BENNY VAN DEN MEULENGRACHT-VRANCX

Slices of life (Death Stranding)
prints on vinyl, aluminum pipes
2020

Distinctive about Benny Van den Meulengracht's Slices of life series is the materialization of the digital. Taking the intangible, virtual elements and characters from cyber worlds and subsequently pouring them into a physical state and placing them in a different reality and context with new meanings and stories as a result.

For Anti Hero, he printed a selection of screenshots he made inside the video game Death Stranding by game director Hideo Kojima, released in 2019, following the line of a different exhibition project Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx is currently working on, called Point of No Return, which adopts the climate crisis as its theme. After finishing the game, the artist used all of the tools available to swiftly move through its world in search of areas and elements that refer to climate change, his character acting as a documenter, a photographer, capturing these places by using an in-game binocular function to frame the image and then the Playstation 4's screen capturing option to shoot the photo. The shots shown at CLAPTRAP are from what the artist calls "The Expedition" and are not the end result, but can be viewed as a behind the scenes, showing the artists' character while traveling.

When approaching his Slice of life series, Benny goes for total immersion, moving inside game worlds as himself or a persona. As such, gaming has a big influence on his artistic practice. His artistic life is filled with elements from these other worlds, with a different rule set, characters and aesthetic and throughout the years, his position towards the in-game universe and cyberspace has shifted from playing, participating and observing to experimenting and enshrining.

"As individuals we cannot deny the digitization of our visual language, culture and identity. As artists, we have the power and freedom to create a bridge between cyber culture and art."

Generally his work revolves around the gaze, watching and being watched, the notion of existing and his existence as well as the translation of the self into and from digital contexts, resulting in works of different media.

Next to his artistic practice, he ran exhibition space Hole Of The Fox for nearly 7 years and continues to work as an independent exhibition maker. Recent shows include participation in group exhibitions at Base-Alpha Gallery (BE), Podium (NO), Diesel Art Space (BE) and Soyuz (IT), while currently working on an exhibition project for the cultural center of Ekeren. Benny Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx studied at Sint-Lucas Antwerp and was awarded first prize in the graduation contest of Art on Paper in 2012. Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx lives and works in Antwerp, Belgium.

- Benny Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx, modified version of Lotte Brown's text for the exhibition Residence Evil at Het Bos.

Tique
Six Questions, interview
2016

How do you describe your own art practice?
My work usually revolves around who I am and who I try to be. About who other people are and how we perceive each other. About how you and I relate to each other, what we do in order to keep up appearances and the feelings that are generated as a result. It often ends up in two opposites, either it's "looking", the eyes, confrontation(!) or hiding, masking, armouring up.
I try to visualise these things in drawings, sculpture, paintings, and so on, choosing to work with specific types of visual elements, bringing with them specific associations, but in the end I strongly feel that it's always about dealing with things, the world around you and especially about dealing with yourself.

What was your first experience with art?
This would consider my interpretation of art and when I first experienced it. My idea of art has also shifted as I grew up, but looking back, I'd like to think that my first experience with art would be the first time I felt the need to make something myself, or rather, the first time something else gave me the need to create and then that would

be the Sunday anime cartoons running on TV during my childhood. These are sort of engraved in my memory and I remember watching Rurouni Kenshin (Samurai X), Dragonball Z, and later Pokémon and Digimon, and wanting to redraw the characters myself. But are these cartoons art? I guess for 7-8 year old me, they were.

What is your greatest source of inspiration?
I don't think I have one greatest source of inspiration. A lot inspires me, from obvious things, to me, like manga and anime, videogames, to the behaviour of people, fashion, nature and life itself. These things surround me, like everyone, they happen and they inspire me when they do.

What do you need in order to create your work?
I especially need the right atmosphere and mind set and preferably also the right surrounding. I kind of need to get in the zone, which I can instigate by relaxing, gaming, looking at the right things, sitting in my cosy desk room in my atelier and plugging the right music into my ears. Once I'm there, I can start working without end, regardless of what material I have at hand.

What are you working on at the moment?
For a while now, I've been working on an ongoing series, portraying the artist, myself, as a Black Knight and using this as an icon for the mystification surrounding the artist persona and personalities of people in general.
I just recently finished a cut and paste book called 'Revelations of a Black Knight' and if my sculptures of Black Knights are about armouring up and the abstraction of recognisable form, then the book is about taking of the helmet, allowing a peek in, lifting the tip of the veil.
I will continue working on this series during a residency at the Frans Masereel Centre (Belgium) in March-April, expanding on it with printmaking techniques.

What work or artist has most recently surprised you?
One artist was Jim Thorell, who recently posted a detail of one of his pieces on Instagram, which showed an interpretation of Griffith, which is an antagonist character from the manga Berserk. I thought it was funny and nice to see, since my Black Knight series were inspired by the protagonist of the same manga, Guts. It gave me reassurance.   But I'm blown away by many great and less great artists' work, all around the world, almost daily.

https://www.tique.art/six-questions/benny-van-den-meulengracht-vrancx/

Codename HOT FOX
A solo exhibition by Benny Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx
2014

Benny Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx is the owner and curator of Hole Of The Fox. The space is his atelier, which he uses as an exhibition platform for other young and motivated artists, such as himself. He changes roles, going from artist to curator and back, switching between contexts, intentionally.
It's the idea of role-play that gives meaning to Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx's work, the change of face in specific situations, the shattering of personalities and the embodying of a persona.

