painting. I went from designing the urban landscape to painting the urban landscape, which is something totally else because it has a different history. On the other hand I'm currently working on a few public and private projects in the public space.

You participated in the exhibition *Matisse and Beyond: A Century of Modernism* at SFMoMA in 2003. The colours in your recent work remind me of Matisse's colours.

There is no other artist who influenced me more than Matisse. You can even say that he is the cornerstone of Modern Art. Almost all the American artists dating from the 30's till now have a link with Matisse. The way he used bold, saturated colors for example is something you can see in the work of Barnett Newman, Donald Judd, Clyfford Still, Willem de Kooning, John Baldessari, Gary Hume, Laura Owens, etc. The essence of painting – stripped down from all its content – was something Matisse was constantly looking out for. To this day a painting by Matisse is never boring - which already is a great accomplishment. History proves that Matisse is still very alive with young painters and will be continue to be revisited constantly. Therefore it was a great honour for me to be included in the exhibition *Matisse and Beyond: A Century of Modernism*. Seeing my work hanging on the wall as last point in the exhibition was of great importance to me. It gave me the energy and focus to keep on developing my own ideas about abstraction and figuration.

In 2008 you collaborated with John Baldessari on a project that combined pictures of Baldessari with painted interventions by yourself. I understand that you painted photographs that Baldassari made of film-stills of Hollywood movies. Perhaps we can discuss that collaboration?

The project was called *This An Example Of That*. John is a good friend of mine who I met very early in my career as an artist. He is the godfather of Conceptual Art at the West Coast. Somehow this project came forward out of the idea that John is a painter who may not paint because his roots are with Conceptual Art. But on the other hand there is no other artist who I know that looks more to painting than John Baldessari. In 1970 he burned all his paintings that he made between 1953 and 1966 for a piece he did called *The Cremation Project*. I have always been very influenced by the work of John and Conceptual Art in general and how they used film and photography. That is why painting over the pictures of John was very interesting to do and still very important in the understanding of my work. It gave us the opportunity to broaden our ideas about what painting can be and how to make clear our influences to the audience. From the moment I started painting over the stills meaning bounced around and interesting things started to occur which still please me.

You then had a solo-exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (SMAK) in 2010 in Ghent – which I understand was a retrospective in many ways. Do you think being given this institutional moment to reflect on your work had an impact on what you have done since?

Since my work is in many private/public collections throughout the world it's sometimes difficult to keep an overview of what I already have done. The SMAK gave me the opportunity to revisit my own career and to go back to all the important chapters of my artistic career. It was a thrill to see ten years of my painting career together in one exhibition. I drew new conclusions from my older work and this gave me the energy to keep on developing my familiar motives of the urban landscape and how this can be translated in new ways onto the canvas. Andrew Renton who is professor at Goldsmith University London was the curator of my retrospective. He decided to break up my oeuvre into different parts according to the different themes I paint - like cracks, curbs, shadows, collaborations, landscapes, etc. The paintings were placed in seven different rooms throughout the SMAK Museum, which we referred to as the way in which an Andy Warhol show would be placed. The retrospective also gave me the opportunity to create my monograph 'Crack' which I worked on with Wouter Davidts, John Welchman, etc.

You have an exhibition at Gallery Baton's new exhibition space in Seoul, entitled *ZYLON*. It is your second exhibition with Gallery Baton and in fact your second solo exhibition in Asia. How would you compare the works in this more recent exhibition to those you showed with Gallery Baton two years ago?

ZYLON is my second solo show at Gallery Baton (previous one was in 2012) and I participated in group shows in Seoul (2000, 2005), Shanghai (2009), Singapore, etc. For this exhibition, *ZYLON*, you can see that the paintings move towards an abstract, autonomous vocabulary while the previous exhibition still dealt with recognisable subjects. I try to constitute a language that comes out of the abstract but still deals with the landscape and feeling of the streets. Last year I met Dr. David Anfam, a renowned scholar in the field of Abstract-Expressionism - and who wrote for my book 'Insomnia and the Greenhouse'. We had long conversations about the paintings of Mark Rothko,

Clyfford Still, Franz Kline, etc and why those painters are still very relevant to us today. For example Franz Kline - you can see how the photographer Aaron Siskind translated the language of the paintings of Kline into photographic images that he took from the street cracks, road lines, peeled off advertisement, dirt and he even took pictures of the paintings of Kline. To see how this draws back to my own work is very interesting to see. As a student I was very influenced by Willem de Kooning who moved from the Netherlands to the United States and came under the influence of Abstract-Expressionism without forgetting his European roots.

This exhibition is a high point of a body of work that was shown last year at Marlborough Contemporary, London (CHICANE) at Friedman Benda Gallery, New York (APEX) and Gallery Greta Meert, Brussels (YAW). I also want to recall that it is an honor as a Belgian artist to open the new space of Baton Gallery!

Perhaps you can explain the title *ZYLON*?

'ZYLON' is a term that describes a liquid that is being used for many applications. It has more strength than Kevlar and it has great thermal stability, which makes it inflammable. In the Formula 1 they use it to create the cabin in which the drivers sit because it creates a safe environment for the driver. The use of the Formula 1 vocabulary connects back to the other exhibitions I did last year: CHICANE, APEX, YAW. The way how the street has been pictured from Mondrian's 'broadway boogie woogie' to Walker Evans, William Eggleston and even Rene Magritte keeps helping me moving this theme forward. One of the bigger paintings in the exhibition incorporates the 'Madonna' of Jean Fouquet and mixes it with motifs from the *Torque* and *Birds* series.

Would you mind talking about the process of making the works for the exhibition at Gallery Baton?

I start with a digital design that has been sampled together from previous work. The digital sampling process started last year and moves away from the photographic source. Then I draw the image onto the canvas. I always paint the light tones first because they give me the freedom to make changes whenever I want. Sometimes the light tones frustrate me because you don't see the image appear but they do make sure that I am focusing on the global image. The bolder colors are painted in the end and then image comes into being which is like putting the cherry on the pie.

What next?

At the end of January I am having a solo show at Figge Von Rosen Gallery Cologne (Germany) and also a solo exhibition by the end of June at Marlborough Contemporary London (UK). I also partake in a couple of group shows which are on view now: 'COLLECTIE XXXIII', Museum for Contemporary Art (Antwerp, Belgium) 'Museum to scale', Royal Museum of Fine Arts (Brussels, Belgium), 'First we take The Hague, then we take Berlin', Embassy of Belgium (The Hague, The Netherlands).

Then I am also working on two books which will come out later this year. One book is with Kay Heymer who is a critic/curator from Museum Kunstpalast Dusseldorf. The other book is with John Welchman who wrote for my monograph 'CRACK' and who will explain in the upcoming monograph why I actually paint the street.

I am also currently involved in a couple of public projects where I am creating an intervention for the architecture.