

FEATURED ARTIST

Unvarnished portraits

**Herman
Van Hoogdalem**

DUTCH ARTIST
HERMAN VAN HOOGDALAM
HAS PAINTED AN
OVERWHELMING SERIES OF
PORTRAITS: FACES
OF DEMENTIA...

Herman Van Hoogdalem lives and works in Groningen, the most northern part of the Netherlands. The artist has recently acquired a well-deserved reputation thanks to an impressive series of very large portraits of people suffering from dementia. The starting point for these monumental watercolours, up to two metres high, was the artist's own mother who suffers from Alzheimer's disease. This complex and difficult subject could have proved too daunting for many an artist overwhelmed by the challenge and yet Herman has achieved a true *tour de force*...

The Art of Watercolour: Entering your studio, we see both striking portraits and seascapes. Is there any connection between the two?

Herman Van Hoogdalem: These beach scenes are made up of childhood memories and photographs. I am not interested in the depiction of an actual location as much as the rendering of an atmosphere. These scenes are for me a vision of a lost paradise. Today, through the eyes of my own children, I am able to see these beaches as I used to when I was a child. I try and capture some of this primitive magic in my paintings. So to some extent, all my paintings are autobiographical.

Have you always painted?

As a child, I always had a pencil in my hand. As I was growing up, I had no idea of what I wanted to be. In fact, I was almost afraid of it: should I work in an office or in a factory? I did environmental studies, then one day I met a friend's father, an artist. There, in his studio, I knew that was wanted to do.

Were there no artists in your family?

Not really... there was someone on my mother's side who designed stage costumes. My parents immediately understood that I was really into painting. My father, who was a teacher, didn't try and put me off, on the contrary, he was enthralled by my drawing ability. He took me to the Rijksmuseum and offered me a calendar with colour reproductions of works by the French painter Edouard Vuillard. It took me several years to realise that his paintings – which I considered abstract – were in fact figurative. This for me, was a true revelation. I admire the way he uses colour: juxtaposing colours with almost identical values. This is particularly remarkable in his range of greys. My first watercolours were a series of interiors with an emphasis on contrast and light. These were doubtlessly inspired by Vuillard's paintings.

How did the idea for the 'Faces of Dementia' series originate?

It all started with my mother who suffered from Alzheimer's disease. I constantly had in mind images of her changes of attitude and expressions; I was almost obsessed with these images. A friend of mine finally suggested that I do something about it and I realised perhaps I could paint her. I went to her nursing home and started drawing my mother. I said to myself that I had to face the disease with my own eyes. A straining experience, no doubt! At first, I thought I would only do a few drawings. I asked permission from the medical staff of course and they showed interest in what I was doing. I then showed my drawings to the patients' families and their

Previous pages:
2 Portraits of Andrea van Leeuwen.
113 x 240 cm (left) and 153 x 240 cm (right).

