

KETELEER GALLERY is very pleased to present a solo exhibition by Norwegian artist Bjarne Melgaard (°1967, Sydney AU. Lives and works in Oslo, NO), the artist's first exhibition since joining the gallery.

- A text by Ulrike Lindmayr.

From the numerous publications on the oeuvre of Bjarne Melgaard I've distilled the following terms: orgiastic, extremely packed, like a feast of trolleys, direct power, uprootedness, coquettishness, Gesamtkunstwerk, endlessly layered, scattered around the room, irritating, overwhelming generosity, fascination for suffering, addiction to misery, horror vacui, catharsis, total boredom, existential doubt, loneliness, addiction to sex, awareness of lost innocence, provocative, inexhaustible repertoire, artistically incorrect, voodoo practices, black magic/white magic, satanic and Dionysian rituals, looking for the sublime, challenging the meaning of "artistic freedom", transcendence of the individual, grotesque, questioning the limits of morality, full of contradictions, violence, sadomasochistic homosexuality, torture, DESIRE, without compromise, drug addiction, repetition, personal mythology, homoerotic, sexual behaviour transgressing societal norms, introspective, fascination for the obscure and satanic, meeting inner demons, death and desire for death, passion as inherently anti-social in nature. And, I repeat, ADDICTION.

What a list!

I would personally add the term 'self-mockery'.

Since the nineties, we have come to know Melgaard's oeuvre as an act of excess and abundance, as a "total" work of art or "Gesamtkunstwerk". Melgaard is one of the few artists who feels at home in all disciplines. Painting doesn't occupy a special place. It's just one of many means of expression, alongside puppet shows, drawings, furniture design, sculptures and installations, as well as jewellery design and texts. The artist bends all mediums to his own will, creating a personal universe unafraid of the darkest corners of human existence. As Dante Alighieri takes us to the underworld in his *Divine Comedy*, to the Ninth Circle, the deepest point of Hell, Melgaard's unwavering courage opens up Pandora's box and accompanies us while we conquer our fears.

Bjarne Melgaard has a special relationship with Belgium. It's where, as a young artist, he first participated in an international exhibition, at S.M.A.K. in Ghent – the legendary show *De Rode Poort* (1996) – when Jan Hoet was still the director, showing the work *A Church for Joey Stefano*, a homage to the American porn star Joey Stefano who committed suicide in 1994 at the age of twenty-six.

Belgium has remained loyal to Melgaard or vice versa, Melgaard has remained loyal to Belgium. In the past 30 years, he regularly participated in solo and group exhibitions, both in museums and galleries.

Today, Bjarne Melgaard presents his new exhibition at KETELEER GALLERY, which consists of 14 new paintings and a selection of drawings, all created in 2021.

What a power, what a mastery of painting, what an explosion of colour! And what a joy to look at these works! The paintings clearly illustrate how for Melgaard painting is the transformation of matter, not the production of an image. Viewed from a distance we recognise emblem-like figures populating the canvas, from up close we see landscapes, abstract relief-like shapes that create space and movement. Eyes become sunsets, faces become hills, a mountain becomes a tongue... The intensity of the act of painting almost suggests a kind of meditation, an immersion in or identification with matter.

Exuberantly and joyfully layers are put upon layers, fat and greasy. "Joy, Joy, Joy" is written on one of the paintings. While in other works the texts "Jeg er den Jeg er" [I am who I am] or "Jeg monster" [I Monster] emerge from the explosion of colour like a reckless echo, a vague memory. We become witnesses to the strength the artist needs to step "into colour", into light.

At the end of the Ninth Circle, after meeting Lucifer, Dante and his escort Virgil crawl over Lucifer's body and through a cavern to the other side of the earth.

Ulrike Lindmayr.
Antwerp, August 2021.

September 5th, a new permanent mural will be unveiled at the reopening of Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, as part of the group exhibition *Zes permanente kunstwerken*.