

Fabrice Samyn

Only in Space You May Find Your True Face

Opening May 12th, 6 – 9 pm

May 12th – Jun 17th, 2023

Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf

Summersome they seem, the new works of Belgian artist Fabrice Samyn. On the canvases, we encounter men in the open air. It must be warm when even in the moonlight the temperatures are still pleasant enough to go without a T-shirt (*The White Page*). Samyn painted the motifs from photographs he took himself in the countryside around Brussels. The skies in these pictures are without clouds, the fields harvested—it is late summer, when the days are getting shorter, and the nights invite us to observe the stars once more.

In *The White Page*, a young man—a *Rückenfigur* (back-figure)—enters into a dialogue with the moon, which he captures with a shaving mirror. The pale earth satellite and its cyclical recurrence have often occupied Samyn—a few years ago he created a lunar cycle from antique Chinese bronze mirrors that had become blind due to oxidation, which he polished (*In the Glimpse of an I*, 2016). A mirror can blind—or dazzle, as in *Dazzled*. But it also allows us to see more than what is in the photographer's immediate field of vision. In *Soon with the Tree of the Biography*, we recognise the sunset on the horizon in the mirror held by the figure. The painter devotes the same degree of painterly attention to the back of the model as to the bark of the tree, but the face, of all things, as the decisive bearer of a person's identity and expression, is missing. But is it therefore really absent? After all, the figure sees itself, or could do so at any time with a tiny movement of the hand. It is the viewers who remain outside. They bear witness to a dialogue between subject and environment that is perhaps conducted vicariously. Is it us looking into the mirror? Is the image a metaphor? And if so, for what?

By skillfully intertwining his models, their reflection and the viewer via mirrored gazes, Fabrice Samyn plays a complex game with our perception. Samyn, born in Brussels in 1981, is a conceptual and interdisciplinary artist who is firmly rooted in the tradition of European painting—he grew up in Flanders, where the paintings of a Jan van Eyck or a Hugo van der Goes are among his early and lasting memories. In painting, the mirror is also a *vanitas* motif. It stands for the transience of life, beauty and youth. At the same time, its reflective surface is an indispensable tool in the painter's workshop, especially when they wish to depict themselves. The earliest man-made mirrors were still made of polished stone and metal. In 15th-century Flanders, the convex glass mirror covered with silver foil appeared, an improved mirror which can now encompass entire rooms—one of the most famous examples of its use in art is the portrait *The Arnolfini Wedding* (1434) by Jan van Eyck (before 1390–1441). In it, Van Eyck combines a maximum of realism with a complex symbolic language in a manner typical of Flemish painting—a tradition that continues to this day.

The mirror can thus remind us of the transience of what is shown and of the viewers themselves, but it can also visually expand the pictorial space and thus make the composition more complex and ambiguous. Since we can only ever be attentive to one part of a painting, a painted mirror in the pictorial space induces us to jump back and forth between two levels; there is no single valid way of looking at it. An example of this latently unsettling effect is the painting *Bar in the Folies Bergère* (1881) by Édouard Manet, which at first glance appears to have a simple structure and yet it is still debated to this day as to where the viewer is actually located in it. The mirror subsequently gained particular popularity in the art of Belgian Symbolism around 1900. Fabrice Samyn, who lives and works in his native Brussels once more, after stints at the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts and the San Francisco Art Institute, can also be seen in this tradition. In view of the sometimes shadowed, sometimes sunlit faces of young men, Georg Minne's (1861–1946) *Young Man's Fountain* comes to mind, as do the mysteriously

sombre self-portraits of Léon Spilliaert (1881–1946). Belgium, it seems, always produces philosophically and spiritually interested artists, whether their names are Thierry de Cordier or Luc Tuymans.

"What lies beyond the mirror?" Samyn asked himself on the occasion of his solo exhibition *To See With Ellipse 2021* at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Brussels, which brought him into dialogue with the old masters. The answer he provided himself: "The river of time. And what lies at the heart of the river of time? The freshness of the instant.¹" One thing must also be clear to the figures in his paintings: we will not always be who we see in the mirror. For all their inwardness, the way the line of sight is complicated by the hand mirrors also lends the paintings something incomplete, which is what distinguishes Fabrice Samyn's work as a whole—themes important to him are constantly revisited. "My work is cyclical²", he says, and that nothing is ever really finished.

