

Interview Pieter-Jan De Paepe with Michiel Ceulers (EN)

Michiel, first and foremost, I would like to congratulate you on your fortieth birthday! In this festive exhibition, you take centre stage on several canvases in the form of a remarkably explicit self-portrait. I feel that the notion of the self-portrait has always been present in your work, though previously in a more indirect way.

Thank you in advance for the birthday wishes! Perhaps it is no coincidence that the exhibition is scheduled for my birthday. This is one of the reasons why I have chosen to feature myself as a figure in my new paintings. It is not just about a number, but about a beautifully rounded moment: forty years.

This age invites you to pause. To slow down and take a closer look at yourself. That's why I chose to paint myself. Apart from technical skill or physical resemblance, a self-portrait is essentially an act of reflection, examining yourself and allowing the viewer to do the same.

I am currently putting the finishing touches to the last paintings. It will only become clear during the installation process how many self-portraits will ultimately be on display in the exhibition. However, I have deliberately sought to expand the notion of the self-portrait to encompass broader and more abstract meanings.

What are our social circles? How do others see us, and how does society pigeonhole us? I am forty — am I still *emerging*? What does that word actually mean, and how has its meaning been redefined by the art world?

Is a midlife crisis imminent? Or is the concept mainly based on previous generations who had children early and, when they left home, were faced with the question, 'What now?' How does that story relate to our generation?

It is these questions, among others, that led to the creation of the works in this exhibition. Some ideas have been more clearly translated into paint than others; some have been further eroded, distorted or even cannibalised during the painting process, leaving perhaps only a title to offer a vague hint at the underlying questions. However concrete and biographical the inspiration for these works may be, they are not intended as illustrations of these questions and others like them.

It is interesting to hear that the installation process has such an influence on the final selection. Looking at your past exhibitions over the years, I notice that the selection of works often forms a heterogeneous ensemble. This made me wonder whether you intend the boundaries between the individual works to blur in such a diverse arrangement, or whether you see it more as a dialectic, with differences that highlight the diversity of your practice?

My work stems from an interest in the relationships between my paintings. In a studio setting, this takes the form of a process of mutual contamination and defilement, whereas in an exhibition context, it is more about the visual influence of one work on another. I am interested in how paintings reinforce each other, as well as how they can create tension or doubt. During an exhibition, repetitions and shifts occur: certain works return like echoes, evoking a sense of déjà vu and slowing down or distorting the perception of time and movement through space.

At a more fundamental level, negative space plays a central role in my practice. The irregular shapes of my canvases generate voids that actively produce meaning, rather than being mere absences. These spaces do not function as residual zones, but as places of potential, directing perception and attention. This approach is always present in my creative process, but due to

my messy and intuitive studio practice, this aspect often only becomes apparent during the creation of the works. This is why I consciously leave room for improvisation in my practice.

How has this translated into your current exhibition at Pizza Gallery?

This way of thinking forms the basis of the exhibition's design, although I also use a clear framework within which the works are presented. I find the architecture of the space problematic because it barely allows for sequential readability. As soon as visitors enter, they can see the whole space immediately, which leaves little room for discovery or reflection. Rather than ignoring this fact, I have used it as a starting point to create a new, temporary layout.

This intervention comprises three series of canvases which I position between the pillars. This introduces a physical interruption to the view and creates a rhythm to the movement through the space. The works are hung at eye level (150 cm) and are 120 cm high. These dimensions are deliberately similar to the size of a standard wooden board from a DIY store. The everyday nature of this reference anchors the intervention in a non-monumental logic, emphasising the object-like aspect of the paintings.

I see this arrangement as a crossroads between an exhibition I presented in Spain in 2014 and a more recent presentation in Düsseldorf. The works, which I am provisionally calling 'sensor bars', function as monochrome black surfaces that disrupt the immediate overview of the space. They force visitors to look and move differently, constantly readjusting their perception of the paintings in relation to each other and to the space.

You describe your studio as a place of 'contamination and defilement', where works can infect each other, both literally and metaphorically. Anyone who has ever visited your studio knows that it is not a sacred space, but rather a workplace where materials and paint marks are everywhere. To what extent do you need that chaos to drive your creative process?

I believe that the chaos in my studio is not merely a backdrop, but an active component of the creative process. It is not romantic chaos, but a state in which things can touch, contaminate and distort each other. As paintings, objects, sketches and remnants of earlier works accumulate, a circulation of images and materials emerges. They literally begin to influence each other. Paint drips over an older work and one canvas leans against another, leaving traces behind.

To me, that messiness is not a loss of control, but rather a means of delaying it. The studio functions as an ecosystem in which works do not exist in isolation. They are constantly negotiating with each other. No painting is completely autonomous; each one bears traces of what stood next to it, what happened before it and what failed.

I need that chaos as a form of resistance. In an overly orderly environment, the work would make decisions too quickly, become clear too quickly. The mess, the paint marks and the dust slow me down. They force me to react instead of plan. This reactive element is essential. It ensures that the work is not just the execution of an idea, but the result of circumstances.

