

SCALIA REGIA





THE EXCEPTIONAL CABINET

JAN DE VLIEGHER AND HIS UNCONVENTIONAL COLLECTION

The first time that we came across the artwork of Belgium artist Jan de Vliegheer, we were both enchanted by the effortless detail of his compositions and amazed by the dimensions of such works, frequently built over floor-to-ceiling canvases. From the various subjects that Jan enjoys exploring, one particularly had the ability of seducing us: rows of magnificent plates and other extraordinary porcelain utensils alike that, in gargantuan scale, aim to emulate the likeness of small, frail objects. Such a contrast proved itself irresistible, prompting the conversation that follows.

Hello Jan, we would like to start off with your first steps in the world. What can you tell us about your early life?

I was born in Bruges in 1964, the second youngest son of a family of seven children. I grew up in a warm family. I was a very happy child.

While growing up, how do you think your interest in the Arts developed?

As a child I liked to draw a lot but, having no artists in the family, it was not obvious that I would become an artist later in life. When I was 14, I asked my parents if I could go to an art academy but I wasn't allowed to; I had to finish my regular school first. Only later, at the age of 17, I entered Saint Lucas High Institute of Arts in Gent to study painting. I studied there for 4 years, from 1982.

What were your first inspirations and references? Have those evolved?

In my first year at the academy my main inspirations were the Russian realistic painters of the late 19th century — I felt especially attracted to Ilya Repin and Valentin Serov. Soon after came my love for the impressionists and, towards the

end of the same year, I had discovered the paintings of Willem De Kooning and of other abstract expressionists. My learning curve went very fast. I still love all the artists I loved in those early years.

You have dedicated a great part of your life to painting...

Painting always gave me great pleasure. I wanted to share the freedom and joy it makes me feel. Furthermore, I also had a conviction, a theory I learned about the principles of beauty that I wanted to show through my paintings: Why certain paintings are more beautiful and why others, painted by the same artist, are less? Not every painting by Rubens or Veronese is a masterpiece, why is that?

And how did it impact your life?

The impact that painting has had on my life is that now I see more beauty. I learned to look at the world through a matrix of colours, forms and compositions. Everything has the potential to become a painting and, in consequence, I see paintings everywhere. A second impact, on a more practical level, would be that I can do what I want and when

I want to do it. I am very lucky to have such financial freedom.

We guess that you must paint a great deal. How many works have you produced so far and how do you set your routine to do so?

I paint from 50 to a 100 paintings per year, which I think is not that much. I make one painting a day, every day, during two or three months. The rest of the year is spent preparing new series.

While painting, how do you channel colour, form and composition?

I work in groups or series. This allows me to make all the colours for a specific series beforehand: I prepare an average of a hundred buckets of 2,5 litres of a colour and then these buckets are spread across the floor in a certain order. The nice thing of this process is that I can paint non-stop, not having to interrupt the process of painting to mix colours. The compositions are studied beforehand as well: I usually recompose several images into one with the help of Photoshop. I cut then I paste different pieces until I find balance in a final image for



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the composition that I envision. Solving the abstract issues of colour and composition before starting to paint allows me to maintain speed, not to overthink while painting and to keep things fresh. Otherwise, there is always the risk of ‘strangling’ a painting.

Are you particularly proud of any of your series?

Not really. I can be proud of a particular painting but never of a series. The painting has to be good; the subject matter is only a pretext.

In your work, you seem to have a preference for wide canvases. Why?

Painting large canvases allows me to move more freely, to use my full body and arm length. I believe that a monumental painting has a bigger impact on the viewer. You feel the energy much more.

And, while painting, do you ever think of a perfect location for the piece or do you leave that task to your public?

Large paintings, I guess, should ideally be presented inside large white spaces with no other distraction than the pieces themselves. However, I also feel

happy when a painting fits perfectly at a client’s house.

Far from pretending to show a comprehensive display of all your work — which is rather vast — we focused in a selection of tableware... Tell us more about it!