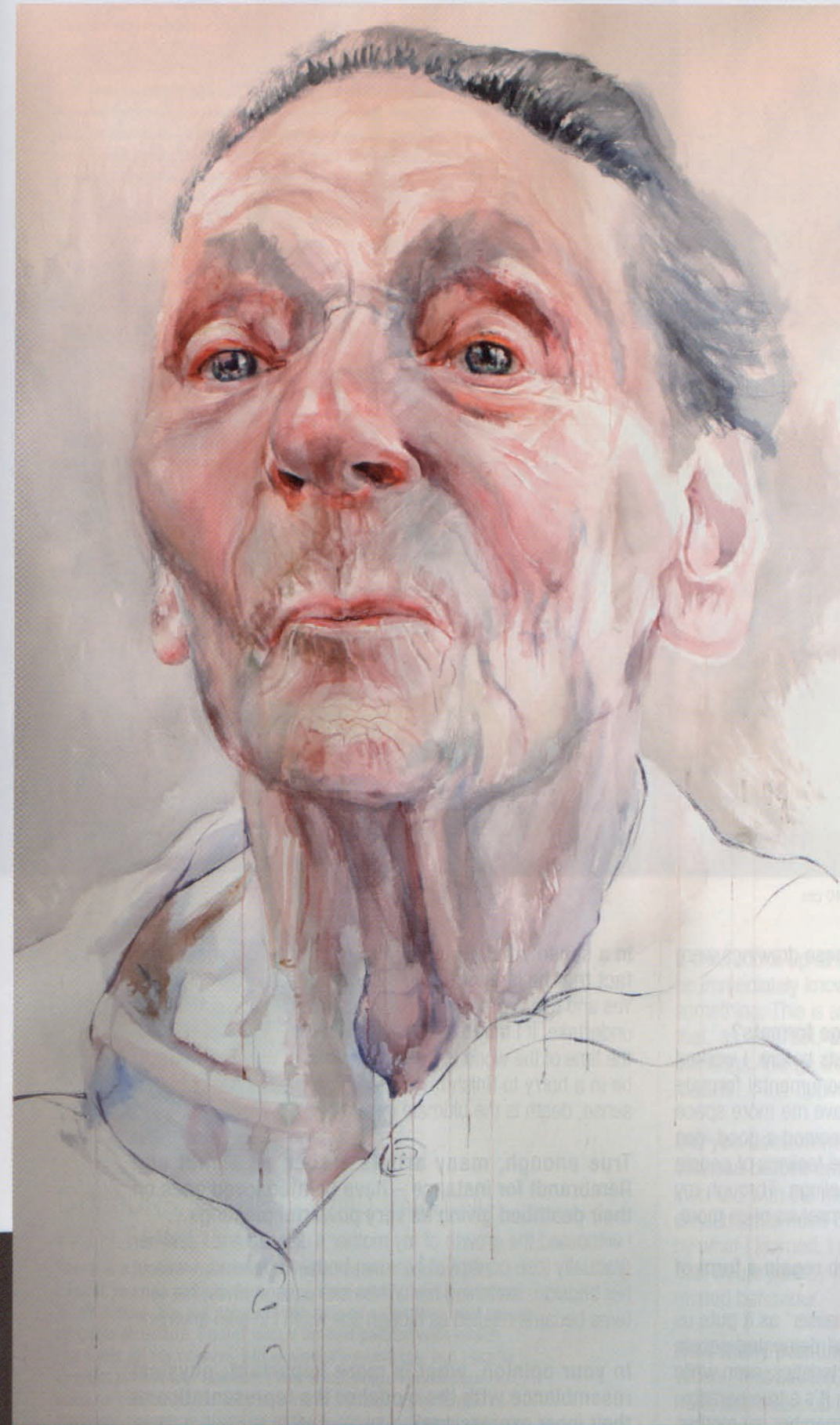


The artist working on the portrait
of Joachim Horn (153 x 270 cm).



Only with watercolour do you get this balance
between the mind and the hand holding the brush,
which in turn allows you to reach a state of mind
where you are in control and yet able to let go.

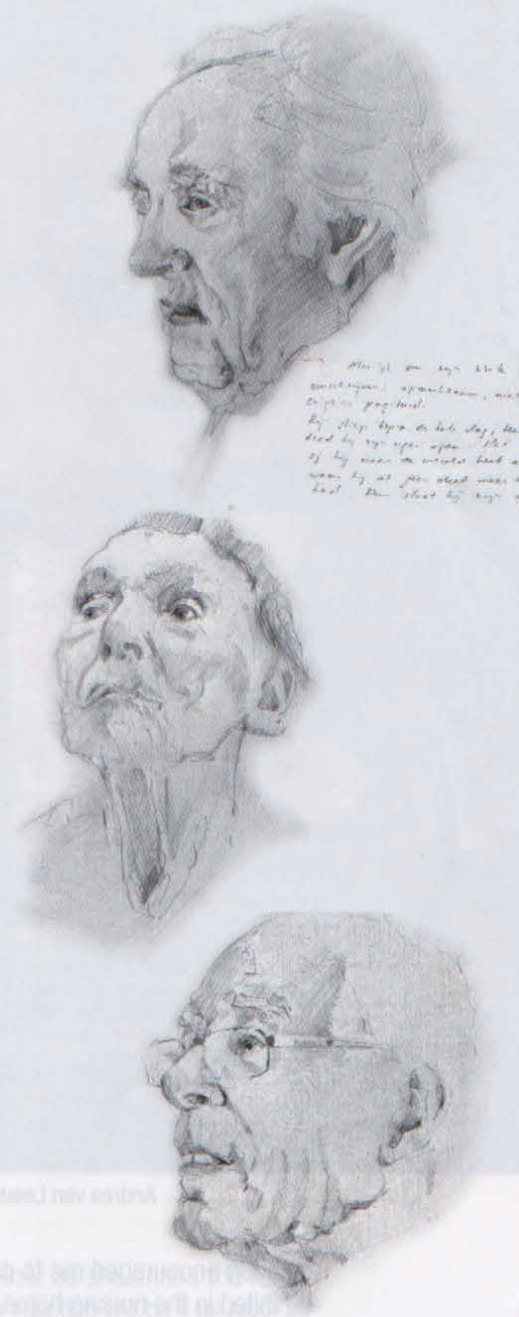
“My mother suffered from Alzheimer's disease.
Her attitude and expressions changed constantly.”



