

Press text,

La Chambre, ELAINE LEVY PROJECT, BRUSSELS BE

Solo show

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A Corinthian maid is said to have been at the origin of drawing when she traced the contours of her lover's kneeling shadow thrown by a torch on a wall. This story became Steven Baelen's muse and his desire to grasp the act of drawing in itself.¹

After spending so many hours sitting in his surroundings, atelier or home, he started to perceive that the banal objects suddenly stared back at him and became estranged. Contrary to his academic practice, he discovered in the meanders of his mind, that every form of photographic rendition is in fact already an attack on 'das Ding an sich'. A chair, a drawing table, a window, are in constant movement within their own shadow play. By obsessively sketching, in a fight with this existential fear, he started a long process of learning. After five years of self reflexion he rediscovered his own way of drawing. A new manner of stroking back and forth with pen on paper emerged. The lines of the drawing shaped the contours of the surrounding objects, as if the room had become an overexposed photograph. On entering the gallery at Elaine Levy Project, Steven Baelen will at first restlessly encroach upon you, with his bigger works. Your eye will wander about, slightly lost, in an overload of informations as in the horror vacui of the Flemish masters, until you little by little recognize a sofa, a frame on the wall, a plant, inside an écriture automatique, which the artist calls a mathematical matrix. At the end of his stay in the HISK, towards "The Final Show" Baelen evolved from this horror vacui to "Le Néant" on canvas. Through the years an alphabet emerged, of contours of lines, which he learned to omit. Baelen himself expresses an abhorrence for the term abstract, but myself I must admit that one is confronted clearly with a process of abstraction and elimination of the recognizable. Indeed contrary to a wave of abstract lyricism of the 50's, he still takes as his point of departure the sketches of his own surroundings and everyday reality. A Mondrian evolved for years to arrive at the exhaustion of its own movement and a

decentralized picture, but Steven succeeded through an effort of his visual imagination, through producing copy of copy of copy... through enlarging and reducing without mechanical tools... Driven all the while by labyrinthine questions about the sense of life and the meaning of things.

I got up and went out. Once at the gate, I turned back. Then the garden smiled at me. I leaned against the gate and watched for a long time. The smile of the trees, of the laurel, meant something; that was the real secret of existence. I remembered one Sunday, not more than three weeks ago, I had already detected everywhere a sort of conspiratorial air. Was it in my intention? I felt with boredom that I had no way of understanding. No way. Yet it was there, waiting, looking at one.²

The things depicted in Steven's paintings seem like thoughts that get stuck halfway in the process of obtaining sense. They have forgotten what they were and what they wanted to say. The artist is involved entirely in the act of drawing as such. Steven paints what Sartre put in words. He slowly creeps up on a secret that escapes us all, but which perturbs us all the more, when it comes falling at us, in its visualized, improvised keeling of lines into a jazz on canvas.

In spite of their structured chaos out of a proper alphabet of circumnavigating lines, his early works don't escape the paradox of mimesis, while his more recent oil canvasses bring about a catharsis. Admittedly, as an art historian I have seldom experienced anything like it. The privilege is yours to experience, the 'Ereignis' of slowness, wholly different from the fast speed up way we live today.³

[Eva Kerremans]

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1. [W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do pictures want?*, 2005 Londen, p.66-67.]

2. J.P. Sartre, *Nausea* (translated by Lord Alexander)

3. Bart de Baere, director of the Muhka, interview with E. Kerremans 2010