

Philippe
Vandenberg
Berlinde
De Bruyckere

Innocence
is precisely:
never to avoid
the worst.

The pairing of Philippe Vandenberg's and Berlinde De Bruyckere's drawings in this catalog is the result of a series of visits Berlinde made to Philippe's studio at the invitation of the Philippe Vandenberg Estate. Berlinde, age 48, is one of Belgium's established artists and is best known for her abject and corporeal sculptures of contorted human and equine figures. Philippe, a restless painter and prolific drawer, who tragically passed away in 2009 at the age of 57, represents a slightly older generation of Belgian artist for whom art, life, pain and doubt were inextricably intertwined. Although Berlinde's and Philippe's drawings stylistically couldn't be more different, both artists share certain experiential and philosophical similarities. First, each had early formative childhood encounters with old master paintings and religious iconography that left lasting impressions. Secondly, they share similar preoccupations with how personal doubt and despair, sexuality, death, and the darker side of human nature play out in aesthetics and in the reception of the artwork by the viewer.

Art History

For Vandenberg, who was born in Ghent, his earliest mental images and creative output were linked to religious icons. Vandenberg says, «The first impressive images that I saw where those in church: the crucifixion, the Stations of the Cross, the Madonna, the Pietà. Now I'm becoming increasingly conscious of how these became basic symbols for me. Moreover, the drawings I made as a child were not real children's drawings, such as for Christmas or Mother's Day, but they were heavily laden from the very start. That has never changed.»¹ As an 11 year old, his visits to The Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent produced a revelation for Philippe: «What I had been doing for years—drawing, sketching on bits of paper—was a human tradition.»² This deeper understanding that art was connected to human history gave Vandenberg a new found appreciation for the «bewitching» paintings in the museum by Van de Woestyne, Bosch and Permeke that ultimately led him to pursue the life of an artist. De Bruyckere's early experiences with art began in her home in Ghent and were more auto-didactic. Her parents had a set of *Artis Historia* on their bookshelf with volumes titled *Flemish Primitives* and *Paintings from the Louvre* and *Paintings from the Prado*. Berlinde was able to lose herself for hours in these books and they offered a foundational exposure to a wide range of masterworks in reproduction. At boarding school, which she attended from the age of 5 to 16, she pored over art books

in the library as an escape from the nuns and the issues she experienced at school. It was here that she became familiar with the history of Catholic art and iconography. In her later teenage years she began visiting museums and experiencing specific paintings, like Rogier van der Weyden's *Pietà* (1441) at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels, gave her a deep understanding that art could transmit strong emotions to the individual viewer.

Drawing

Vandenberg produced thousands of drawings during his lifetime. His work ranged from figurative, to pure abstraction, to all text-based concrete work. Vandenberg says about his drawings, «I started drawing to escape from the oppression of daily life. Drawing gave me solace; it also provided me with a certain degree of security. It still does. As long as I am in studio, I feel safe and bolstered to create order in the chaos around me.»³

Five highly charged series of drawings by Vandenberg are presented in this catalog. These serial drawings are all figurative and are all executed in a quick sketchy, cartoon-like style that fluidly moves from detail to abstraction from drawing to drawing. Several of these works are based on masterpieces by other artists like *The Entombment of Christ* (1602–1604) by Caravaggio, the *Martyrdom of St. Erasmus* (1628–1629) by Nicolas Poussin and the *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* (1475) by Antonio Pollaiuolo. In these drawings, Vandenberg takes the frozen moment captured in these paintings and animates the scenes to provide a more complex, modern and nuanced reading of these iconic Christian images. Jan Vanden Berghe wrote, «One of Philippe's great feats of strength is that he is able to endow these classic images of the old masters with an innovative, universal human significance. Formally he preserves the inheritance but he makes it timeless. He takes the themes back to their origins, gives the flag another connotation: that of the deepest but also the most heart-rending empathy with the human condition.»⁴ Vandenberg also performs blasphemous acts on these images by drawing St. Erasmus in one frame with an erection during his disembowelment; adding cartoon dogs with wagging tongues, cacti, ducks and palm trees to the compositions, and in the St. Sebastian series, he depicts the saint ejaculating and the executioners with erections while shooting their arrows.