But what is being negotiated in these new works? The setting can give us a clue. The images show a rural but cultivated space—not a wilderness, rather the periphery of the city. Another clue is the technique with which it is depicted—he intentionally refrained from using the photographs as a template, which would certainly have been conceivable. In the case of the works shown here in Düsseldorf for the first time, he has applied oil paint in thin layers, which gives the colours a special depth. For other paintings he uses egg tempera, which in turn can mean weeks of waiting between work stages. Samyn makes this extra effort not out of fascination for the Old Masters, he says, "but because a picture painted in this way lasts forever.³" The painting becomes a witness to the transience that takes place around it and also affects the models. In the installation wall piece "Endogène/Exogène" it is a plant that becomes a symbol. Transplanted from South America to Mediterranean Europe from the 16th century onwards, the inflorescences of the agave, which only blooms every few years, are reminiscent of crucifixes and thus of the finiteness of life (and, for believers, of the possibility of rebirth).

"How do you deal with celebrating something that will pass?" Samyn asks himself in conversation. "Whether it's desire, whether it's beauty, whether it's your own body or something else⁴". So the beauty of the summer evening is ambiguous in his paintings. Should one be happy when there are no clouds, when it stays warm and dry? Nature has become latently suspect due to the climate crisis, it is no longer just a framework for human actions, but is increasingly becoming part of the foreground. In his work *Between Vanishing Points* from 2012, Fabrice Samyn isolated the vanishing points of two Renaissance paintings and made them the motif of two paintings of his own—literally moving the background into the fore⁵. In the painting *The Branch on Which you Sit* one sees a burning branch where one would expect to see the mirrored face of the figure. The man looks thoughtfully into the reddish glow of the fire. The sun provides life, but it can also be deadly. The widespread, fast-growing pine trees of Central Europe, imported from Scandinavia, are particularly endangered by climate change and have been dying off en masse after periods of drought—*Eclipsing Forests*, to use a work title by Fabrice Samyn. A coded clue is contained in the tattoo on the upper arm of the man—a characteristic pattern caused by bark beetles. In an earlier work, Samyn coated the boreholes of an apple tree felled by the insect with gold leaf (*The Fallen Tree of Knowledge*, 2020). The pests mainly attack stressed trees that stand close together in monocultures—and ravage entire forests after periods of drought.

When you go into a forest in Belgium or Germany, can you still speak of "nature" at all? In the Anthropocene, this geological epoch in which humans exert a significant influence on the biology, atmosphere and geology of the planet, the term has become obsolete, according to some leading thinkers. "Nature", writes the influential British philosopher and literary scholar Timothy Morton, "is just agricultural logistics in slow motion... It's controversial, but some geologists actually think that the

¹ Fabrice Samyn quoted in Donatien Grau, „The Gaze of Thaumás“ in *Fabrice Samyn. To See With Ellipse*, 2022, p. 9

² "Nothing is ever finished in my work. My work is cyclic" Conversation between the author and the artist on 3 April 2023

³ „I'm doing it because when you paint this way, the painting lasts forever. They last a long, long, long time“, *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ The sources are *Marriage of the Virgin* (c. 1503, Caen) and Raffaello's *Marriage of the Virgin* (1504, Milan).

periodic, smoothly cycling form of the Holocene was in fact a product of the functioning of a certain agricultural mode ⁱ.

This may sound complicated, but art can help us understand it. Our idea of "nature" is inextricably interwoven and intertwined with the images that man has made of it. In Fabrice Samyn's new works, we see a contemporary consciousness at work that is aware of this fact. One that is aware of the historicity of nature, but which nevertheless comprehends the visible world and its representation as a gateway to understanding—not least to understanding ourselves.

ⁱ Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological*, London 2018, p. 66

