

La chambre

(Exhibition from April 4 to May 4. Elaine Levy Project.)

The works of Steven Baelen and Elena Damiani seem at first utterly remote from each other. Yet Elaine Levy Project offered them a common ground where an intimate dialogue could take place, in a show called *La chambre*. The practice of Steven Baelen, a Ghent artist and a Hisk post-graduate school alumnus, is deeply rooted in drawing: it's a dense, compact and stratified practice. Little by little it evolved into painting, through a self-analytical process. The body of work of Elena Damiani, a Peruvian artist based in London, is multifaceted and is not restricted to two dimensions, as it may first appear. It is composed of layers of found elements, creating a material as palpable as it is malleable. Her practice leads the viewer to reconsider the perception of the image as space. Steven Baelen draws his immediate surroundings, living room or studio. His interwoven strokes draw the viewer's attention within a subtle visual overload with acute and abstract construction that appears only after a patient gaze. The apparent mess orders itself, step by step, into a figurative representation. In the beginning, there's a sketch in a notebook depicting the artist's environment, whose dense network of lines unfolds later into several other supports and media: from notebook collections to autonomous drawings, from drawings to paintings rearranged and translated after other rules and points of references. For his first show in Brussels, *Found in Translation Chapter D*, that I happened to curate at Elaine Levy Project, Steven Baelen faxed his drawing from a nearby copy shop during the opening. The drawings were on purpose adorned by the distortions from the poor quality device.

In *To-Copy*, a drawing from his seminal note books, is decomposed stroke by stroke on 1213 separate sheets of paper. The title invites the owner of the piece to reconstruct or even to resurrect the original work by photocopying each sparse element one single sheet. Some older drawings are often enlarged, after a translation, to create bigger paintings or other drawings; some other drawings are recreated under some constraints, like copy pasting the same stroke of gesture.

In this show, the two canvases, beside the series of drawings, are picturing the artist's surrounding in the same cryptic and faded style as usual. Whereas the drawing process is based on the accumulation of details, the paintings act like a counterpoint. If they start as a mere transposition of the drawings, the paintings add another layer: their light and their breath come from a repeated attack on the patterns; they are dissolved and made sparser little by little, taken away from their pictorial references.

Overall, his paintings are putting together a background based on the drawings and a foreground of dense or diluted matter, going against the readability of the details.

Steven Baelen's work stands at the intersection of two paradoxical trends: they reveal their own making, showing themselves as delicate palimpsests, as much as they hide for they tend to stay unreadable. Elena Damiani's material, vocabulary and collection of shapes are different from Steven's. But her work shares the same interest in images that are not given at first, but rather appearing to alternatively withstand or let through the viewer's gaze. She's using mainly found images and material, which is Steven Baelen's opposite. Yet her practice based on collage and

double exposure is close to Baelen's processes (enlarging, blurring...). Yet her work doesn't rely on her intimate surroundings. And if the images bear references to an obvious space at first, the constant ambiguity and altering perception turns them into indecisive heterotopias. In short, the viewer's thought is carried away in the exact opposite direction than in Steven Baelen's work. For this encounter, in Elaine Lévy Project enclosed and confined space, it was her pictures of interiors that became obvious as starting points. But the outside is still either present or suggested. In indirect ways, like Russian dolls, it appears by a window, in a mirror or in an artwork hanged in a photographed room. A thin and transparent paper add a weave to the original pictures coming from delimited book pages; whereas the bigger print on silk is acting like a physical and mental curtain, opening the narrow space of the gallery and of images hanged there. The encounter between the two bodies of works and aesthetics is unconventional and unexpected but it's appealing. They're sharing the same will to activate the viewer perception and sensorial intelligence by leading and misleading it through different stages. These processes are interacting in a complementary and symmetrical way.

Emmanuel Lambion. (Translation: F.D.)