

M E D I A



Michael Van den Besselaar

Candy-colored weapons of mass destruction, JFK, the dead Norma Jean, images of TV-sets and luxurious homes that would turn every classic James Bond villain worth several million go green with envy: Dutch artist Michael Van den Besselaar isn't necessarily interested in delivering a precise portrait of the rise and backlash of the American Dream, but how it is tied in our collective consciousness regardless of ones very own cultural background and upbringing. His unique visual mix of pop culture, politics, retro imagery, and personal nostalgia is reflecting on American culture, the dilemma of secondhand knowledge, and alternate worlds that became more important than reality itself. The outstanding artist took a break from preparing new paintings for his forthcoming show at Brooklyn's Black & White Gallery to talk to Lodown in mid January 2012.

MODULAR ADVANCED ARMED ROBOTIC SYSTEM 3, 2010
60 X 60 CM
OIL PAINT ON LINEN

N I S S A S S A

Michael, was oil paint always your favourite way of expression or did you have to work your way through countless techniques before you discovered it as your perfect fit?

I think my visual language has been subject to change, everything depends on the subject-matter and the way I want the final outcome to look, I do not have a single standard way of making a painting not even in mixing my colors. What I love about painting in general is that I can turn some coloured mud and a vague idea into something that looks believable. I've worked with different materials in different techniques but I prefer to work with oil paint because it allows endless possibilities. It's really fantastic, you can use it thick and sticky or as a more fluid substance to work in layers, and to get saturated but at the same time transparent colors and diverse textures. You can make it look like plastic, like velvet, water or dust, whatever you want it to look like, and because it dries slowly you have plenty of time to do so.

In the late 80's I started off as an abstract painter in a kind of late modernist style, not bad at all, you could easily put it on a wall without offending anyone but at some point I realised that abstraction had turned into commonly approved aesthetics, not only my own work but abstraction and modernism in general. The narrative aspect in art was almost gone and that was exactly what started to creep on me.

I decided to make a radical switch in the direction I wanted my work to evolve. It was about a month before I moved to Paris when I called a former teacher of mine, Hans van der Lek - he worked in a figurative style - and asked him whether he could tell or show me how to do what he was doing. He told me that I could come and work in his studio, I just had to bring an empty canvas and leave my crappy paint and brushes at home. In about a week I was taught what I needed to know about paint, transparencies, glazing and so on. With what I learned I was able to analyze the skills and tricks of the long gone painters I admired and I was very happy with the fast progress I was making. But soon I realised that the problem with painting in an old figurative way was that old forms were no longer reflecting contemporary sensibilities, they had lost their relevance and could easily be taken for a nostalgic fake. I realized that I was not interested in realism as such but in recalibrating. In that

TIME MACHINE MIRROR #2, 2007
120 X 160 CM
OIL PAINT ON LINEN



way I could use a mix of sources without my work becoming nostalgic in itself. My background as an abstract painter worked to my advantage in finding my way around this challenge.

You were born in Brunssum, a fairly provincial town not far from the German border... a lot of your paintings though are dealing - or at least grazing - with American iconography and the up and downs of the American way of life in general. To which degree has your upbringing an effect on the themes you're dealing with in your paintings?

Brunssum would have been a completely uninteresting dot on the map if it was not for two things: the blood weeping figurine of a Holy Virgin and the NATO command centre located in an abandoned coal mine. I leave the catholic relics for what they are, because even though I think they are part of an interesting social and cultural history I can't take them seriously in a religious way. However, the contrasts between the local customs and those imported by the American military personnel at the NATO base were significant; They spoke a strange language, dressed differently, drove their Lincolns, Chevrolets, and Mustangs through town, their kids jumped around on pogo sticks, went downhill on skateboards and played baseball. I was

fascinated by this new entity. You have to understand that the Netherlands, especially the southern region where I was born, are traditionally orientated towards the east, and Germany in particular. It was also the time when American culture started to have a serious influence in Europe that was still quite an old-fashioned place, very much regurgitating it's own cultural history, and lacking its own contemporary cultural answers to counter this invasion of American pop culture. I have the feeling that different local versions of popular culture with American flavors emerged in Europe since that time; The music business is a good example where almost every style has local representatives heavily influenced by American styles: French HipHop, German Metal and so on. I think that today the cultural difference between Europe and the USA is less significant than the cultural difference between, let's say, Norway and Italy.

Identity and cultural background are no longer solely defined geographically, I am of the generation that grew up heavily influenced by American culture and still remembers how different it used to be.

In your "Land of the Free" series as well as the "Nostalgic About the Future" series you're dealing with a certain kind of architecture and interior design. Please

tell me a bit about the story behind these projects... is it a reflection of what we interpreted as luxury - and the promise that it's achievable for everyone - in the late 50s/early 60s?

I like architecture, as a child I even wanted to become an architect, it shows a lot about how societies are organized. The Land of the Free series are portraits of American mid- 20th century homes and what intrigues me about this type of architecture is its individual but temporary character, the houses are designed with human interest in mind but are clearly not build to last for centuries. A total opposite of the West European way of building homes for posterity.