He has a background in illustration, where he, as a draftsman, pursued a vision of simplicity, limiting himself to certain dimensions and techniques. In 2012 he created a series of self-portraits over an extended period, where his face changes, because of the urge to see himself in different aspects. He called it: 'A personal study of the observing portrait through drawing', but you can say that, next to improving his skill, he was actually searching for his true face.
Drawing is still a baseline from which he starts and in this series here, illusion is again a prominent aspect. The series started from bamboo, but soon after the few, first drawings, he stepped away from trying to draw the plant, instead, he used what was in his hand and went from there.

The look of the other reveals that every appropriation of identity depends on the judgement of the other. Sartre states that "I" and my "consciousness" can never be the same, which means you will always be looking at yourself from the outside or through the other. Although, you can never completely know how you appear to others, so in fact the only thing you have as a representation of your self is your silhouette in the mirror.

We're constantly recreating ourselves in an evolving manner and since the coming of the Internet, the idea of recreating who you are has manifested itself very superficially. You are forced to create an endless amount of accounts or profiles, splintering what's left of your already small definition of who you are. Jackie Chan asked it right: 'Who am I?'

"I have many faces and all but one; I am a Ninja, an actor, a spy, an illusionist, an empty vessel, in need of another."
Benny Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx

Benny Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx uses visual elements from Cosplay (Costume play), a subculture where people dress up as there favourite characters from games, Anime, Manga, movies and comics; as well as gaming culture, because of the fact that, in a lot of games, you are also asked to create a custom character, personalized to your liking (within the set boundaries of the game). Internet and Otaku culture feature similar elements.

Deviant
Publication
2013

When scouring the internet and browsing through endless streams of images and virtual interpretations/mirrors of reality and social concepts, some more known then others, it's easy to lose sight of your true identity. We constantly create different personas within these virtual worlds. Our alter ego's exist next to each other and are connected through the sharing and migration of content via different social networks, which are constantly and preferably linked to each other. This kind of recreation of the self has more to do with the creation of some sort of ego, rather than creating a shared experience worldwide. It's more about promotion of the deep egocentric self and building a fake self assurance, through online spamming and at some times mindless, endless scrolling possibilities.

However, some of these platforms for self recreation are not entirely about throwing your own life stories online for thousands to overlook, but combine the appeal of social networking with a database of user generated material, such as in the case of deviantArt.com, where registered users are given the power to show, share and comment on each others artworks. There are other, different and maybe more successful social websites evolving around art, but what sets deviantArt apart is that it is ruled by the amateur artist and, even more so, the fan artist. This website is filled with outcasts, deviants, rejects, who found themselves a place where they can come forward with their creations, undisturbed, and where they are able to create their own set of social rules. There's numerous image boards that share a similar amount of artistic freedom when it comes to creative output, however, deviantArts' content is uncensored and massive in scale and variety. What's worth noticing is the literal name of deviantArt, it calls itself 'deviant art', meaning rejected or aberrant art, and using 'art', already stating that all things posted on deviantArt, are in fact to be viewed as art. There are no qualifications or standards which you have to fulfill, it doesn't matter if you went to art school or whether or not you've achieved anything related to the world of contemporary art, simply create an account and start uploading. You choose a name, profile picture and add some short information and background to your new artistic persona and what you'll soon notice is your "gallery" (the icon seems to depict a miniature Mona Lisa painting), this is where your works will be displayed. Again straightforward naming, referring to the art context. Next to uploading your own works, there's also the compulsory behavior of favoriting other people's works (similar to the "like button" on Facebook). The deviantArt community is very thankful and whenever you engage in favoriting works, people will comment on your profile, thanking you for the "fave" or the "watch", creating some sort of pressure for whenever people "favorite" your work, you have to return that favor. DeviantArt also adds the option of selling prints of your works, focusing more on 2 dimensional work, but even though this feature is available, it's quite noticeable that the emphasis is never on the selling of the artworks.

As mentioned before the deviant community is ruled by the fan artists, creating fan art, which can be viewed as derivatives of original art, always referring to an original or already existing image, which as a concept can be viewed as a consensus in today's visual, virtual society where all originality has faded and where the creators of images are forgotten. DeviantArt is perfect for those who see through, or ignore, the ideas of copyright and just take images to create new ones. This idea is the most visible in Japanese otaku culture, where dōjinshi create their own illustrations and manga, derived from, or based on an original manga or anime. It's even so accepted that they have a separate convention for fan art only, called 'Komiketto' or 'Comiket', short for 'Komikku Maketto'

or 'Comic Market', the largest in the world and held twice a year in Tokyo, Japan. As follows, a lot of Japanese dōjinshi, and dōjinshi worldwide, have established themselves on popular image boards and communities such as deviantArt.

The works of Yannick Val Gesto and Benny Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx touch on these subjects of originality, copyright and the found image. Immersing themselves into the virtual world of image boards and social media, they use these websites as a source of inspiration for their own work, copying certain techniques, stealing and hiding images, responding to the idea of a massive, endless, fleeting and intangible, database of visual content. Like a lot of fan art, the pieces by Val Gesto are attempts at capturing the essence of entertainment-related intellectual properties, mainly of those that are heavy on the eye. His semi-abstract 3D renders we're constructed through the usage of game-fonts, 2.5D painting, found imagery and multiple image-editing programs. The working process is based on intense visual research, speed, production and trial & error.
Van den Meulengracht-Vrancx masks himself as one of the dōjinshi artists and tries to fade away in the deviant world by creating a series of app-generated, uncanny selfies, which share similarities with the works of the amateur and fan artists, communicating with them and functioning inside their social and artistic image-based communities.

Fueled by the ever growing amount of diverse web- and otaku-based outsider art, 'Deviant' identifies itself as an experimental artist publication and homage.