During my visit to the Victoria and Albert Museum, back in 2008, I was blown away by the presentation of the ceramics. Everything was grouped together so well inside glass cabinets and the light exposed the objects so naturally that I was virtually looking at paintings. The colours and the compositions, everything was already there, in front of my eyes. It was all too beautiful not to want to paint a series of all of those ceramics. It was only years later that I became interested in the objects themselves, especially the plates.

Do your paintings always depart from pre-existent objects?

I never felt the need to reinvent reality. An artist can make reality more beautiful than it is just by correcting the composition or changing the light or colours. In my early twenties, I used to paint lyrical

abstract works, directly born from fantasy, yet I quickly found myself repeating forms and colour combinations, turning in circles after a while. It didn’t make sense. Paintings looked richer and freer once I began departing from reality.

So our guess is that you must be an avid visitor of museums...

Whenever I can or wherever I am, I will always visit the museums first. I’m always on the look for that one piece that blows my mind, especially paintings. I am very sensitive to colour or to some kind of painterly freedom. Some painters possess the ability to bring life to a painting and that, I believe, is an act of absolute beauty.

How do you relate yourself to Beauty?

My relationship with beauty is one of a scientist: I like to analyse beauty, break it up into logical structures, explain it. Why is this object beautiful? Why are these shoes more beautiful than those? And so on... It’s so much fun to explore the principles of beauty!... On the other hand, I think beauty is not a necessity though it sure makes life pleasant. “A joy for ever” as some say... I grew up

in a small socialist house and I wasn’t aware of its plainness until much later, after my artistic training, and I was a happy child nonetheless. My life was full of love, family and friends. Today, I visit the most beautiful palaces around the world, see sublime beauty from time to time which lifts my soul repeatedly, and yet I think I can live without a ‘beauty overload’. Beauty is only a luxury; it fits perfectly in a hedonistic lifestyle. Formal beauty never added real value to my childhood.

How do you think Life and Art complement each other?

I would say that life and architecture complement each other, although I am not sure about life and art. Again, I grew up happy without any art, at least no ‘high art’! Now that I have been involved in art and with beauty for so many years, I recognize it has made my life more colourful. However, I also think that being an artist, or having become an aesthete, is a curse as one likes to surround oneself with all things beautiful, things that are usually very expensive. My life would have cost a lot less if I had stayed ignorant.

How do you characterize your temperament and how do you think it translates to your work?

I would consider myself as being optimistic and happy. I like to express this happiness through my work. Matisse liked his work to be like a fauteuil where one can relax; as for myself I would add a big smile to that fauteuil.

And if you had not become a painter, what else do you think you could excel at?

Excel is a high claim but I could see myself as an architect or a mathematician. I was always good at math. Everything related to order would feed my rational side. But I honestly think that painting is the only medium where one can express life and freedom within some kind of structural or compositional order. In great paintings, you get the best of the Eros and of the Thanatos as, in some way, all paintings are related to life and death.

What do you mean?

With the presence of death in paintings I mean the feeling of an absolute silence, or an irrefutable mathematical truth—something you’ll find in a perfectly balanced composition. You can see such beautiful

grand order in masterpieces by Rubens or Veronese as well as, for instance, in the abstract paintings of Pollock, De Kooning or Twombly. I believe that, on top of rational structures, it is possible to experiment, or to even loose yourself, in colours and in paint. In the end you will always land on your feet; and so will the viewer.

What other interests do you actually exercise outside of painting?

My life is consumed by passions. I am always in short of time. Architecture and design are two of my main passions but also are gardens, architecture, flowers, gem stones, Koi carps, chandeliers, fabrics, paint formulations, etc. I seldom watch television or movies as I have no time for it. All I do is explore the Internet, read scientific books, visit places and paint.

What do you think would be the most crucial question anyone could ever ask you? And what would be your reply?

“Are you happy?” because this question answers so much! Yes, I am happy, not as euphoric as I used to be before I became an adult—I guess that that loss of being carefree is normal—but if I had to do it all over again, I would do it exactly the same. ■

















