

Doppelgänger

Interview by Simon Delobel with Simon Delobel, Antwerp, 08 November 2014

SD: I've often heard you think that trampoline simply wouldn't exist without Nel Aerts...

SD: I was visiting Nel Aerts and Vaast Colson in September 2013. I was very surprised when Nel asked me whether I would be interested in opening a gallery. I naively asked who would collaborate with me. When Vaast Colson raised his hand in answer to the question, I knew I could count on the two artists. One week later, Marion De Cannière made me the generous offer of using her basement to house the gallery. I visited again that very same evening to make sure it was not an empty promise...

SD: And yet Nel's exhibition is only the seventh solo exhibition organised at trampoline.

SD: Nel has had a busy year, with group and solo exhibitions in Belgium, France, Denmark, England and the United States. In late 2014, she was also contacted by the London-based gallery manager Carl Freedman, who organised several projects with Tracey Emin in the nineties. Nel Aerts has always been very interested in Tracey Emin.

SD: That is where she held her solo exhibition *Lord Nelson's Portrait Gallery* in September of this year...

SD: ... for which she made 17 paintings. She employed the same technique she has been using since 2010: acrylic paint on wooden panels with careful attention to the effects in the wood. These paintings are all featured in the exhibition at trampoline, *Doppelgänger*, but in two indirect ways. On the one hand, they have been reproduced in black and white in the little book by trampoline that is available for visitors, and on the other hand, they are represented in colour in the works on the walls. Before her paintings were sent to London, Nel Aerts took a series of polaroid photographs of herself in her studio, holding the paintings in her hands. She then scanned and printed these polaroids, adapted the prints, and then scanned them again. The polaroids were used as the exhibition catalogue in London. In the end, Nel decided to print them in large-scale for *Doppelgänger*.

SD: That was a fairly long process...

SD: ... in which the quality of the image constantly changed. While Nel was busy setting up the exhibition in Antwerp, she adapted the works again by painting over them, sticking paper to them or pricking thumbtacks through them. The serial aspect of the first interventions gradually disappeared, creating a collection of unique works.

SD: Are they more original than the paintings?

SD: Nel has already made several works that function as self-portraits, but which all conceal her face. Such as *Boomhanger*, for example, a black and white photo taken in 2012 in which she is hugging a tree trunk: only her hands and feet are visible, just like on an earlier drawing of hers in which someone (perhaps she herself) is hugging a bottle. In the same year, she made *Inside in, Inside out*, an artist's book consisting of 70 colour pages with two eyes and an upside-down smirk carved into them. You can literally see right through the book, use the publication as a mask, which is exactly what she did in a photo in her studio that might be considered the predecessor of the *Doppelgänger* polaroids...

SD: The exhibition also features two installations of curtains with cut-out eyeholes. Do the visitors take the place of the artist when they stand behind the curtain?

SD: They certainly play a role, just like the artist does.

SD: In her book of paint splashes, Nel Aerts seems like an allegory of the artist-painter who spends all her time alone in the studio repeatedly starting from scratch whenever she begins a new painting.

SD: Over the past few years, Nel has developed her own visual language and created a rich universe full of cartoonish figures that represent all kinds of human emotions and situations. Nevertheless, she is also part of a tradition of artists who are attentive to the exhibition context in their creative process, rather than isolating themselves in their ivory tower. One good example of that is the fact that her work *Zeemansneus* is displayed in the same location where her husband and Dennis Tyfus placed a grab bag for their duo exhibition *Radikaal en Radikaler*.

SD: Another *Doppelgänger*...

SD: (laughs) I hadn't thought of it that way! The two exhibitions in London and Antwerp undoubtedly function as a diptych. In literature, a *doppelgänger* is a malign counterpart to an existing being. One of the many questions is of course whether the paintings or the adapted polaroids can be considered to be 'malign'. Nel manipulates ambiguity with much brio. It is the realisation of the tragedy of human existence combined with enormous desire to enjoy life. The tenderness of the pastel colours combined with the sharply drawn lines... There is something clownish about many of the characters in her work...

SD: ... And they are reminiscent of a poem by French author Charles Cros:

*Moi, je vis la vie à côté,
Pleurant alors que c'est la fête.
Les gens disent : Comme il est bête !
En somme, je suis mal coté.
J'allume du feu dans l'été,
Dans l'usine je suis poète ;
Pour les pitres je fais la quête.
Qu'importe ! J'aime la beauté.
Beauté des pays et des femmes,
Beauté des vers, beauté des flammes,
Beauté du bien, beauté du mal.
J'ai trop étudié les choses ;
Le temps marche d'un pas normal ;
Des roses, des roses, des roses !*

Doppelgänger

Nel Aerts

Opening on Saturday, 8 November 2014

Runs until 29.11.2014