Geertje Klopstra. 113 x 240 cm.

THE DRAWING

Everything starts with drawings and sketches. Lots of them. At one point, there is a drawing that triggers something in me and I know it will become the basis for my painting. It may not be the most beautiful drawing, but it will be the most expressive, that is to say, in many cases, showing a mixture of absence and concentration. The expression of the mouth and eyes is very important because they are the two facial elements we lose control of when afflicted by Alzheimer's disease. I start with a freehand drawing then perhaps a light wash. I need these drawings as guidelines, otherwise I get lost.





Andrea van Leeuwen. 153 x 240 cm.

reaction encouraged me to continue. These drawings were exhibited in the nursing home.

What prompted you to paint such large formats?

I had never painted on such huge formats before. I worked for a year or so before deciding that monumental formats were what I needed. Their sheer size gave me more space to portray my models' expressions. It seemed a good idea because I was after all trying to paint the feelings of people who could no longer show their own feelings. Through my paintings, they were able to express themselves once more.

Were these paintings a way for you to regain a form of control over the unfolding events?

It is said that dementia is the 'great equaliser' as it puts us all on an equal footing. Oddly enough, all demented people share a certain number of similar characteristics, even while retaining their own traits and personality. It's a true paradox. These paintings were a way for me to remember my mother, but not of erecting a monument to her. We all get old before our ultimate demise. To acknowledge that is not being desperate or fatalist, it's simply being aware of our own mortality.



Elkje Drent. 153 x 240 cm.

In a sense what distinguishes man from animal is the fact that he is aware of his own mortality...

Yes and this is precisely what lends energy to everything we undertake. If I thought that I was immortal and that I had all the time of the world in front of me, I'm not quite sure I would be in a hurry to finish my work or improve my painting. In a sense, death is the ultimate inspiration.

True enough, many artists – such as Monet and Rembrandt for instance – have painted loved ones on their deathbed giving us very powerful paintings...

I witnessed the growth of my mother's disease and I saw her gradually lose control of her own body. At the end, I was at her bedside, sketching her. When she passed away, her features became relaxed as though she wasn't in pain anymore.

In your opinion, what is more important: physical resemblance with the model or the representation of their inner expressions?

Both are important. I wanted both to portray a physical likeness as well as bare my model's soul. The facial features, in other words what we see, are a reflection of the inside. When

MY CREATIVE PROCESS

I wouldn't lay down my way of painting as a general rule to be followed by one and all, but all I know is that the way I paint works for me. Here is how I worked things out for my series of portraits:

- I paint wet in wet. Colours are mixed both on the palette and the paper. I painted my first watercolours horizontally but that destroyed my knees! In any case, when you paint monumental formats, you need to occasionally take a few steps back to appraise the work in progress, so I hang my watercolours vertically.
- I start with the eyes because that way after about thirty minutes, I know if the painting is going to work or not. I can't take the risk of painting for three days only to find out that I am in a rut and that I have to start all over again.
- Like I said, I start with the eyes, then add in details in the skin texture, wrinkles, creases, etc. These details will later on be covered up under successive washes, hidden under the skin in other words.
- I paint with light-value washes until I understand my paint, until I have made it mine. It is only then that I will start by adding in the darkest values. And all the unnecessary details will be covered up.
- Up to thirty or forty washes may be needed. Or sometimes only five. I like to progressively and subtly create my colours.
- The direction of the brushstroke is very important as it adds contrast in colour and texture.



COLOURS, VALUES... AND PAINTING WITH FEW COLOURS

There is a close relationship between colours and values. Even if you see colours first, values are what gives a painting its structure. For me colour is the skin of a painting, and values its bone structure. I paint with a limited palette with which I can mix all my colours. I love Monet's paintings, but I prefer to paint with fewer colours. I like small scale variations, such as can be found for instance in Vuillard's paintings. My basic palette is made up of the following colours: ultramarine blue, cobalt blue, cerulean blue, burnt Sienna, yellow ochre, scarlet red, alizarin crimson, Winsor red and viridian green; this last colour, when mixed with reds, gives me a whole range of greys.



I never paint with the public's reaction in mind. This comes later when the paintings are finished and leave my studio. What matters, initially, is the link I establish with my subject and my model. I am happy of course that my paintings elicit such an emotional response, but for me it's a by-product of my art... nevertheless, I'm not sure I would go on painting if my art went unnoticed!

a child looks up at his/her mother as she enters the room, he immediately knows what her reaction will be if he asks for something. This is an ability that we lose as we grow up. And that, as an artist, we try to recapture and transcribe in our paintings. We go from the outside towards the inside of our models... the opposite of what psychoanalysts do!

