

Tools of the trade

Interviews SARAH SCHUG & PHILIPPA SNOW / Photography SARAH EECHAUT

The apparatus that artists use when they're busy moulding, sculpting, splashing and spraying are often overlooked.

“BEDSHEETS ABSORB PAINT BETTER THAN ANY OTHER MATERIAL”

Michaël Borremans' new Ghent studio is located in an old chapel, but we're not invited in. Instead, we meet him in a cozy student café just around the corner. "I'm a bit superstitious and I don't want people to see my work too early. Especially because I've had a bad year." 2012 was indeed a difficult year for the celebrated painter, who hit a new production low: "I only kept two paintings in the end, but one of them is a masterpiece." Cloth, a fabric that's normally only used for destructive purposes, is his weapon of choice. "If I'm not happy with a painting at the end of the day, I wipe it off with a cloth," he says. It seems to have happened quite a lot in 2012. But has he ever regretted destroying one of his creations? "No, never. If you have even the smallest doubt, it's not good enough." He found the cloth he is currently using on his studio floor. But he usually tears bedsheets into pieces. 100% cotton bedsheets absorb paint better than any other material he has tried. Being extremely self-critical, even artworks nearing completion run the risk of getting wiped out. "You can ruin a painting in seconds. One wrong move and it's over." Switching tools can make quite an impact. "Sometimes when I'm painting and it's not working I change the brush and all of a sudden it's okay." But Michaël is quick to emphasise the importance of a flawless process, comparing it to sports: "It's like running a race or playing a tennis match. If you make mistakes, you lose. It's as simple as that."

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MICHAËL's next major show will take place in Bozar, Brussels, from February to June 2014



“THAT’S DESPERATELY BORING, ISN’T IT?”

Peter Liversidge is eager to talk about the tools he uses to make the proposals for which he has become famous. These proposals – fake gallery texts for shows that will never happen – are often surreal to read; hilarious, poignant and, every now and again, a little bathetic. “I propose to run a kung fu school from the gallery,” reads one from 2001, while another proposes: “A wall just inside the gallery door, to stop people entering. This may allow the gallery staff some time off.” The tools he uses to make them? His music collection and his typewriter, which are more closely connected than you might think. “A friend of mine, a pianist, said that the work struck her as being less like writing and more like composing. I like the idea of using musicians, using music, as a kind of found art.” The typewriter itself is a handsome relic with retro appeal: “It’s a found typewriter,” he continues. “It happens to be a Olivetti. I’ve been using it for 11 years. When I came to London in 1997 to work as a security guard, I didn’t have any money. So it was partly about how little money I had. But I do like the process of using a typewriter because it’s a little like drawing. It’s almost a sculptural thing.” Peter’s studio space, housed in a former button factory, is airy and modest. He likes how its massive windows look out onto the park, a view which inspires him with its liveliness. He points to his extensive music collection above the doorway: a fraction of what he owns. It’s mostly classical and ambient, but spans myriad other genres and includes “Slow Six, Balmorhea, Ohayo, Agnes Obel and Rachel Grimes...” Before we leave, I ask him if he’s got anything else to show us. We hover near a back-catalogue of National Geographics. “I’ve got a collection of dictionaries, if that’s anything,” Peter begins brightly, before collapsing in mockdespair. “No – that’s desperately boring, isn’t it?”

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PETER created a video backdrop for Low’s current US tour and his work will be exhibited in the group show *The Spirit of Utopia* at London’s Whitechapel Gallery from 3 July till 5 September



“IT’S IMPORTANT TO KNOW HOW TO MAKE THINGS”

Dutch artist Mark Manders lives and works in the sleepy little Belgian town of Ronse. His studio is a 2,000-square-metre former weaving factory located right next door to his home and it’s full of tools; from simple screwdrivers and hammers to sophisticated welding and sawing machines. When we meet, Mark is holding a piece of iron in his hand, a rectangular steel plate that has become his most cherished device. “This is called a card scraper. I use it every single day,” he explains. It holds sentimental value for Mark; it was given to him by his father, a carpenter, who shared all of his woodworking secrets with his son. He uses it for wooden sculptures, particularly for the finishing touches: “It’s quicker than sandpaper. It allows me to work with more precision and the result is smoother. It’s a fantastic tool but not many people are familiar with it. I never saw anyone use it in art school.” Techniques and tools play an important role in Mark’s work. “I already knew what I wanted to do as an artist. I only went to art school to learn all the different techniques,” he says. “It’s important to know how to make things; it makes you more flexible in your head and, as a result, in your art.” Mark says that tools and technique also influence the content. It’s the reason why he doesn’t work with assistants like many other artists. “There are so many decisions to be made in the process. I can’t just give a building plan to someone.” Once, he even invented his very own tool; a hammer that he conjured up when he was unable to find one with the perfect horizontal angle. “Of course I’m much more well equipped than in the beginning, even though my art has always remained pretty much the same,” he says, adding, “...but in the end the most important tool remains your mind.”

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MARK will represent the Netherlands at the Venice Biennale 2013

markmanders.org