At the same time, it is not completely random. Within that apparent chaos, its own logic develops. I usually know exactly where something is or why it is there. The studio may be untidy, but it is not indifferent. It is a space where mistakes are allowed to remain visible, and contamination becomes productive.

Without that physical and mental contamination, my work would probably become too clean and closed off. So the chaos is not a by-product of the process — it *is* the process itself.

Do you remember the first time you encountered art, or realised that you could create it yourself?

Until the age of six, I lived around the corner from the Raveel Museum. I must have seen Roger Raveel's work often, although I don't remember much about it. Nevertheless, I think that proximity had an effect: art was never far removed from everyday life. It was just somewhere nearby that you could visit, almost like a park or a library. Perhaps that's why art felt natural to me from an early age.

Growing up, many people encouraged me to go to art school, from my teachers to the staff at daycare. It was clear to everyone that I loved drawing and working with images. However, I didn't only have positive experiences during that time. I often felt that I wasn't being challenged enough; it was more about staying neatly within certain lines than truly exploring or experimenting. Consequently, it sometimes felt more like an obligation than a place where creativity could flourish.

A pivotal moment was my parents' divorce. At the time, I often saw my father struggling with how his life had turned out and the choices he had made. He had wanted to pursue an artistic career himself, but his parents told him there was no future in it. The tension between what you want to do and what is considered 'realistic' was very tangible to me. After the divorce, however, my mother gave us the exact opposite message: that we could study whatever we wanted. This gave us a sense of freedom, but also made us realise that we had to think carefully about our choices.

At the end of sixth grade, when I had to choose what to study, it actually felt pretty clear to me. I decided to do something else for two years first and then go to art school. This seemed like a way to take a step back while confirming that I still wanted to pursue an artistic career.

Another vivid memory is going to Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens with my father to see the exhibition 'In Search of the Perfect Lover'. It featured drawings by Marlene Dumas, Paul McCarthy, Louise Bourgeois and Raymond Pettibon. Those works opened up a whole new world for me, very different from anything I had experienced until then. It was rawer, more direct and sometimes more uncomfortable. They showed me that drawing is not only technical or aesthetic, but also personal and confrontational. I bought a catalogue of the exhibition and still have it today. In a way, it still feels like a kind of starting point.

Your work is full of artistic references, as if you are constantly in conversation with other images and creators. Paolo Baggi describes how you use a semiotic visual language to create painterly “inside jokes” and how these references do not *construct* lineage but rather *reveal* it. Among these references, aspects of the work of Belgian artists regularly appear, such as Jef Geys, Walter Swennen, Jan Vercruysse, Guillaume Bijl and Raoul De Keyser.

Just as my forms come into being, these references are not predetermined. They are not designed positions or strategically placed references that I establish in advance. For me, there is a fundamental difference between creating an idea and designing a work. Designing presupposes control and a pre-drawn plan — almost a recipe that must be followed meticulously. My practice rarely starts from such a fixed plan.

The references arise during the creative process. Usually unconsciously and without predetermined ideas. They do not appear as though you are carefully mixing a cocktail with a

measuring cup — precisely measured and blended — but rather as retrospective observations. While I am working, I suddenly notice a connection emerging, an echo of something I once saw or an attitude that resonates with another practice.

That moment of recognition is important to me. I would rather identify the connection myself than have it pointed out to me later. It's not because I want to claim them; it's because they are not a conscious strategy. They are not deliberate references, but traces that become visible during the creative process. Often, the work knows where it stands sooner than I do.

My position as a museum guide undoubtedly plays a role in this. Every day, I am surrounded by works of art, not only as a viewer, but also as a mediator. I have to establish connections, propose genealogies and identify affinities for an audience who are sometimes seeing the work for the first time. This constant exercise in observation, comparison, and articulation becomes embedded in my thought processes. Images accumulate within me, mix and remain unconsciously available as a frame of reference.

Perhaps that is also why I often describe other people's artworks as recipe books: a pinch of this, a pinch of that. Or I playfully say that a certain practice seems as if artists A and B had a child together. This is not an art-historical model, of course, but it illustrates how I experience kinship: as something that arises from encounters between sensibilities, rather than from linear descent.

And what about that Belgian genealogy in your work? What do you activate when it presents itself?

This so-called 'Belgian genealogy' operates in a similar manner. When elements reminiscent of Geys, Swennen, Vercruysse, Bijl or De Keyser emerge, this is not a premeditated positioning within a tradition. Rather, it is a mental atmosphere that arises during the creative process. I am constantly surrounded by such attitudes as a guide: a certain reserve, an irony that never becomes cynical and a distrust of heroic gestures. These sensibilities circulate within me and sometimes manifest themselves in my work without my explicit invocation.

What interests me is precisely the difference between constructing and observing. I do not construct a genealogy; I observe it as it takes shape. Just as my forms emerge through repetition, shift and correction, references also appear as a residue of looking, speaking and thinking that is already within me.

