DeMorgen.



Bendt Eyckermans: 'Every painting seems like a scene from a larger story that I do not know.' Tatjana Henderieckx

Background Painting

Bendt Eyckermans: 'Sometimes I only understand my own paintings years later'

The young painter Bendt Eyckermans (32), a descendant of generations of artists, was practically born into art. He has long been regarded as a great international promise and his first museum exhibition at the SMAK lives up to all expectations. 'Sometimes I feel like setting the place on fire, running away and building something completely new somewhere else.'

Danny Ilegems October 30, 2026, 17:00

On one of the last sun-drenched days of autumn, I visit Bendt Eyckermans' studio in Antwerp. It is a back house in what is commonly known as the Jewish Quarter. It is crammed full of the legacy of his ancestors: five generations of sculptors, woodcarvers, and craftsmen, the most famous of whom was Lode Eyckermans (1919–1998).

Sculptures in plaster, natural stone, and wood, furniture and objects from various periods, antiques and trinkets from all markets. Like a seasoned set designer, he has arranged, rearranged, and distributed the whole lot across the many rooms on three floors.

There is an Ensor salon and a Spilliaert room, a study and a reflection space. As well as 'a painting graveyard': a rack into which he slides the works he considers failures, awaiting their destruction or reuse as a base. Sometimes, quite often, you see sculptures by his ancestors reappear in his paintings. Sometimes his scenes take place against the backdrop of this semi-dark world.

That is what makes Bendt Eyckermans' work so unique, and so unsettling. He is barely 32, but based on his use of light and color, his technique, and his themes, you would guess that he is an obsessive octogenarian who has failed to free himself from ghosts of the past.

When I ask if he feels like the curator of the family museum here, the archivist of his family history, he cannot suppress a wry smile: "Rather the caretaker of the depot."

Eyckermans: "When I'm feeling good, these spaces are an inexhaustible source of inspiration. I walk up a creaking staircase, push open a squeaking door, and I find myself in another universe, in another era even, like in a surreal film. But when I'm feeling bad, this can be a stifling, depressing place. Sometimes I feel like setting the place on fire, running away, and building something completely new somewhere else."



Tatjana Henderieckx

FAMILY OF STORYTELLERS

For safety reasons, he lives in an apartment a little further down the same street. In the studio, he spends workdays of about ten hours, between approximately 9 a.m. and 7 p.m. Although sometimes he forgets the time. “I once considered moving here,” he says, “but then there would be no separation between work and life at all. Then I would feel like I… was living someone else’s life.”

The question is: is there a separation between work and life for him? He was born into art, so to speak. Does he even exist outside of art?

Eyckermans: “Hmm, that genetic burden isn’t really that oppressive. True , I come from a family of sculptors and collectors. The sculptures they created, the furniture they made, the objects and curiosities they collected have always surrounded me. They form my natural habitat. But I never knew most of those people. I can only guess at the story behind many of the items standing here.”

At home at the family table, it certainly wasn’t about art all the time. We talked about politics just as much, about what was happening in the world, about everyone’s daily concerns.

“We are certainly a family of storytellers. Fantasists, actually, who like to embellish reality, making it more beautiful, grander, and more compelling than it is. I believe that family trait has crept into my visual language a little. (laughs) I love giving banal reality a twist, adding tension, mystery, or absurdity to it. What connoisseurs call my magical-realist streak.”

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Bendt Eyckermans is by far the most successful artist the family has produced. When he graduated from the Antwerp Academy of Fine Arts in 2016, he was immediately picked up by the professional circuit. In 2018, he had his first solo exhibition at Sofie Van de Velde Gallery. A few years later, there was already a waiting list with more than a thousand names of prospective buyers from home and abroad.

Today he is affiliated with Mendes Wood, a Brazilian gallery with branches in São Paulo, New York, Paris, and Brussels, and with Carlos/Ishikawa Gallery in London. Of the two to three hundred paintings he has produced over ten years, about half are in foreign art collections on almost every continent. His first museum exhibition opens this weekend at the SMAK in Ghent, focusing on his production of recent years: 45 paintings and works on paper, two sculptures, and a video, under the title *The Passenger*.



Tatjana Henderieckx

SOUL ON A WORLD TOUR

His images seem to transform when they enter the full light of a contemporary museum. As if they suddenly acquire topical relevance. In any case, they bear more traces of this era than you might think: a plastic water bottle, a crumpled plastic bag, a modern car, a metal fence, a tarpaulin hanging against scaffolding.

The cinematic quality of his images also comes fully to light. It is as if you are looking at a collection of film stills, set photos that he has cut up rather roughly, resulting in headless bodies.

As he paces through the three halls where the exhibition is already largely hung, I probe his personal favorites. Could he already put together a collection of his own greatest hits?

“Difficult,” he says. “I’m just looking! I’m glad to see some works here again, because almost my entire oeuvre has been sold and is scattered across the world. I do regret now that I didn’t keep more work. If only to get an idea myself of the journey I’ve taken. I mean: some paintings are somewhere in a vault in a freeport – will they ever surface, will I ever get to see them again?”

On the other hand: I shouldn’t complain; above all, I should be very humble and grateful, because I am in a privileged position. It is fantastic to know that my creations, fragments of my soul as it were, are appreciated not only in my own country, but also in the US, China, and Peru.

I want to know how they view his work abroad.

