

IN THE PRINT ROOM | Preview. Work on Paper by Koen van den Broek
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An interview with Koen van den Broek, Cologne, 21 December 2009
By Nico Van Hout

“Why have you recently begun to paint on paper?”

Koen van den Broek: “To me, it’s been a double tryout. This is the first time since 1998 that I’ve worked on paper. Back in my Los Angeles studio, I was finding it hard to be productive. All I have to show from that early L.A. period are two paintings on canvas. So after a while I decided to give it a second go. I realised that I had become too absorbed in the world of film; I felt I was too close to the subject matter and needed to create some distance. Back in Belgium, the image was detached from its origin.”

“The groups of work from Angle [2007] and Out of Space and the collaboration with John Baldessari [2008] had all been carefully thought-out, deliberate. Now I wanted to let go of all baggage, liberate myself from the automatic memory of El Greco, Corot, Warhol and up to the present day. It took more than a couple of drawings to achieve this detachment. I first took a sheet of paper and made a pencil drawing of a car in a desert and two other compositions, which I subsequently overpainted. In L.A., I used to work on an American size paper that is slightly larger than our standard A4 size. I continued to experiment with combining two or three images to see if they worked together. I soon got the hang of it and within six months it felt quite familiar. Then the second series came into being.”

“Did you feel inhibited when painting on canvas?”

Koen van den Broek: “Inhibited is too big a word. But painting on paper did give me more freedom; it requires less preparation. Working on paper is quicker. You can capture things more easily. And there’s no wasting time mounting and preparing the canvas. I still use rather rough brushes. I never work out my paintings in fine detail. The presence of just a few surprising dashes in between the abstractions gives the work a very physical feel.”

“Why do you use photographs? Corot used paint in the open air.”

Koen Van den Broek: “I don’t regard these works as preparatory studies. For that, I rely on photographs. It’s quite simple really: everybody does it. To stubbornly ignore photography would be artificial and senseless. It would be ridiculous not to use photos. Rubens didn’t have a camera, but we do. It’s important that I take the pictures myself. I never use published photographs. I determine the image and distance myself from reality. Also, I use analogue rather than digital photography. Otherwise I would be constantly gazing at the display. And when I’m done photographing, I take the roll of film to the lab, so I actually have to hold it in my hands, and it becomes tangible. Also, it seems incongruous to me to explore locations for the right composition and to simply take hundreds of digital images from which to pick later. For that matter, I also draw much inspiration from film.”

“Artists of the past would choose a high horizon in order to be able to represent a lot, but you typically pay little attention to detail. So why this panoramic perspective?”

Koen van den Broek: “In Michael Haneke’s most recent movie, *Das Weiße Band* [2009], the camera is frozen still. The actors move in and out of view, you catch glimpses of limbs or simply hear voices. The power of suggestion makes the image stronger and sometimes also more aggressive. And this has relevance to how I fix my subject matter in the composition; it find it exciting. By placing an object in the bottom left corner, by using different dimensions, and by deviating from symmetry, you can profoundly change the perception of the image. It’s a way of creating tension and suggesting movement.”

“Do you feel influenced by the perspective distortions in the landscapes of Morandi and Diebenkorn?”

Koen van den Broek: “Diebenkorn used to apply layer upon layer of paint. It’s not my kind of aesthetic and I don’t feel it’s necessary either. I draw inspiration more from Matisse, the Godfather of twentieth-century art. As soon as I’ve drawn the main lines in pencil, I have a framing for the image that I wish to represent. It’s a synthesis of this swimming pool and those plants. I don’t bother with details. By using a broad brush, I retain only the essence. Why is Matisse so brilliant with three colours and two lines?”

“Why do you use acrylic paint, not gouache?”

Koen van den Broek: “Acrylic paint is a horrible plastic-based paint that I never use on canvas. In Los Angeles, I used to buy my material at an art supply shop called Utrecht, or ‘Youtrek’ as they pronounce it over there. They had these small tubes of easy-to-dilute paint, which turned out to be acrylic. So that’s the reason why. In fact, though, it does look a bit like gouache. Perhaps they don’t have real gouache in L.A. [laughs].”