Did you document yourself on dementia or Alzheimer's disease before embarking on such an ambitious task?

I worked with the medical staff, but I did not do any research on dementia itself because I did not want to be influenced by what I learned. I did not want for instance to do paintings that would portray specific symptoms of dementia and their related behaviour.

How many paintings did you select in the end?

When I first started, I threw many away. For the twelve portraits that make up the series, I probably painted thirty in all.

How did you manage your white areas on such large formats?

I'm very conventional in that respect: I either preserve them

PAPER, A CRUCIAL ELEMENT

More than colours or paintbrushes, paper is the most important element when painting in watercolour. I started with a paper that suited my needs only to find out a few years that the mill had closed down. I then spent a lot of time searching for a paper that had the same properties... which says a lot, I think, about watercolour and paper. For five years now, I've been using rolls of Saunders Waterford 300 g.



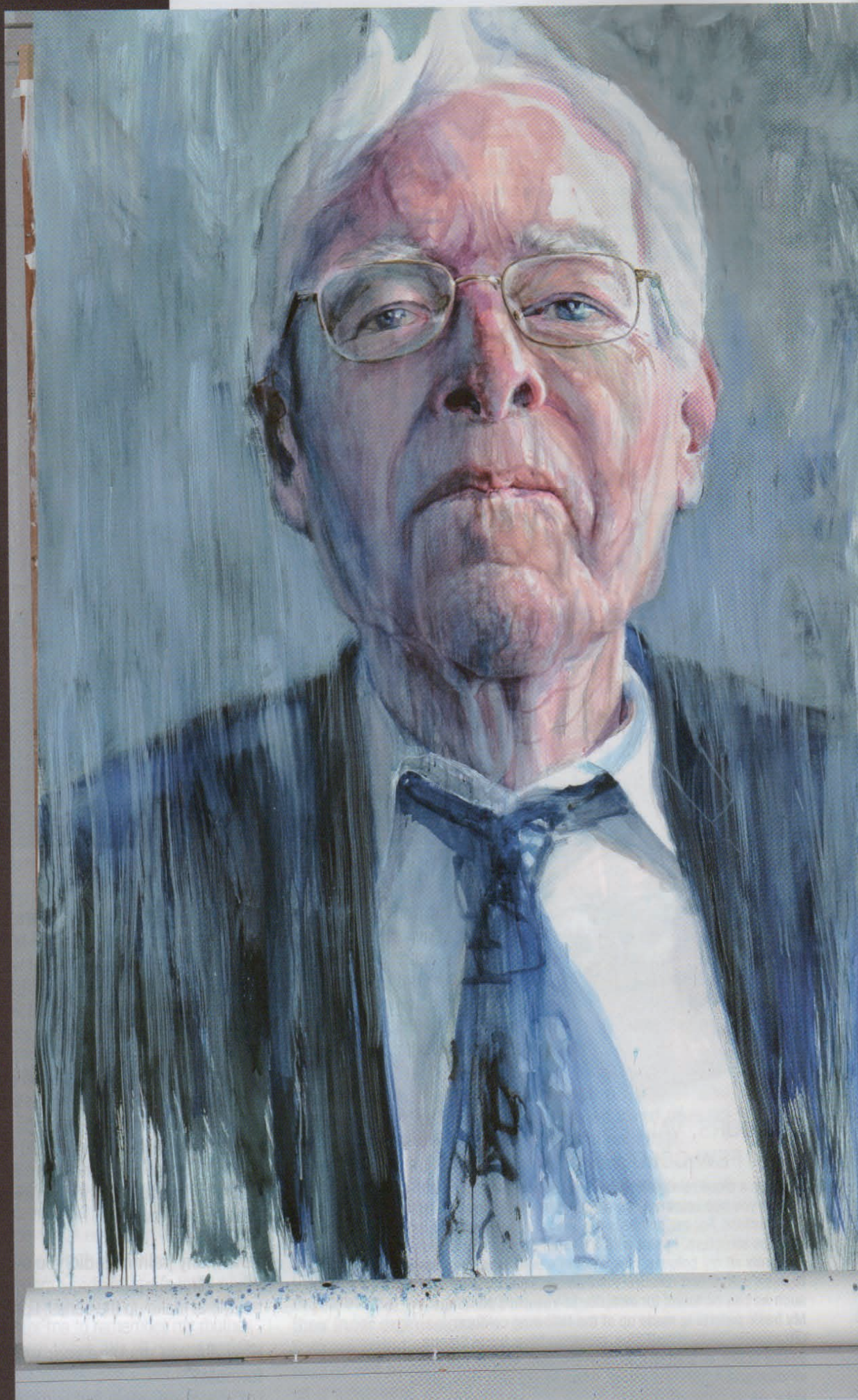
KEY FACTS

1956: Born in Groningen.