Yes, my architectural series is the reflection of the 50's/60's, an era we like to refer to as the "optimistic" years. After cleaning up the rubble of the second world war it was probably logical to believe that life could only get better if not perfect, and until a certain point in time it actually did. Both the capitalist West and the communist East started to build their ideal society. I don't want to focus too much on the political and ideological situations of that time but when it comes to visual references from the past we immediately put on our pink glasses and want to believe that life used to be better. As if the cold war never existed or the 527 atmospheric nuclear test



explosions never took place, we are quite selective in what we like to remember. I think of this series as a metaphor for a utopian gesture from the past to the future, once hopeful in its vision but dark in its view of what preceded or followed. I visualized this historical ambivalence in my paintings as a "solarization" effect, a phenomenon in photography in which the image is partially or wholly reversed. Positive becomes negative and colors get a psychedelic apocalyptic effect.

Social commentary and a twisted sense of humor are essential components in the majority of your paintings... would you say they are as important as the aesthetic realization?

True, these are components although it's not my intention to be ironic or to lecture people, I like to think of my work as more complex than that. It interests me to mix the past and the present, and by creating a context wherein I can merge the different subject matters and timelines, I change their imaginary and symbolic order. The Time Machine Mirror paintings are a good example to illustrate what I mean. In this body of work I depicted still lifes of retro television sets, televisions as representation of our collective memory. The meaning of each individual screen is quite clear, but it changes because of the content of the surrounding screens, it's being detached of original context. This way real can easily become imaginary and vice versa, what we remember and how we remember becomes unclear. Sometimes this turns out to be funny as a pleasant side effect and sometimes it becomes a

more serious comment. I guess I paint the difference between things. As for the aesthetic part, I believe that the way I work doesn't only make my paintings more convincing but also subversive.

For the delicate "Larger Than Life" series (check page 88-92) you portrayed iconic public figures from the 20th century on their deathbed... what made you decide to switch to acrylic ink for this one? And what were the aspects for the final selection of your protagonists?

The choice for acrylic ink was an obvious one since this series is made on paper and using oil paint on paper poses a lot of archival problems, besides that I decided to use an airbrush to apply the ink. I normally don't work with airbrushes because I hate to clean them all the time to keep them from splattering, but by using diluted acrylic inks (almost watercolor-like) it worked quite well. I liked the idea of not touching the surface with brushes but to have the portraits emerge from several layers of ink, literally keeping a respectful distance from the portrayed. It's fascinating how lifeless dead people can be; the changed color of their skin and the lack of muscle tension make them look peaceful and fragile. The selection I made is a mix of personal preferences, some usual suspects, some to bring balance in the previous two categories and last but not least the availability of the right source images. They are all icons from the worlds of actors, singers, politicians, religious leaders, freedom fighters (or terrorists, depending on your point of view), saints

and thieves. A lot can be said about them individually, some died of old age and others died violently but they all left us a legacy, cultural, ideological, intellectual or political. These legacies are the main meaning of the title "Larger than Life." The secondary meaning is Death, as death is the ultimate reality of life.

This March your new body of work will be on view at Brooklyn's Black & White Gallery... a very outstanding piece of work is your take on the assassination of JFK, which you display with toy characters. I can imagine this will raise more than just a few eyebrows, especially in the US. I was wondering if you've received some feedback about it already?

Yes, the JFK assassination is still a touchy subject and I owe the raising eyebrows some explanation, especially since I depicted this work with toy figures which might make it look like a joke. Browsing on eBay I came across some toy models of the Lincoln x-100, the presidential limousine in which JFK got shot. It exists in a couple of different versions; small, large, and even one containing the passengers you recognize from the Zapruder film some seconds before the shooting took place. I decided to buy them because of their eeriness, after all there is only one thing to play with these toys. I made a couple of small paintings with the cars as a subject but after finding a small plastic JFK figurine I started thinking of how I could create a scene that described the tragic event that took place on November 22nd 1963 entirely with toys.

The problem with the assassination of John F. Kennedy is the difference between the official report of what happened that day and the Zapruder film, which shows us something else. Without this footage the lone gunman theory would probably have been accepted as a fact. However, what really happened was not registered by the human eye but unconsciously captured by the lens of a camera and therefore we are able to repeat the images of the assassination over and over again. We are able to view and repeat in slow motion, the moment our fantasy about Kennedy got shattered which turned it into a collective trauma. I think that by depicting the assassination with toy figures I pinpoint precisely the consequence of this collective trauma, that historical closure is difficult if not impossible.

To put all this in a more contemporary context; I strongly believe that the assassination of JFK and the events that took place on 9/11 are comparable in terms of collective trauma, the sudden change of our real, and the difficulty of closure.

What are the cards holding in 2012 for Michael Van den Besselaar?

Until now the cards hold the show at Black and White gallery and some other group shows in the first half of the year, the second half is still quite open. I will of course continue to shape and reshape my painting. In preparation of a new body of work I do a lot of photography. I normally use these images just as source material, I never thought about them as art, but lately I started to take the camera as a tool and photography as a result more seriously. So far the images look like they are heavily treated in photoshop but in fact they aren't. I've build a tiny studio to photograph objects and use uncommon light sources to make it very difficult to understand what it is you are looking at. I have a lot of fun making these photographs and I think of them as work on paper. And finally, since I am secretly very eager in winning the individual pursuit championship of my cycling club this year, I sure will spend more time at the velodrome.

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REBELLION OF TECHNOLOGY, 2010
190 X 190 CM
OIL PAINT ON LINEN