S.M.A.K.

THESE STRANGERS...

PAINTING AND PEOPLE
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These Strangers… Painting and People presents the human figure in the Western painting of the last forty years. The exhibition is not a survey, but explores the oeuvres of nine artists who so far have had little or no work shown in Belgian museums. Each of these artists, who are of different generations, starts out from the tradition of the portrait and goes in great depth into viewing the model and into the look he or she returns. This results in portraits that are embedded in the personal, societal, political and cultural environment and the period in which the artists live and work.

The title of the exhibition is taken from These Strangers in a Foreign World, a poem by Emily Dickinson (1830–86), and accentuates the relationship with the Other:

These Strangers, in a Foreign World,
Protection asked of me –
Befriend them, lest Yourself in Heaven
Be found a Refugee –

In the course of art history, painting has evolved from the application of paint to a support as a subjective act into a complex and many-branched domain where the personal and the mass produced meet. Nowadays, painters combine handwork with industrial techniques and supplement pure imagination with images appropriated from the media and art.

The painted portrait has developed in a comparable way. It was originally intended to give a true-to-life portrayal of the subject, but it later played a crucial part in the rise of individualism and its expression. A traditional portrait shows a specific person whom the artist has actually met. It is a rendering of someone’s outward appearance, but it also says something about what the person is like and how the artist saw him or her. Portraits enable us to look at and get a sense of others, but our own ideas are reflected too. Portraits express something deep and fundamental that transcends the ordinary and momentary.

In the present network culture, where the self-image is moulded and shaped through the views of others, the internet and social media, portraits are not necessarily the result of real encounters. Artists now have unlimited access to the abundant archives of art history and the visual media on which they can draw and then, to their heart’s content, manipulate, recombine and set these images in new contexts. They no longer sketch the human figure as an individual, but as a metaphor for human existence in our complex globalised world. At the same time, they ask pertinent questions about such concepts as originality, identity, gender, subjectivity and consciousness (of the self).
In her paintings and drawings, Nicole Eisenman comments with wry humour on current political events and social developments. In her individual and group portraits of anonymous figures we can discern her deep fascination for human interaction and our inability to make contact with each other.

Eisenman explores such topics as gender, sexuality, group dynamics and inequality in a rich visual language that refers to the classical tradition, art history genres, styles such as allegory and satire, and visual material taken from popular culture. She mixes these references with direct personal experiences in her circle of friends and her everyday surroundings.

As opposed to a possible feminist interpretation of her work, Eisenman describes her practice more as an attempt to explore and understand the human body in a new way, without focusing on the difference between man and woman. She aims for a mobile, flexible and cross-gender visual language.

Eisenman’s paintings are characterised by pronounced colours, virtuoso compositions and human diversity. She subordinates her technique to the psychological depth of her portraits. What she intends is specifically to intensify the relationship between the people she portrays and the public that looks at her work. She does this especially by means of gazes and exchanges of them. She makes it impossible for the viewer not to get into contact with the figures in her paintings or to become part of their reality.
The characters in the shiny, layered paintings of Victor Man are bathed in a nocturnal light. They look as if they have escaped from time while still bearing the traces of tradition. In his work, Man cites from the history of painting and photography, from the old masters through Edouard Manet, Paul Gauguin, Balthus and Thierry De Cordier to the present. In addition, he also takes inspiration from literature, memories of his youth and stories from his childhood, and combines them with myths and culture from Romania, his native country.

Victor Man does not make literal use of his sources, but repeats, manipulates, duplicates and distorts them to create strange images that balance between crystal-clear fact and obscure fantasy. He creates a world where man and animal, male and female, the animate and the inanimate are all in a changing, indeterminate state. Through poetry, the artist brings together elements that cannot be captured in one single feeling or a static image. In his own words, the artist claims “to steal the soul of found images and carry them off to another place”.

For Grafting or Lermontov dansant comme Saint-Sébastien, Man started out from a boy’s face. It seems as if he superimposed two slightly different versions of this portrait so that the face was given a third eye. In the painting, the shadow effect in the photo has been completely removed and the emphasis is on the cheeky, impenetrable gaze of this three-eyed boy. The odd metamorphosis strikes a perfect balance between mystery and reality.
From the 1950s to the 1970s, the heyday of abstract expressionism, Alice Neel painted figurative portraits. In her flat she received people from the most varied backgrounds – relatives, writer-friends, fellow artists, mothers and children, neighbours, immigrants, white businesspeople, trade union leaders, communists, republicans etc. – and captured them with her keen eye.

Neel’s portraits are direct, penetrating and honest. Each one arose out of an intense dialogue between the artist and her model and each has powerful psychological expressiveness. They show living beings who may or may not be at their ease and who have surrendered their self-image to what Alice Neel saw as ‘the truth’. Neel’s focus on her models forced her to reduce the presence of the surroundings to its essence in her paintings. Instead she concentrated on body poses and especially on the hands and the eyes. Neel’s subjects only rarely bought their portraits; they were unsettling because they always had something of the personality of the artist in them.

Because of her democratic and socially-committed selection of models, Neel touched upon such social and political topics as inequality of race, gender and status. She was one of the last important painters to work with live models and she spent many hours with them. Her portraits were not yet influenced by the effects of the ‘society of the spectacle’. They are nevertheless very topical in nature and relate to the characteristics of the period in which they were done. Rather than bringing a tradition to a close, Neel’s portraits seem to start off a new one: the questioning of the relevance of the painted portrait after the rise and popularisation of photography.
Paulina Olowska grew up behind the Iron Curtain in Poland in the latter days of communism. She still lives and works in the countryside there to this day. As an artist she explores such feminist topics as woman as an archetype, muse, mother, housewife, model or artist and she sets them against the backdrop of the historical, social and cultural shifts between East and West since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Olowska has always been profoundly interested in the cultural and social significance of clothing and fashion. For her Applied Fantastic series (2010) she started from fashion magazines from the 1960s and 1970s with their knitting and sewing patterns for East European housewives, who were fascinated by Western fashion and the consumer society. They made copies of the latest trends in Western clothing by hand at home, but did not succeed in concealing their Eastern European origins. Their imitations of the Western style could not rise above the local, traditional decorative level.

In her more recent work, the static nature of Olowska’s earlier paintings, which were based on commercial images, has grown and evolved into a lively style oriented towards the present time. Whereas in her early portraits the emphasis was more on the garments than the anonymous models, her more recent portraits subtly reveal the relationship between the personalities of her mostly female models and the surroundings in which they pose.
Nicolas Party counters the rapid evolution and complexity of technology with simplicity. In his view, technology undeniably and inevitably influences culture, but does not necessarily make it any better. According to him, beauty can be found in simple things and naivety is one of the ways to reach it.

Party does not paint from a live model, nor does he portray real individuals with a personal story. In his imagination he creates pure, archetypal faces that are reminiscent of masks, are detached from time and place and reveal nothing about who they are.

Party draws inspiration from, among other things, Picasso’s pastel drawings of neoclassical heads, which in their turn are based on archaic Greek sculpture with its quite specific rules of beauty. There too, outward features were idealised and the distinction between male and female faces remained very vague. Party feels that this enhances the perfection and beauty of portraits.

Nicolas Party frames his portraits, but also paints the surrounding exhibition space. In this way he explores the effect of decoration on his individual, independent paintings. In his view, a painter in the first place creates a surface, a visual element. The content that lies beneath it is on a second, underlying level. On the basis of his experience that it is impossible to attune surface and content to each other, Party endeavours to make works of art that “are shadows of reality that continue to travel through time”.

Nicolas Party / Portrait with an Owl / 2016
installation view CAN, Centre d’Art Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, 2016
collection of Mario Testino, courtesy of the artist, the Modern Institute, Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow
photo © Anton Satus
ELIZABETH PEYTON

°1965, USA

Just like the work of Alice Neel, the paintings and drawings of Elizabeth Peyton present a document of a particular period. To counterbalance the complexity of the 1990s, the artist decided to do something very simple. She created images of people rather than portraits, putting the emphasis on visual pleasure, an artistic choice which at the time was considered hopelessly old-fashioned. Peyton’s painting style, which in this sense was ‘reactionary’, was in fact radical because it abandoned the customary irony and used popular visual material from magazines, videos and films without making any critical comment on it.

Peyton paints delicate, idealised portraits of artist-friends such as Matthew Barney, Jake Chapman, Martin Creed, Peter Doig and Rirkrit Tiravanija, of her loves, of pop stars and musicians such as Jarvis Cocker, Kurt Cobain and Sid Vicious, and of members of Europe’s royal families. Sometimes Peyton uses existing images and sometimes she paints from a live model. She chooses her models on the basis of ‘love’ and her desire to identify with them. She also distances herself from the typically male artist who usually subjects female models to his gaze. She portrays men who are not shy of posing as an object of beauty and thereby show their ‘feminine’ side.