In the *Erotic Drawings / Indonesia*, 1996 Vandenberg's scatological impulses are even more unbridled. He draws dogs copulating, women on crosses and lashed to trees being masturbated on by multiple men, acts of bestiality and explicit acts of fellatio. These images bristle with an urgent sense of

immediacy and dark humor. Although these works are provocative, Vandenberg's intentions are more closely aligned with neutralizing evil rather than celebrating it. «By drawing evil you get a grip on it, trapped on the paper it loses strength. The drawing becomes a fetish that has to keep the demons temporarily in check, it has to offer protection against the threatening, often inhuman world outside.»⁵

The works Berlinde has chosen from her own oeuvre in this catalog act as a counterpoint to and expansion on the themes proposed by the selection of Vandenberg's drawings.

Berlinde's drawings are also always figurative and serial in nature; however, her style is more atmospheric and evocative than Vandenberg's. Her brooding palette alternates between muddy charcoal and smeared dried blood.

Her drawings have a tendency to circle around their content and register small perceptual and visual shifts that have the accumulative effect of watching something in slow motion from multiple vantage points. In an on-line interview I conducted with Berlinde she offered the following thoughts about her drawings:

«The drawings are very intimate and occupy a prominent place in my work. They reflect my research into the relevance of an idea; they are where doubt is investigated. The drawings are always produced in series. A single drawing is insufficient to express the complexity of a feeling. Drawing is a slow process. I start a number of drawings simultaneously. Often with small shifts, differences that are not always clearly readable, I question myself while studying my themes in depth. In the course of the work I destroy drawings from each series, specifically those in which something has gone wrong, or those that have become overwrought. A drawing is the only way in which some ideas can be translated.»⁶

In works like *Parasiet, 1997*, and *Untitled, 2010–2011*, Berlinde obscures or leaves out the details of the head and face of the subject. Her impulse to metaphorically «decapitate» and «blind» her subjects comes from her strong feelings about Flemish portraiture and its reliance on hairstyles, accessories, fashion and accoutrements in telling their stories. Her aesthetic is essentialist and in her drawings (and sculptures too) she is able to represent a more interior gaze that focuses on the uncontrollable, and sometimes shameful, inner thoughts that we all have, rather than on the external materialist trappings of subjectivity. Berlinde's drawings also ply the thin line between Eros and Thanatos that we can clearly see in Vandenberg's work as well.

In *Romeu, «my deer», 2010–2011*, which is based on Ovid's myth of Diana and Actaeon, the figure sprouts antlers from his head and is portrayed as having a constant erection.

These drawings represent the passion that Actaeon feels when he sees Diana bathing nude in the forest while at the same time foreshadowing his ultimate demise. It is after all the fact that Diana punishes him for his transgression that makes him unrecognizable to his own hounds, which eventually maul him to death. I can see a direct line between these drawings and Vandenberg's drawings of the *La Dame aux lions, 1996*, which depict a woman being mauled and raped by lions. In this series we also confront power, lust and the eroding of the divisions between the natural and human worlds.

One last point I would like to make is that both Berlinde and Philippe want to puncture the permeable membrane between what is created and what is experienced. They are interested in how images can provide an almost mystical transformation between a sense of pain, emptiness and lack, and a feeling of spirituality, completeness and awareness. When we look at these artist's drawings it is as if the whole world has become naked and now we as human beings can no longer keep anything hidden or unexpressed.

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1 Philippe Vandenberg, *Visite*, Ghent: Museum Voor Schone Kunsten Gent, 2008, p. 37.

2 *Ibidem*, p. 37.

3 *Ibidem*, p. 43.

4 Jan Vanden Berghe, *Gruesome possibilities* (unpublished text), s.l., 2012.

5 *Ibidem*.

6 From an online interview conducted between Brett Littman and Berlinde De Bruyckere, October–December 2011.