

# STEVEN BAELEN / ELENA DAMIANI : La Chambre

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In the agreeable neighbourhood of La Campagne in Brussels, it is definitely worth popping in to Elaine Lévy Project, which is currently hosting La Chambre, a joint show featuring Steven Baelen (Belgium, 1981) and Elena Damiani (Peru, 1979). After encountering Damiani at the Goldsmith's Masters show in 2010, and Baelen's work at the Higher Institute of Fine Arts in Ghent, both artists were invited to Brussels separately. Discerning the latent parallels between the two artists, Elaine Lévy Project invited the pair for an intimate tête-à-tête as a preface to La Chambre, where their close dialogue unfolded into two new bodies of work, harmoniously linked.

As the title suggests, the artists' departure point was the confined space of the gallery and their mutual interest in interior rooms. Yet the outcome of their subsequent project reveals two quite different approaches. Baelen's practice departs from the fixed context of his studio or apartment, the places that he knows best and that are closest to him. He catalogues his three-dimensional habitat by taking 'notes', as he describes his jungly marks on paper, recording the materiality of the space in a two-dimensional transcription. You have to look closely to distinguish the contours of the room, the furniture and the baby crib, that appear in Baelen's skeletal sketches. Rhythmically pencilling his surroundings in his compact sketchbook, the drawings become the schematic anchors for two paintings and two enlarged drawings. The diluted derivatives on canvas are even more puzzling than the condensed traces encoded in his notebook. Moving between pictorial density and dissolution, the shifting legibility of Baelen's work continuously displaces the beholder's gaze.

Damiani's work similarly challenges our perception by playing with the ambiguity of the image. Her layered work, however, develops in an opposite manner. Rather than disclosing the origin of her work as Baelen meticulously does, Damiani collects found images, which she then assembles into new sculptures and collages. In doing so, her work seeps outside categories of space and time. While the process of documenting and archiving generally involves accurate data and descriptions leaving no room for ambiguity, Damiani attempts to open up our perception by erasing all points of reference. For Damiani the room seems to be an imaginary space where inside and outside can merge: in the 'Chamber series', for example, landscapes are inserted in plain architectural settings. An exterior space is also suggested by adding transparent layers of thin paper or a silken veil on top of the image. 'Fading Fields', a digital print on silk of a distant mountain landscape is mounted in a corner of the space, as if revealing an opening in the room to an imaginary other. In this

space, where works of art are deprived of windows to connect to the world, Damiani's seems to extend beyond the walls.

Despite the two artists' contrasting practices, the show feels balanced, an effect which stems from their complementary vocabulary and the parallel effects they have on the visitor. For both Damiana and Baelen, the artwork needs to reshuffle our perception by hiding and revealing, fading and enhancing, abolishing representation and arousing new readings. Exploring the poetic impulse of the chamber as a space to disclose and expose, the twosome has succeeded at developing a compelling collaboration without passing over the autonomy of their practice.