

KETELEER GALLERY is very pleased to present *Bonfires*, the third solo exhibition by Koen Theys (°1963, Brussels, Belgium) with the gallery. The exhibition consists of recent sculptures and paintings which, in line with the rest of his oeuvre, address contemporary social, political and cultural topics in a uniquely poetic way.

Traditionally, the lighting of bonfires is a very meaningful and symbolic act that takes place during rites of passage and religious festivals to emphasize that the past must first be given up in order to be able to start something new, purified. And Theys is truly starting a new chapter here. Even though he studied painting and has always made drawings and watercolours as preliminary studies for his works, this is the first time ever he's showing autonomous paintings.

What's immediately striking about the works is their baroque style, complete with abundant twists and ornaments, often covered with gold leaf. The paintings on panel and cardboard show a beautiful golden blaze in richly applied oil paint sticks or watercolour, a sort of impressionistic ode to the enchanting but paradoxical force of nature which is fire – source of both life and destruction. If we look beyond the seductive shimmering of the fire however, anonymous black figures and silhouettes of cars, motorcycles, garbage bins, car tires ... etc. emerge. These aren't bonfires. These are protest actions. Outbursts of the discontent of the anonymous masses. Koen Theys was inspired by protests against poverty and doesn't want to give it any additional political dimension. It's a rather general idea of a protest. By evoking a complex social problem in an ornamental still life and thus contrasting subject and style (which he also did with *Diasporalia\**, where he made refugee beds out of bronze and gold lacquer), Theys also refers to the ambiguous status of every art work; an often contradictory tension between what the artwork depicts and what it represents as an object.

In *The Bull of Sorrows* (2020) there's also a kind of glitch in the perception. The title of this sculpture refers to 'The Man of Sorrows' (1891) by James Ensor, a portrait of a terribly suffering Christ. For this sculpture however, Theys chose a bull's head. The bull is an animal laden with symbolism. In art history and mythology it was always used as a personification of male virility, self-confidence, strength or macho dominance – think of the image of the minotaur and certainly how Picasso worked this out. In Theys' work it's turned into a sad bull of sorrows.

The wall sculpture *Doctors of Arts* (2019 – 2021) also expands on the theme of contradictions, but this time on the ones found within the art world. A pyramid-shaped composition of 'official' portraits of doctors of art arranged from large to small playfully portrays both the growing glorification of the dissecting, analysing and categorising of art and the new artificial hierarchy implemented by arts education institutes. Within this hierarchy, Theys has given each figure an original personality, complete with specialized accessories and traditional costumes. He simultaneously individualizes the portraits and deindividualizes them by portraying their lower parts as anatomical models, with cheerful curling gestures and lavish splashes of colour.

Koen Theys was one of the first Belgian artists to start working with video art in the 80s, a time when there wasn't much institutional interest in it in Belgium, and quickly gained international recognition for it. In recent years however, Theys also started using other media and surprised us, in addition to photography and tableaux-vivants performances, with amazing sculptures ranging from meters tall ceramic wall sculptures such as the *Arabian Nights* series (2018) to large scale installations such as his *\*Diasporalia* (2018): 12 life-sized bronze refugee beds that were on display in the Cathedral of Antwerp for over a year.

Koen Theys' works were shown in many reputable galleries and museums, amongst which: MOMA, New York (US) – MOMA, San Francisco (US) – Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (FR) – S.M.A.K., Ghent (BE) – Bozar, Brussels (BE) – Witte de With, Brussels (BE) – M HKA, Antwerp (BE) – Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (NL) – Ludwig Museum, Cologne (DE) – State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg (RU) – MARTA, Herford (DE) – Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle (BE) – Museo Nacional Reina Sofia, Madrid (SP) – Kunstmuseum Bern (CH) – Musée Felicien Rops, Namur (BE) – Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels (BE) – Baker Museum, Florida (US) - ...

His works are part of private and public collections, amongst which: MOMA, New York (US) – S.M.A.K., Ghent (BE) – Museum for Contemporary Art, Seoul (KR) Fonds Régionale d'Art Contemporain, Centre Paris, Villeurbanne & Paris (FR), Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (FR) – Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle (BE) – Middelheim Museum, Antwerp (BE) – M HKA, Antwerp (BE) – MUDAM, Luxembourg (LU)...

For a detailed list of the works, scan this QR code:

