

**Hans Ulrich Obrist  
Interviewt  
Koen van den Broek**

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**Koen van den Broek**  
*Grand Prix*  
2010  
180 x 120 cm  
Oil on canvas

## Koen van den Broek

interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist

**HUO** I'm curious as to how it all started. When you came into art was there an epiphany of some sort?

**KvdB** I studied mathematics in Leuven and started as a building engineer at university in Leuven (KUL) and then I made a shift when I was twenty years old. I was fed up with it because engineering in architecture had nothing to do with creation and there was too much focus on other issues. I just decided to go to into painting without knowing anything. I didn't really understand what art was about and because of all the difficulties in art schools, because of certain teachers who are frustrated artists, to learn, you have to do everything yourself. It didn't work out very well. But I did a post-graduate at HISK in Antwerp where I met people like Catherine David and Chris Dercon and the curator David Elliot and different artists, which was an eye-opener. I think the first question for a painter is finding a different place for making new art in the oldest medium: you have to think about how you can make a difference. You need a trick.

**HUO** You have to change the rules of the game in order to make a contribution?

**KvdB** Yes. I saw that the same thing was being done everywhere in Europe, so I took a plane to San Francisco, just to see if maybe something fresh was happening there. Then I came to the conclusion that the same thing was happening there too, so I became fatalistic and disappointed about the possibilities. Then I came into contact with Mike Kelley and with John Baldessari and saw a different way of thinking. There was a generosity that I didn't feel in Belgium – collaborations and so on; it was a kind of an anarchistic and creative attitude. My first very important contact was Baldessari in 1998, when I was twenty-five. It was important because although he quit painting, he still thinks like a painter. As a painter I try to think conceptually, I don't believe in different media.

**HUO** So it was this idea of an expanded notion of painting?

**KvdB** I think all art is about making decisions: the right decision at the right moment. It's a combination of elements, and choosing which element you put next to another one in different situations, and what the result is of doing this and not doing something else. But whether you do this with a photo or you do this with a painting, it's the same.

**HUO** The dialogue with Baldessari started long before you did this beautiful book together, *This an Example of That* (2008).

**KvdB** Yes. We'd been talking about collaborating and I said, 'John, what are we going to do?' He said, 'Let's keep it simple: you do the painting and I'll do the photos.' I said, 'OK.' He sent me photos that were the opposite of what I usually do: all black and white and mostly interiors, which I don't paint; human presence, which I don't paint. It was a

kind of game. John chose photographs from old Hollywood productions. The artists' book is the design for the larger works, so they're at 1:1 scale. For the actual works, I decided on the dimensions: some were three by four metres, some were smaller; depending on the topic. There was a very kitsch image from a Western movie; I decided to blow it up as the biggest part of seven different panels of three by four metres. I put a white architectural structure into it, just wiping everything away. A critic [Wouter Davidts VU Amsterdam] said maybe this was my answer to Anselm Kiefer or Wilhelm Sasnal, who are not my favourite artists. The big difference between Kiefer and Baldessari is Baldessari said, 'I will not make any more boring art'; he burnt all his paintings: the 'Cremation' projects. Kiefer keeps his pieces, makes a big package of them and sells them to a museum. So I go the Baldessari way because I think it's difficult to continue to develop if you don't lose or get rid of something.

**HUO** It's interesting that Baldessari sent you photographs of everything you don't do. But you do make a lot of photography yourself, though it's mostly colour photography. To what extent is photography important for you and how do you decide when to paint a photograph and when not to?

**KvdB** The main thing is, I'm the person behind the camera and that's how I differ from Richter and a lot of painters who work from photos. So I decide on how the picture is taken: the angle, the topic, which is usually non-elements, non-places, very influenced by film, by Polanski, Tarantino, whatever. For example, take the movie *The Cotton Club*: at the start of *The Cotton Club* you have a view of a gutter and some kerb and it's totally abstract – you just have black and white and the light reflecting off of it – but it's not abstraction because it's a realistic scene. Then you have the sound of a jazz club and the camera moves up, showing the club, and this tells you everything you need to know about the whole movie. So these elements – the light, the movement of the camera, going from one topic to another – are very important. When you go from point A to point B, you have a way of contemplating, of thinking, of not being busy with emails, with the internet, with communication, but concentrating on this, which also applies to painting. I try to find different structures that suggest the possibility of abstraction. You see this with the three big 'M's: Malevich, Mondrian and Matisse. Matisse's *Porte-fenêtre à Collioure*, for instance, is a painting of windows where normally you'd see a seascape, but it's night so it's a black square. There's a possibility of abstraction, but because he's painting night, it's also a realistic thing. And he's actually the base of everything that happened in the twentieth century from then to Andy Warhol.

**HUO** He's your hero?

**KvdB** Yes, sure.

HUO And has Richter influenced you?

KB I love his work. I can say that he never influenced me, though. I'm fascinated by what's happened in history: in the 1950s the Americans took painting over and then Richter took it back again. Martin Kippenberger too, has a very wide balance of different ways of working. I think he wants to do it all: photography, political art, abstract art, sculptures. I love his sculptures the most.

HUO You also make sculptures yourself. There were some in the exhibition *Curbs & Cracks* at S.M.A.K in Ghent. There are some abstract elements in your work, some borderlines in your painting that suddenly come out as wedges or like sculpture. What's the role of these sculptures?

KvdB They're not really my decision. These are sculptures that I did five years ago as a trial because I wanted to take the chance. I had a lot of discussions about them with different people, including some with Jay Jopling, and Jay told me, 'You're a better painter.' I said, 'Yes, it's so literal, it's so direct.' But Andrew Renton from Goldsmiths College, the curator of the exhibition, said, 'I'm going to show this.' I said, 'I don't know.' He said, 'I don't care. I'm the curator; I'm going to show this. Just see it as an element from a theatre piece or whatever. Don't think about whether it's art or not. Don't give a shit, just let it be there.' 'OK.' It was the first time I'd worked with a curator that intense and for him it was one of the first occasions when he wasn't influenced by the wishes of the artist and I thought it kind of silly that you want to control everything as an artist.

HUO So you just let it flow?

KvdB Yes. It was very 1990s. Over the last ten years, I've wanted to control everything.

HUO So the sculptures were, in this sense, not your choice?

KvdB Yes, but this business of deciding whether it's art or not is very tricky. You don't always want to go on the safe side because it's boring. I felt we had good results, but I'm not sure I'm going to make more sculptures; maybe in five years I'll do something else. There was another sculpture. Did you see the door that was open, the door crack? [*Doorcrack*, 2010] *Doorcrack* 2010. That's another sculpture.

HUO Jennifer Higgie wrote that the climate of your paintings is as precise and sparse as polished metal. So there's something almost sculptural in the paintings.

KvdB Well yes. It depends on which painting. There's a lot of reference to film architecture, but also to sculptures. One of my first 'Borders' is almost like sculpture. It's a photo that we did in California. In LA, they paint the kerbs where you can't park, and you have blue ones and red ones. That's like Minimalism.

HUO How did the 'Borders' come about?

KvdB It was before I met Baldessari, when I was about twenty-four. I was trying to decide whether or not to use photography in my work; I didn't want to work with photography because every painter was doing this and I wanted to find another way. But then I came to this zero point of only painting two lines and a circle, which didn't make any sense, so I decided to go and make photographs. After three weeks, I made a painting of a landscape with green lines and a red line and with a horizon that was very high. This was just one of my landscapes. There was a guy who came into my studio and said, 'Oh! You're starting to work abstractly!' I said, 'It's not abstract.'

HUO So it allowed you to do both abstract and not abstract at the same time?

KvdB Exactly. And not have to decide whether to make an abstract picture or not.

HUO These works have this travelling element as well. You seem to photograph the road and moving places a lot when you travel.

KvdB I think movement around different places is about looking for differences. The only reason I did two paintings from Belgian landscapes was because some people said, 'Is Belgium not good enough for you?' But it's not about that; travelling is about having the distance to surprise yourself and having a fresh eye. Travelling is also a connection with movies. I like Wim Wenders' movie *Paris, Texas*. It's in the name already; you see the American landscape through the eyes of a European director, and his view is more objective than the Americans because of the distance.

HUO And is your 'Out of Space' series related to the 'Border' series? (Here is a misunderstanding. The out of space series is after the this an example of that series. I explain later)

KvdB Lots of paintings are about the moment when you're in your car. Because of the way you sit in the car, and the movement of the camera, these are mainly horizontal rather stable and frontal photos. The 'Border' series is about when you step out of your car. The moment you do this you still have the suggestion of speed because you're standing and looking for perspective and there's a directional *Fluchtpunkt*. It's often vertical, it's a snapshot, it's less stable..

HUO What role does John Cage's idea of chance play in all of this?

KvdB It was important at the beginning, but the element of chance disappears after a while because you know what's going to happen when you make your pictures.

HUO You have a system.

KvdB Yes. And I wanted to avoid the system when I quit painting for a year, my seventh year, which was 2004 or 5, and that's why I started my 'Angle' series, where I tried to re-find the ideas in my first paintings. With the 'Angle' series I revisited my own images and treated them like autonomous images disconnected from reality. Another way of avoiding to go back to a system was to collaborate with Baldessari in *This an Example of That*. In The 'Out of Space' series I almost literally took my paint off his photos and then painted the image again on a white canvas. Then I found another way of moving on further; just doing stripes over crack paintings. That's why I call them 'Just Stripes', because I didn't want to make a reference any more.

HUO And what's next?

KvdB It might be called 'The Big Sculpture Show'. [Laughs] I did some photographs of shadows of sculptures by Nancy Rubins, Chris Burden's wife, and I did some pictures and photographs of black shadows. So maybe that will work out, maybe not.

HUO Dan Graham says one can only understand an artist if you know what music he or she listens to. Do you listen to music when you paint?

KvdB No.

HUO What music do you listen to otherwise?

**KvdB** Nothing specific. My painting *BADWATER* (1999) was done at a time when I was listening to Miles Davis; it was a very existential time in my life. I listen to jazz, I listen to Johnny Cash, I listen to the Pixies. My wife runs the classical radio station in Belgium, but I don't listen to it very often. My friends make compilations for me of music from Quentin Tarantino movies and from David Lynch's *Lost Highway*, which is great.

**HUO** What would be your advice, in 2010, to a young art student?

**KvdB** Take your time. Try to be smart. Avoid the hype. Know what's happening and try to do something different. Maybe something about Luc (and others): An enemy image (not sure if this is understandable English...) is not a relevant or interesting concept to me. Once a famous director told me: 'if you have a message, send a telegram'. I can see one element which connects artists as Tuymans, Borremans, Richter, Sasnal and even Kiefer. They all feel the need to comment media, and image culture, politics etc. I'm a kind of bored with this and think that an artist should rather concentrate on art, it's difficult enough to create a valuable art which reflects and triggers/excites their public. And which adds something to the rest. I love movies, images, architecture, creation in general. The 'other' artists somehow which to comment. This is not anymore convincing to me. But I do agree that some did interesting art in their time.