Eyckermans: “They generally find it, uh, very Belgian. I am happy about that, because Belgian art, Belgian cultural history, and the architecture that surrounds me are truly my greatest source of inspiration.”

Of course, it depends a bit on who you ask. In England, you will find people who detect traces of Spilliaert in my work, or of painting from between the two world wars. In Los Angeles or Hong Kong, they find what I do rather exotic and scream: ‘It’s strange, it’s surreal, like Magritte!’

We underestimate how prominent Belgian culture and Belgian artists and designers are in the world. If I tell someone in New York or Shanghai that I am from Belgium, the reaction is very often: ‘Belgium, great! Luc Tuymans! Ann Demeulemeester! Raf Simons!’ Art and culture from Belgium is a quality label that resonates all over the world.



Tatjana Henderieckx



Tatjana Henderieckx

Except in Belgian and Flemish politics, as evidenced by the recent wave of cuts at the expense of heritage and archives, art education, and small museums, not to mention the M HKA. Or does that not bother him at all, as a young, successful, internationally operating artist?

Eyckermans: “On the contrary, that unleashes a soup of emotions in me. As a self-proclaimed archivist of a family heritage, I know better than anyone that heritage requires maintenance, and that archives are only valuable if they are cared for.”

The abrupt decision not to build the promised new M HKA after all, the scrapping of Screen Flanders: that is simply shortsighted policy. Those are savings that benefit no one, but inflict incalculable damage on the arts and the film industry. (sigh) For artists, for people active in the cultural sector, it is becoming increasingly difficult in Flanders to look hopefully towards the future.

FILM FROM BYGONE TIMES

That brings us back to his paintings. From his predominantly dark scenes, over which scarce, pale light from the 1930s shines, one might deduce that he is indeed not a cheerful, hopeful boy.

Eyckermans: (laughs) “Is that so? Surely you can be a cheerful fellow and still have a fascination with the dark sides of man and the world? Stephen King’s books are full of murder and mayhem. Blood splatters off the screen, fear grips your throat when you watch the film adaptations of his stories. Yet I can only imagine Stephen King as a man with a broad grin on his face, like a lookalike of Jack Nicholson in The Shining . I think he’s roaring with laughter when he sits writing.”

Yes, I love ambiguous images in muted, broken colors. I love suggestion and deception, images that raise questions, suspicions, conjectures: who is this woman, where is that guy going, what is happening behind that door? But they don’t make me melancholic; on the contrary, they can make me very cheerful.

As part of this exhibition, a film programme curated by Eyckermans is running at Sphinx Cinema in Ghent. There are two screenings: first, * De komst van Joachim Stiller* , the three-part series by Harry Kümel based on the book by Hubert Lampo, and later in November, *Malpertuis* , also by Kümel, based on the novel by Jean Ray. What is his connection to Flemish film from bygone days?

Eyckermans: “I saw those films when I was about 12 or 13. In my mind, the idea persists that they deeply influenced me and still resonate in my paintings. I just want to check if that is true, because I haven’t seen them again since then.”

The Arrival of Joachim Stiller is set in Antwerp. I remember a scene where the main character is sitting in a café, and suddenly angelic figures outside start breaking up the street. They pry the cobblestones loose and then lay them back neatly, for no apparent reason. The absurdity of that scene has always stuck with me. The street is being dug up and you have no idea why: that still happens in Antwerp every day, you know. (laughs)

My parents used to be real movie snobs. As a child, I always watched along. I would sit with them watching The Matrix , but of course I didn’t understand what was being said, so I kept asking: ‘What are they doing? What are they saying? Why?’

“At some point, my mother had had enough. ‘Shut up and just look at the images,’ she said. Apocalypse Now, Bram Stoker’s Dracula, The Island of Doctor Moreau: I’ve seen them all, I had no idea what they were about, but the images are burned into my retina. That is where the cinematic character of my images comes from. Every painting seems like a scene from a larger story that I do not know. Every image is isolated from a context.”

Which leaves you guessing at that bigger story. Which also makes any societal context seem to be missing. Is that because reality, the world as it is, time as it is, does not interest him immensely?

Eyckermans: “It is impossible not to be moved by the things happening in the world. It is inevitable that everything I absorb in terms of information and experiences eventually ends up in my images. It is all there, it is all behind it, but indeed: concrete clues are lacking, there is no explanatory framework. I sometimes only understand my own paintings years later.”

I would like to put it differently. I think that reality hits me too hard, stirs and occupies me too much. As a result, I have a tendency to flee into my work. But that does not mean that my works are escapist. On the contrary: they bear witness to my struggle with reality, to my need to make the world more beautiful, more exciting, and more bearable.

I remember the time when I was at the academy. It was a strange time. I felt my friends were so nihilistic, while at that moment I was becoming obsessed with painting. To challenge my friends, to provoke them, to give them zest for life, I started painting scenes from our daily life as art students. But I made it grander and more mysterious than it actually was, as I had learned at home. As if I wanted to say to them: look, our life *does* have meaning, our life *is* exciting and captivating.

All the figures you see in my paintings are friends, artists and non-artists. Whenever an exhibition of mine opens somewhere in the world, they try to be there. They know: I make those paintings, but they are about us.

Bendt Eyckermans, *The Passenger*, SMAK Ghent, until 21/2.



Tatjana Henderieckx