

The artist inspired by hands, Magritte & Wong Kar-wai

Antwerp-based painter Bendt Eyckermans incorporates the legacy of five generations of sculptors that came before him into his work.

By Ravi Ghosh | 22.10.22



Bendt Eyckermans has always wanted to be a filmmaker. Growing up, the 28-year-old artist would read about directors with painting backgrounds and the effects film had on their use of lighting and composition. He hoped that he could follow a similar path, incorporating the legacy of five generations of sculptors into an unfolding, cinematic practice of visual storytelling.

Bendt speaks to me from the studio used by his father and forefathers, whose works in stone and plaster tower all around him: the grand metaphors of influence and expectation. Painting is his current stepping stone. The Antwerp-based artist creates rich “vignettes” depicting gold half-sculptures and busts handled by his friends, who adopt theatrical poses to foreground these mysterious objects.

“I never knew these people,” Bendt reflects on his sculptural predecessors, “I only see a fraction of their lives, inspirations and creative intent through these objects and fragments.” His paintings, then, are an attempt to re-animate dormant motifs, to refresh signification using a new medium and atmosphere. The gold lends the statues a sense of majesty, giving his characters a point around which to focus, a totem or directorial prop to structure their movements.

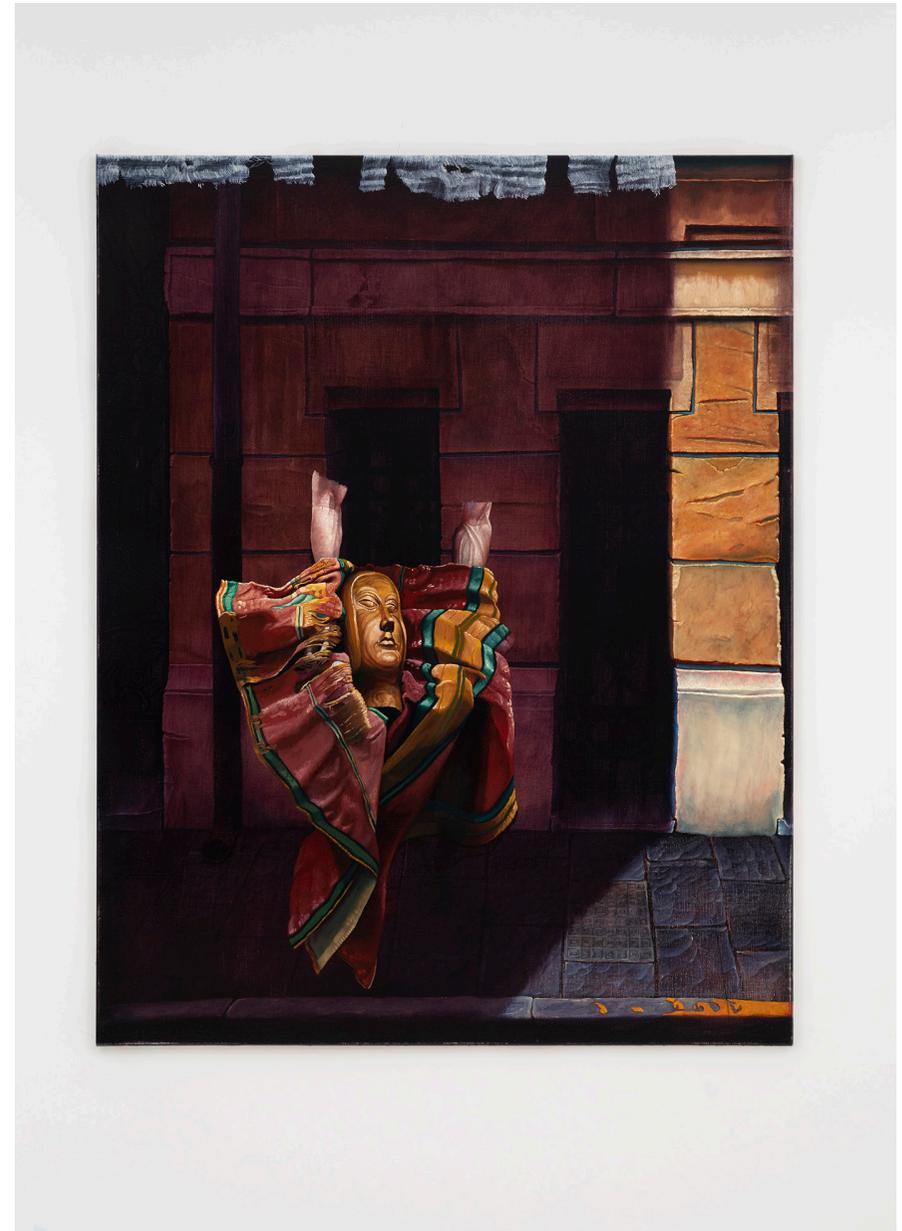
In “A gold head”, a pair of fair hands hover above a female head as if summoning its spirit; “A thick layer of forgetfulness” sees disembodied forearms cradle a head, sheathed by a blanket, perhaps for protection. “I fell in love with the control, doing everything to create my own environments,” Bendt says of figure painting. His tutors at Antwerp’s Royal Academy of Fine Arts were abstractionists, pushing him towards artists like Walter Swennen, but Bendt maintained that the figure can be equally expressionistic. “I don’t strive to depict a perfect stance or a perfect anatomically correct thing,” he says. Hands are important; the first part of

a person's body Bendt looks at when he meets them. "From that, I feel I can immediately read what a person could be like," he says.

Bendt's interest in theatricality also draws on the history of European painting. James Ensor and René Magritte are important touchstones. He mentions Max Beckmann's crowded scenes of acrobats, actors and clowns, both in performance and behind the curtain. Here the canvas becomes a stage; the viewer asked to imagine themselves as audience members in a historical production. But in Bendt's paintings, the faces of his subjects are often obscured. "I'm interested in how others project themselves onto the work," he says, "by using their own social, cultural, associative thinking." Not only do the gold busts resemble masks, the human characters are anonymous — and therefore mutable — too.

Bendt starts with photographs, then sketches in pencil before painting. Imperfection and concealment are crucial to his practice. A painting is not truth but instead an outpouring of expression and partial representation intended to stimulate thought and response. It all goes back to wandering around his family's studio, the sense of possibility that came from unknowing. "As a child, I would look at these works and create my own ideas about what these people were like," he says. "Now I do the same with my own visual vocabulary in paint."

Bendt imagines that in the future, his paintings could be shown alongside his moving-image work and, eventually, feature-length films. He mentions one influential movie



The street vendor, 2022 © Bendt Eyckermans, courtesy the artist & Carlos/Ishikawa, London



A thick layer of forgetfulness, 2022 © Bendt Eyckermans, courtesy the artist & Carlos/Ishikawa, London



De zaaiër, 2022 © Bendt Eyckermans, courtesy the artist & Carlos/Ishikawa, London

by name: Wong Kar-wai's 2000 classic *In the Mood for Love*, citing the melancholic depiction of desire in particular. What would his paintings be if they were films? "It wouldn't be a structured, western way of storytelling," Bendt says, his faith in narrative experimentation clear. "They would be hyperbolic, magical realistic films of life."

A presentation of works by Bendt Eyckermans is on view at Carlos/Ishikawa's booth presentation at Paris+par Art Basel until 23 October



Entombed, 2022 / *A gold head*, 2022 © Bendt Eyckermans, courtesy the artist & Carlos/Ishikawa, London