

**Eva De Leener**  
**MIDNIGHT BLUE**  
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The artistic practice of Eva De Leener (°1978, Gent) consists mostly of drawings, paintings and sculptures, but also includes poetry and prose. Her artistic practice is typified by the way she appropriates elements from, among others, religious forms of expression, myths, or cultural practices, which she appears to combine freely, and subsequently relate to aspects of her own life.

At first sight, De Leener's visual idiom appears to be univocal. Her use of universally recognizable symbols or stories implies that the meaning of her work can be gleaned from an understanding of the underlying messages these symbols or stories convey. But there is also a layered narrative structure that upends and exploits the so-called general validity of certain archetypes. De Leener deploys the multiplicity of meaning some symbols have, in order to veil the content of her work and encourage a more ambiguous reading.

In their specific, ideological context, most of the image elements De Leener uses do have an established significance and a well-defined message. But the motifs that often return in her work, such as the snake eye, are so widespread in cultures all over the world, that their significance is variable. For example, the snake in Christian iconography represents evil, because, according to this tradition, Satan, in the guise of a snake, brought on the Fall by seducing Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. In other cultures, the snake can stand for fertility, rebirth or immortality. Likewise, the depiction of an eye can represent an all-seeing deity, but it can just as well be seen as a codified symbol of female genitalia. For De Leener, such archetypes are no longer dogmatic or static entities presented on a neutral ground, but rather fluid notions in a specific setting. In her oeuvre, multiple meanings fuse into a specific image narrative that explores the boundaries between subjective and universal, confronting us with notions of tradition, memory and imagination.

On another level, De Leener's work throws up questions about the contemporary relevance of such age-old symbols and stories. What can these remnants from times long past mean in our contemporary society, and who can lay claim to them? It looks in any case as if today's society, where we encounter these signs or stories, has shifted from the spiritual to the commercial domain. Think of the Medusa head in the logo of the Italian fashion house Versace, or the siren in the international coffee chain Starbucks. Such businesses connect their trademark identity to established stories in order to lend their 'brand' a ubiquitous recognizability and an underlying heroic or spiritual connotation. The logo of the American television and radio network NBC alludes to the death of the giant Argus, after whose death his 100 eyes were transferred to a peacock's tail. The analogy

is well-chosen, since the company is a commercial news broadcaster that strives to bring everything into view. Although De Leener does not explicitly deal with this phenomenon, her work underscores that such stories and symbols still have plenty of agency today, whilst transcending ideological and commercial agendas.

De Leener's working methods are relatively traditional, in the sense that her ideas for new work usually make their first appearance in a sketchbook. Later these subjects are reprised and further elaborated on canvas, paper or as sculpture.

The smaller works on paper are made with a mixed media technique of watercolour, gouache, coloured pencils and ink. In formal terms, these drawings are like hieroglyphs. For De Leener however the scene does not develop on a neutral background, but in a quasi-theatrical setting evocative of associations ranging from circus rings to the motif of the hortus conclusus. The often symmetrically constructed images are filled with symbolically laden imagery and bathe in an ominous glow. The fascinating play of light also suggests the scene is taking place at a concrete moment in time, often enveloped by the blue sheen that is typical for when day becomes night. These works are usually part of a series with a common story, in which figures, part-human, part-animal, perform ritualized actions.

The majority of the triptychs in oil paint on wood are constructed in a similar way and deal with the same themes. However, an important difference is that these works follow a hierarchy whereby the middle panel is elaborated more richly than the side panels. The gaze of the viewer is therefore drawn inwards, although they do have the possibility to manipulate the panels and optionally to close them.

The paintings with oversized representations of the human face could be closeups of characters from other works. Usually, the face is represented as a skull, with a striking emphasis on the eyes, or the lack of them. Here, too, symmetry is recurrent throughout most of the compositions. Striking however is the absence of a specific elaborated background, which is otherwise so typical in her work. This gives these works the aspect of esoteric body markings or occult emblems, which allows them to be read as a visual puzzle rather than as a narrative.

In a new series of works, part painting, part object, De Leener sets to work with coats of arms she found at a secondhand shop. The designs of the original emblem have been all but stripped away and they have been remodelled through the addition of sculptural elements and overpainting in the artist's typical vibrant palette. Running counter to heraldic conventions, the original symbolic representation is replaced by a subjectively composed emblem with no clear ideology. De Leener's coats of arms no longer represent an important family or region in codified form; instead, they connect the present and past in an amalgam of symbolic meanings that activate a tension between the personal and the universal.

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