Designing implies a clear end result, whereas for me, the creative process is more akin to listening. Perhaps guiding is listening to what a work makes possible in terms of meaning. In my own practice, I try to maintain that openness. The genealogy is therefore not a family tree that I plan in advance, but rather a network of affinities that reveals itself as the work progresses.

When you say that references and positions only emerge during the creative process, I wonder where your way of seeing and that sensitivity were formed. You studied at KASK in Ghent under Vercruysse and then did a residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, with Narcisse Tordoir as your teacher. How did these relationships influence your practice?

I find this a difficult question to answer because, for me, it's not just about the artists I have had direct contact with. It's more about the attitudes they embodied, the positions they took within the art world, and the impressions they left behind, both personally and in terms of content.

Jan Vercruysse was a radical figure in that respect. A diva, if I may be honest. But a diva in the most consistent sense of the word. He embraced art without compromise. For him, art was not just an activity or a profession, but an attitude and a way of life. It was not something you could switch on or off, but a fundamental way of being in the world.

He resolutely played the card of the aesthete. For him, aesthetics were not a superficial matter of form, but a considered and sometimes unwavering choice of autonomy, distance and refinement. His work and persona were inseparable, both testifying to a pursuit of purity and control, and an almost principled seriousness about the nature and purpose of art.

This radicalism did not always make him easy to deal with, but it did make him outspoken and coherent. Perhaps it is precisely this uncompromising nature that makes him so memorable to me.

Narcisse, on the other hand, took a very different position. While Vercruysse was an almost unapproachable radical aesthetic figure, Narcisse acted more as a mentor, literally and metaphorically stepping into the studio. He was present in the daily practice and the work itself, as well as the doubts and concrete questions that arose.

Behind the scenes, he helped me a lot. He guided me, still a kind of 'baby' in the field, into the Rijksakademie. During the selection process, I visited his studio to decide whether to pursue my candidacy. This was an important moment: it was not just a practical decision, but confirmation that my work had sufficient substance to take that step.

Was their accessibility the main difference between the two?

My relationship with Vercruysse was fundamentally different to my relationship with Tordoir. With Vercruysse, I was primarily a student, and the relationship was hierarchical and clearly defined, with a strong artistic authority. With Narcisse, however, I was more of a young artist. The dialogue was more equal, less burdened by status, and more focused on exchange.

Narcisse spoke more often about practical matters. He talked about concrete problems in the work, presentation and positioning. He paid attention to the creative process and the reality of being an artist, not just as an idea or attitude, but as a practice. While Vercruysse elevated art to an almost existential attitude, Narcisse brought it back down to earth: to choices, solutions and possibilities.

This difference in approach shaped me in two different ways. One taught me the seriousness and autonomy of art; the other, the importance of dialogue and practical insight.

You mentioned earlier the object-like nature of your paintings. When I was in your studio, you also showed me the backs of your works: improvised, often clumsy constructions and unconventional shapes that are held together. Is this purely a practical consideration for you, or do you consciously think about the painting as an object in this way?

I deliberately use the term *bricolage* because, to me, it sounds less heroic than painting. The idea of painting still carries a certain historical weight: the notion of the autonomous image, the finished surface and mastery of the medium. Bricolage, on the other hand, suggests something more temporary, something that arises from limited resources and proximity. It also implies a certain intimacy: you work with what is within reach and think with your hands.

The distinction between 'making' and 'designing' is important here. Designing starts from a distance. First, you make a plan; then, you visualise the result; finally, you execute it. In a

sense, the process is subordinate to the preconceived concept. Making, on the other hand, is immanent: you think while you work. The work itself dictates what it will become. Each intervention changes the conditions for the next.

The improvised elements — the slats that are not quite straight and the visible joints — show that the work is not a closed design, but an accumulation of decisions. They do not hide the creative process, but allow it to persist in the object itself. Rather than hiding the construction, I allow it to be seen. This is not intended to provoke, but rather to detach painting from its illusion of self-evidence.

The 'clumsy' or somewhat awkward character plays an important role in this. It resists monumentality and the concept of the perfect art object. It brings the work back to a human scale and tactility — something you could almost grasp or repair. It suggests care rather than control. It also conveys vulnerability, as the work makes no attempt to be untouchable.

To me, bricolage means that a painting is not just a carrier of an image; it is also a collection of materials that interact with each other. The canvas, the wood, the paint, the tension and the back are all part of the same conversation. By not striving for a tightly designed whole, space is created for friction. It is precisely this friction — between the front and the back, the image and the construction, the idea and the execution — that keeps the work alive.

In this sense, the object-like quality is not a formal statement, but a consequence of the way it is made. The painting becomes a physical entity because it cannot be entirely reduced to representation. It remains a composition of choices, manual labour and improvisation. This improvisational, almost domestic character — this bricolage — is perhaps the most honest way I can work.