The modest format of Peyton’s light-filled oil paintings reinforces their intensity. They are often no larger than 20 by 30 centimetres and are reminiscent of miniature paintings and Renaissance portraits on small panels. Peyton’s portraits do not offer us a window on the world, but are at home in the intimacy of the living room and express a personal involvement that is comparable to family photos.
Nowadays many artists integrate the computer into their work for the purposes of research, communication, design and/or production. The endless stream of images available in set formats via digital media has become a universally accepted language in which these artists too formulate their visual arguments.

The schematic figures in Avery Singer’s paintings are halfway between human and robot. They are composed of three-dimensional building blocks taken from such popular computer programmes as Google SketchUp and Photoshop, which the artist uses at the design stage. For the second stage, Singer copies the digital assemblages in paint on canvas, restricting herself to tones of grey. To achieve this she meticulously tapes off small areas of canvas successively and then sprays them. Singer deliberately makes a sharp contrast between this labour-intensive handwork and the quick digital design stage.

In her characteristic working method, Singer examines possible new ways of creating characters which in her view are ‘naturalistic’ or ‘true to life’. Her stylised paintings of expressionless, geometric characters in generalised, colourless rooms lit from one side have an atmosphere very much their own. With a humorous wink, they respond to typical situations between people and raise the question of the impact of digital developments on the world in general and art in particular.
HENRY TAYLOR

*1958, USA

Henry Taylor started painting in the mid-1980s when he was a member of the technical staff at a psychiatric clinic. His paintings and drawings from that period are direct, empathic and expressionist. They present a view of the world inhabited by mental patients, which is surrounded by taboo and often hidden from sight. It gave Taylor the idea of painting what he saw around him, both inside and outside the institution.

Taylor’s work concentrates on ‘ordinary’ people who look at him while he looks back at them. It takes the form of a record of his life in the midst of his Afro-American family, friends and acquaintances, and fleeting encounters with women, men and children from a wide variety of milieus. It is the product of an unceasing story that continues developing in the personal as well as the historical and political realms. The artist enters into each encounter on the basis of the same intense commitment.

Taylor is a master at bringing his models to life. The deconstructive style in which he deviates at will and quite freely from the tradition of portrait painting looks naïve and autodidactic. But he did take an art course and is exceptionally well informed, almost encyclopaedically, on modern and contemporary art. Yet Taylor’s work is very authentic and original, both in its poetry and humour and because of the artist’s obvious energetic urge to paint.
Katharina Wulff was born in East Berlin. She fled to West Berlin a few months before the fall of the Wall. From 1990 she studied painting at one of its many art schools. Wulff’s limited access to contemporary art during her years in East Germany encouraged her to deviate from the prevailing form of painting which was dominated by men and, in her view, was characterised by irony and negativity. Wulff approached figurative painting in an open-minded way unrelated to any trend, in a country that was foreign to her and a new culture unrelated to the one she had grown up in.

Wulff sees each painting as a construction, a theatrically staged snapshot. She emphasises this by means of distorted perspective, deformed anatomy, inward-looking figures and carefully positioned patches and voids in the midst of an abundance of lavish detail. The scenes she paints suggest a vision of society, but they also deliberately hold back information about social relationships, identity and the broader context. There is little communication, warmth or contact. The prevailing atmosphere is one of discord, dominance, control, oppression, dependence and pride.

Wulff’s subjects have been deprived of their individuality and figure in scenes set in times and places different from those of their real lives. As from 1994, the artist often travelled to Marrakesh, and in 2010 she settled there permanently. This change of environment and social context have had a major influence on her style and choice of subject. At the same time, Wulff clearly continues to draw on the tradition of figurative painting, a rich source from which she eclectically selects, cuts and pastes, quotes and combines.
Have a drink or meal after your visit? S.M.A.K.-café is the place to be for a coffee break or light lunch. And there’s a terrace! Reservations can be made through info@smakcafe.be

S.M.A.K. PROGRAM 2016–17

From the Collection | 1964 –’76 - sans M.B.  
from 23.04.2016

ZVI GOLDSTEIN | Distance and Differences  
25.06… 23.10.2016

From the Collection | Incontri con Mario Merz  
25.06… 30.10.2016

From the Collection | The Attendants’ Choice MAN, DON’T GET ANGRY  
27.08… 23.10.2016

PETER DOWNSBROUGH | From To  
11.09… 23.10.2016

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01.10.2016… 08.01.2017

NAIRY BAGHRAMIAN | Déformation Professionnelle  
26.11.2016… 19.02.2017

JAMES WELLING | Metamorphosis  
28.01… 16.04.2017

program to be confirmed