Text: Boris Pofalla

Fabrice Samyn

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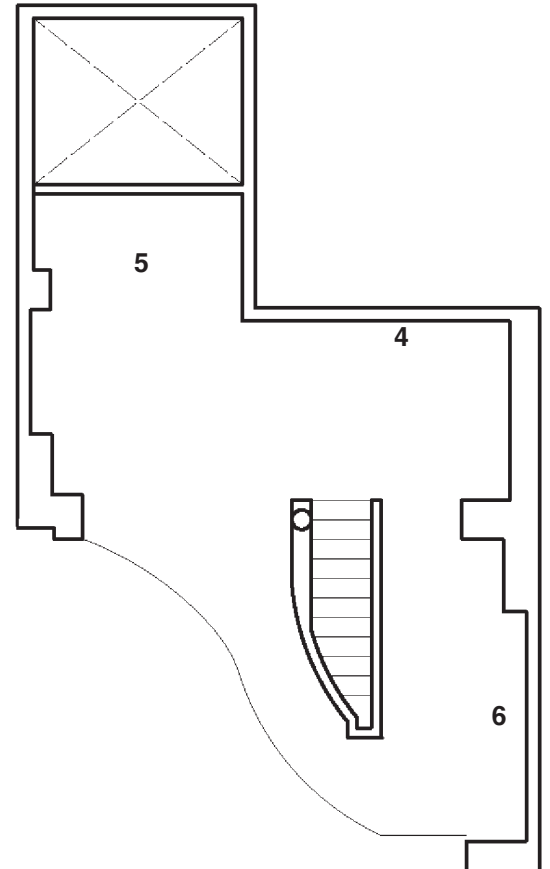
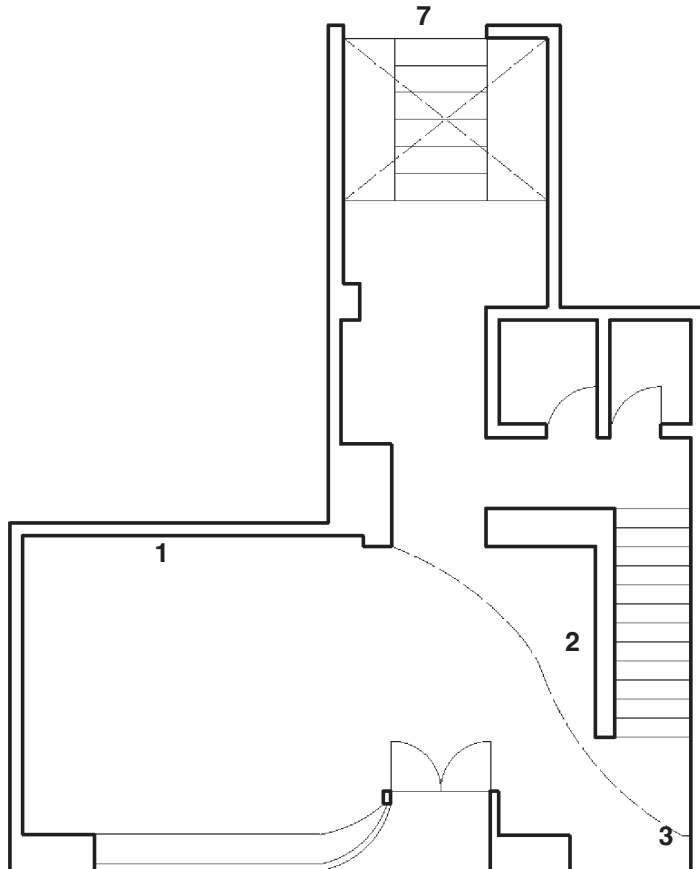
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0211 30 14 360

Entrance + empor



1
Endogenous / Exogenous / Endogène / Exogène, 2018
Gold leaf on agave flowers
Unique
336 x 364 cm

2
The Branch on Which You Sit, from the series Only in Space You May Find Your True Face, 2023
Oil on canvas
108 x 72 cm

3
The Hatching of the Cloud / The Archeology of the Sky, 2021
Marbel
Unique
51 x 93 x 47 cm

4
Io Sono or Never, 2020
Mirror
Unique
38 x 21 cm

5
Sit and Sea Light as a Feather, 2022
Wool, bone, wood, feather and gold

6
Under the Skin, 2020
Wooden, gold leaf
16 x 10 cm

7
The Eclipse's gaze / The Pupil's Suns, 2023
Gold leaf and obsidian
Unique
25 x 120 cm

Souterrain:

8 (next to the stairs)
Sunset, 2019
Watercolour on paper
56 x 76 cm

9 (next to the stairs)
Sunset, 2019
Watercolour on paper
56 x 76 cm

10 (next to the table)
The Consensus, 2022
Coin

11 (next to the table)
Pilgrim's staff, 2021
Gold leaf on wood
126 x 4 x 4 cm

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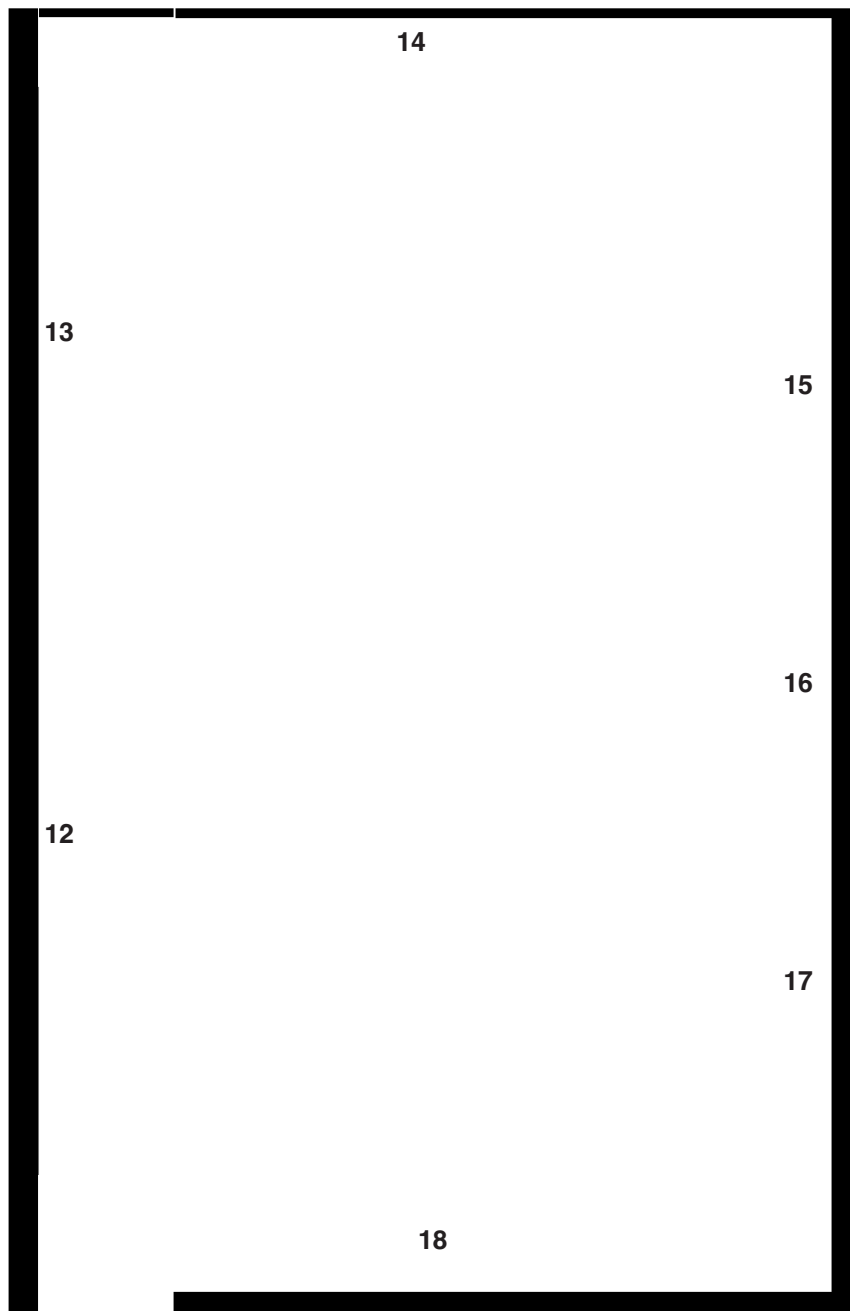
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1st floor

12
His Solstice, from the series Only in Space You May Find Your True Face, 2023
Oil on canvas
200 x 133,5 cm

13
The Eclipsing Forest, from the series Only in Space You May Find Your True Face, 2023
Oil on canvas
94 x 75 cm

14
The White Page, from the series Only in Space You May Find Your True Face, 2023
Oil on canvas
133,5 x 200 cm

15
The Pupil of Night, from the series Only in Space You May Find Your True Face, 2023
Oil on canvas
100,5 x 66,5 cm

16
Indivisible From the Invisible, from the series Only in Space You May Find Your True Face, 2023
Oil on canvas
105 x 72,5 cm

17
Soon with the Tree of the Biography, from the series Only in Space You May Find Your True Face, 2023
Oil on canvas
90 x 70 cm

18
Dazzled, from the series Only in Space You May Find Your True Face, 2023
Oil on canvas
80,4 x 66 cm