

Blurred boundaries

Koen Broucke might have been a lazy musician, but he's making up for it now

Daan Bauwens

Two exhibitions and an unusual music festival created by Flemish polymath Koen Broucke add a visual element to the work of musicians both classical and contemporary. He tells *Flanders Today* about spreading light in the darkness.

Imagination is everything. This aphorism is perfectly illustrated by Flemish artist Koen Broucke. In the leafy Antwerp suburb of Boechout, he shares his studio with a multitude of imagined characters. While a botanist spends long days in the garden, a concert pianist seldom leaves the room.

In the meantime, a psychiatrist is gaining insights into the workings of the mind of his newest artist patients. With the help of these self-invented characters, Broucke says that he is able to see the world through the eyes of others in everything he creates.

But next to this imagined entourage, Broucke himself dares to be a dozen different people all boiled into one. The 48-year-old writes books, performs and creates drawings, paintings, videos and installations. He studied history but would have liked to become a musician.

Last week, Broucke's new show *Dark, Emotional and Energetic, Portraits of Musicians and Performance Drawings* opened at Antwerp's Museumstraat 25. On 5 April, he stages a small festival around the corner at Bernaerts event space in which his art will be in dialogue with music played by some of Flanders' most renowned musicians.

"I had to make the difficult choice between art academy and conservatory when I was young," explains Broucke. "But I was much better at drawing. To be a really good concert pianist, you have to practise long and hard. It never ends. I have to admit, my choice did have something to do with laziness."

Broucke's exhibition, which is on until 10 April, includes early and recent works, always depicting musicians playing their instruments. "The oldest ones are from the 1990s," he says. "I made them as part of a series that I called 'humanetics', some sort of insane effort to paint all possible different kinds of people. I painted faces of both famous and average people and stripped them of everything that had to do with fashion. I removed their clothes and their hair; the only thing that remained was the physiognomy."

In 2005, Broucke began to paint himself in performance. He was inspired, he says, by the 19th-century Hungarian piano virtuoso Franz Liszt. "Liszt was an innovator in visual elements of concerts," says Broucke. Liszt



Koen Broucke in his workshop full of invisible friends

was known for adding facial expressions and sweeping movements that matched the emotions of the music. "He had his own kind of act back then, much in the same way the Rolling Stones or Lady Gaga have today." But there is no visual evidence of Liszt's personal style of performance. "I have started reconstructing these concerts based on old drawings and caricatures," says Broucke. "I made them into performances and then turned them into drawings. But to really get to know the body language of pianists, I needed to study it. That's when I started drawing pianists while they are playing."

Broucke's first drawing and paintings started as very dark depictions of the world of music. But his paintings gradually evolved from *grisailles* – in monochrome, exclusively using shades of grey – into paintings that allow some brightness and colour, but merely in patches in the background of the work. "Besides," the artist says, "I usually portray musicians on the stage of a music hall where it's mostly dark. But within that darkness, there are small glimpses of light."

That's something that has always appealed to him, he says: "applying sparks of light in the darkness. Just like the American impressionist James Abbott Whistler. His paintings of fireworks or night views of the city of Venice have always inspired me."

By drawing and painting musicians, Broucke also manages to get closer to the life and career he decided against as a younger man. "That is

indeed the beauty of it," he admits. "Thanks to the portraits and performances, I have started working with musicians on a regular basis. I am on stage with them, part of them." But it's not just about being on a stage. "There is something truly special about music that visual arts can hardly provide," Broucke says. "When you work with musicians and performers, you are more than yourself. It's a pity that the visual arts are so individualistic. I sometimes try to work on the same drawing with two or three other visual artists, but it's rare and not easy. People on stage, whether it be theatre or music, they're used to working together. Each and every time, it's enriching for someone like me."

During his festival Interchange, Broucke will work together with a handful of Flanders' most-admired musicians: singer-songwriter and experimental genius Mauro Pawlowski, for



Broucke's "Our Travelling Circus Life", 2005

instance, classical musicians Piet Van Bockstal and Jan Michiels and former city poet Peter Holvoet-Hanssen. The artists will appear on a stage surrounded by Broucke's works.

"I am also planning on doing some really small interventions," Broucke explains, "like a *quatre-mains* on the piano or a small percussion intermezzo. But most of the time I will disappear into the background."

During the concerts, Broucke's drawings and paintings of musicians at work will be projected onto the stage. Van Bockstal and Michiels will perform Schumann in a wood, where the trees contain the heads of famous composers. "It will be midnight by then," Broucke says. "I will project a forest in the background and the heads of the dead composers will be illuminated in a spooky kind of way."

Dark, Emotional and Energetic and *Interchange* are accompanied by a third show. In *Nabeeld*, which opened last week in FeliXart museum in Drogenbos, just outside Brussels, Broucke puts works of his own and reproductions of lost works between paintings by Vincent van Gogh and Flemish artist Jan Cockx. "I love dialogues with people from the past. I learn a great deal from them," he says. "In Bernaerts I stand next to the musicians I have portrayed. In Drogenbos I stand between painters whose lost works I have tried to restore. It is the same, but different."

Until 10 April

Dark, Emotional and Energetic
Museumstraat 25, Antwerp

Interchange:
5 April, 20.00

Bernaerts Platform
Verlatstraat 16, Antwerp

Nabeeld:
Until 29 June

FeliXart
Kuikenstraat 6, Drogenbos
▶ www.atelierbroucke.com

MORE EXHIBITIONS THIS WEEK

Traveller in Psyche

Roger Ballen

During apartheid, American photographer Roger Ballen focused on cultural deprivation and poverty among marginalised white communities in South Africa. In the 1990s, his work developed into a more complex and decontextualised depiction of the human psyche and existential voyages. *Until 9 September, Museum Dr Guislain, Ghent*

▶ www.museumdrguislain.be

Ravaged

Museum M

War brings with it cultural devastation: Art is frequently stolen or damaged during armed conflict. *Ravage* takes the burning of the Leuven University library by German soldiers in 1914 as a starting point for a full exhibition on damaged art in ancient, contemporary and current wars. Works by old masters and world-renowned contemporary artists try to answer one question: Why is art a target in war? *Until 1 September, Museum M, Leuven*

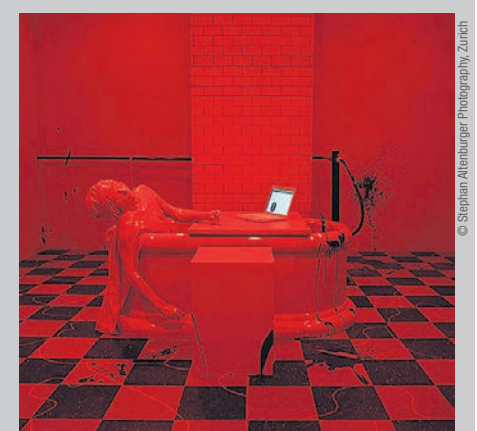
▶ www.ravage1914.be

Ain't Painting a Pain

Richard Jackson

This impressive series of installations, maquettes and drawings shows just how radical an artist can, or should, be. American artist Richard Jackson has opened up endless new possibilities in the world of painting, pioneering an entirely new world of spatial dimensions and mixing it with sculpture and performance art. Inspired by an inherent sense of humour and simple objects, he has also brought the art of painting down from mythical heights to an everyday experience. *Until 1 June, SMAK, Ghent*

▶ www.smak.be



Richard Jackson's "The Laundry Room (Death of Murat)" at SMAK