1975-1981: Studied at the Minerva Academy of Groningen.

2013-2014: From 13 december 2013 until 9 february 2014, his portraits of dementia will be shown at the ECI Cultuurfabriek in Roermond.

2015: The series will be shown in Bremen, Germany, at the Rathaus. He has travelled extensively abroad. He has had numerous exhibitions in Amsterdam, The Hague, New York, Chicago... He exhibits every two years at the Twee Pauwen Gallery in The Hague and at the Wildewuur Gallery in Hooghalen.



Henk Edzes. 153 x 240 cm.



"A good painting is a balance between chance and knowledge. It has to look easy and effortless."

by carefully drawing around or by using white opaque paint, such as acrylic or tempera. In any case, I always find that mixing techniques gives an edge to the painting as it adds texture. You could say that in a sense I am a traditionalist but not a purist: I will use whatever means necessary to reach my goal.

Did you use photos?

Yes, photographs helped me for details such as the structure and texture of the skin. Photography complements my drawing and it is important to start with the latter because it's a slow process: I don't take a picture of a facial expression, my paintings are in the fact the combination of several expressions. Photographs on the other hand are quite the opposite as there an image of one particular instant. The combination of both works very well for me in any case. Incidentally, Vuillard himself was a great photographer and owned one of the first Kodak cameras.

As a general rule, do you think artists should draw their inspiration from their life and their surroundings to make successful paintings?

I honestly don't know, but I do know that that's how I work. I can of course fully understand that some artists can be inspired by other things, history, news events and so on... but I am inspired by subjects that are close to me. That's why I started with interiors, reminiscent of Vuillard, almost as if I were rediscovering the world through the eyes of a child. In a sense, I almost feel as if it is the subjects that find me and not the other way around.

What was the public's reaction to the paintings?

Well in fact some of them saw the watercolours simply as works of art, but I must say that the majority were touched by what I had painted. Or at least they felt strong emotions. Some even had tears in their eyes. Of course, this wasn't something that I had planned, but it did happen and I was moved myself by these outbursts of emotion. I think it proved that art is first of all a way of communicating. I was also touched by the fact that out of the many people who came to see my paintings, many had never been to an art show before. My aim was not to manipulate the viewer by forcing him/her to feel certain emotions. I did not want to paint caricatures or grimace, which could have made strong and interesting paintings in themselves. That was not my intention: I wanted to represent in an objective manner the expression of my models. And it was very important to me the show the paintings first to the patients' relatives and the medical staff as well.

Do you think you were able to successfully say in your paintings what you wanted to say?

Yes, probably, but...

And when you paint, do you seek the approval of your peers?

I work alone. I am afraid of other artist's comments because they can really influence you if you keep them in mind. There are moments in my work when my painting is weak; it is normal and there is nothing I can do about it. It's just like building a house: there are messy moments before it gets better. I don't feel strong enough to resist criticism during these moments. Having said that, I am of course very happy to show my paintings when they're finished and to hear all that is said about them, however harsh! But I like to paint alone. In fact, I like being alone which is probably why I like to paint!

Painting means a lot to you then?

That is a very complex question... For me, painting is both a joy and a pain, a source of frustration and pleasure, it is a lesson in life. There are of course other more important things: my children, my family, having a roof over my head, food on the table... What matters above all is to love and be loved. Painting is probably the most important of all the futile things.

The French thinker Roland Barthes said that the power of photography lies in its ability to infinitely reproduce something that has only happened once. This is also true perhaps for your paintings, or at least your portrait series...

Painting is like searching for something in the dark. Your mind is not in control anymore, but another part of yourself is – even though I would be very hard pressed to say which one. This is what happens. You know how you will tackle your painting and you are aware of which elements are primordial: the expression of the eyes, the mouth... Once these elements are all in place, you just go with the flow of the painting. And when you reach that state, you feel braver, you are willing to experiment and try out new things, you let the paint flow. Then, three hours later, you wake up, you regain consciousness as it were. You step back and are able to analyse what you just did. This creative state is very important for me because that is when you give yourself the possibility of unconsciously exploiting everything you know.

TEXT AND PHOTOS: LAURENT BENOIST
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