

Interview in Berlin with Belgian artist Stephan Balleux

'BERLIN OFFERS EVERYTHING'

Many international artists have an atelier in Berlin, but only rarely do they consider Berlin their home. Stephan Balleux moved to Berlin in 2006. Why did he decide to move here and how long does he plan to stay? Stephan Balleux "Indeed, many artists work or have an atelier in Berlin because living costs are low. While I cannot deny that rent and food is much more affordable here than in Brussels or Antwerp, it was not my primary motivation to move to Berlin. I moved here because I believe that to grow one has to leave the nest. As trivial as it may sound, new challenges and a new environment provide food for thought, and thoughts, more precisely concepts stand at the origin of imaginative and creative processes."

David ULRICHS

So when you feel at home here, will you move on?
Stephan Balleux: "Well, I just started to learn German, which is an indication that my stay in Berlin is far from over!"

Do you feel the Belgian art scene is too small and that to be successful it is not sufficient to exhibit in Belgium?

Balleux: "To be internationally successful, it is necessary to exhibit internationally."

Contemporary works of art are global products and thus have to prove themselves within an international context. Regardless of what artists or critics may think of the art market, the seemingly exponentially growing phenomenon 'art fair' provides such a context.

Balleux: "Personally, I am not an art fair lover, I much rather prefer the traditional gallery space



STEPHAN BALLEUX 'THE BEAUTY IS THE BEAST' 2007, HUILE SUR TOILE, 150X200CM, © STEPHAN BALLEUX/THINK.21 PHOTO: STEFAN LUCKS

or the white cube as a site for an exhibition. With over 400 galleries, many of which are satellites for internationally established galleries, Berlin offers a density of art spaces approaching that of an art fair. Thus, I get the best of both worlds."

You are working with think.21gallery in Brussels, whose programme focuses on new media. Do you consider yourself a new media artist?

Balleux: "Actually, I spend most of my time painting and believe my work is best viewed in this tradition. However, I do not think painting necessitates the medium of paint. I am currently spending a lot of time on computer generated imaging (CGI). Indeed, there are many ways to paint. In general, I consider my work as an investigation into the concept of 'painting', which itself, painting per se has taken on a character for me; it has become a personage. I am currently working on a series that will further illustrate and clarify this aspect of my work."

While your work blurs the borders between different media you seem adamant that your subject matter is painting. Why not purely concentrate on the medium of paint?

Balleux: "Paint has a long and complex history, which is nearly as old as the history of art itself. Everything painted is a statement within this tradition and is judged accordingly. Using younger media, such as the digital form, allows me to approach painting with a lightness that I could not employ if I solely used paint."

While many questions in the history of painting remain unanswered, many issues seem frozen in stone. Is your work an attempt to loosen the shackles that history has placed on painting?

Balleux: "I think that the restrictions placed upon painting are mentally determined by each one of us. In my case, for example, I have always been fascinated by the tension between painting and movement. The digitally moving image is my attempt to bring these two closer together."

What of the origin of your new series of works?

Balleux: "Well, these new works are traces of personal encounters with images that have evoked an intense sensation. I do not merely present the viewer a copy of what I saw. Rather, I aim to elicit a more or less specific aesthetic sensation. My work does not try to convince solely by its content, narrative or historic reference, but also by its surface. It is the skin of the work that is meant to fuse with the skin of the viewer's field of vision: to hold him or her in rapture. I am hunting down the tension between the image—the pictorial element— and its surface."

What can we assume to lie behind the image that we see?

Balleux: "The process of production purposefully removes the connection between the image and reality. Each image has lost its physical link to the historical event that qualified it; it is pure materialistic immanence."

In 2003, you moved away from Brussels, was this a turning point in your life?

Balleux: "Although I think Brussels is a very interesting place to work, live and exhibit, my decision to move was really important. Beginning with my time in Antwerp, I have learned to focus my attention and how to make choices, rather than try to do everything. Thus, I developed certain topics and discarded others. I did not cut my ties with the Belgian art world and to a great extent still consider Belgium my base."

Your new work is almost completely black and white, does this include a purposeful renouncement of all colour?

Balleux: "In the past, a strong use of colour characterised my work. Perhaps so much that it

started to become a restriction. So, I asked new questions in my work and set new goals. One of my most pressing issues is how to give the viewer a sense of presence. I want to breathe life into the concept of painting, transform it and make it real. I choose black and white, since it is the colour of the event, of the past and of memories. While I am currently working with black and white, I certainly have not rejected colour. In fact, what appears monochromatic contains very subtle colour variations. The connection between 'painting' and 'black and white' is not immediate, thus the question 'What am I looking at?' is always implied. It is a kind of painting in disguise."

One aim of last year's documenta was to make contemporary art accessible to the public. While it boasted record visitor numbers, it sadly confused visitors by presenting them with a seemingly ad hoc jumble of different works of different epochs. This year's Berlin Biennial has installed an evening programme to attract a more varied audience. Do you think these big events should be used to educate the public about what is going on in world of contemporary art?

Balleux: "I guess these events have many different purposes and all of them are legitimate. Every biennial is a feast for me. Even if I do not particularly like the works, seeing so many works concentrated in one place is always pleasurable. However, I do not think the organisers should educate the public, since this implies that there is some 'true' way of seeing the works. Art is for everyone."

Stephan Balleux (1974, Brussels) studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels and in 2003 moved to Antwerp. In 2005, he was included in the exhibition 'La BeLgique Visionnaire' (Harald Szeemann). Recently, he took part in the exhibition 'Artes Digitales' at the Kunsten Centrum Buda in Kortrijk. His next solo exhibition will be in think.21gallery (Brussels, 29.05. - 12.07.2008) and his work will be included in the group show 'De Passage' at the Palais de Tokyo (Paris, 28.09. - 04.10.2008). Stephan Balleux lives and works in Brussels and Berlin.