

Michaël Borremans *The Monkey*

6 June–26 July, 2024
24 Grafton Street, London



Michaël Borremans, *The Talent*, 2023, Oil on canvas
© Michaël Borremans. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to announce *The Monkey*, an exhibition of new paintings by Belgian artist Michaël Borremans, taking place at the gallery's London location. In these works, Borremans continues to explore surface and artifice in his careful consideration of mise-en-scène, combining technical mastery with subject matter that defies straightforward interpretation to create works that are simultaneously humorous and unnerving, familiar and enigmatic. This will be Borremans's eighth solo exhibition with the gallery and his second at David Zwirner London.

The title of the exhibition is taken from several new portrait paintings that depict the eponymous primate, who is shown in these works from the shoulders up, adorned in blue and gold regalia. The portraits invoke *The Monkey Painter* (1739/1740) by the great eighteenth-century French painter Jean Siméon Chardin, showing a simian in painter's garb at work on a canvas. Borremans's monkey, as the artist noted in a recent interview with director Luca Guadagnino, "is a self-portrait" but "not just a self-portrait." Rather, the artist said, "It's a universal version of the portrait of the painter, the figure of the artist."¹

While Chardin's famous work appears to have been based on an actual monkey, the dull gaze and softly blurred and glossy features of Borremans's monkey reveals that the subject of his portraits is not a live animal but a small, glazed sculptural figurine. Borremans created these works by meticulous application of layer upon layer of translucent oil paint, giving the monkeys a quality of timelessness and depth that parallels the sculptural nature of the shiny figurine. At the same time, cast within the format and

¹ Michaël Borremans, quoted in "Michaël Borremans Reveals His True Colors to Luca Guadagnino," *Interview* (Spring 2024), accessed online.

traditional associations of the portraiture genre, the monkey appears discomfitingly sentient. Reflecting on these qualities in a recent essay that will appear in a new publication by David Zwirner Books, writer Katya Tylevich notes: “The artist loves a dry laugh mixed with the somber medium of oil on canvas. In *The Monkey*, however, the joke comes wrapped in razor blades. This body of work feels sharp and dangerous. The laugh more acidic.”²

Another work, also titled *The Monkey* (2023) but portraying a young man in three-quarter profile gazing out toward the frame, reinforces the fluid, conceptual, and ambiguous nature of these paintings. Like the monkey figurine, his hard, round helmet reflects gleaming light off its smooth surface, complicating any literal reading of the human subjects as animate and the monkey sculptures as inanimate. In several other portraits of human figures, Borremans paints his subjects in costumes that have appeared in previous bodies of works—lustrous hooded puffer jackets, which seemingly place them in our present day, or in the future, though little is revealed about the setting in which they are shown.

The works’ titles—such as *The Talent* (2023) and *The Talent II* (2023)—connect the portrayed subjects to certain historical archetypes, yet their appearances resist clear narratives. In these two related paintings, Borremans presents a figure from the torso up, clad in generic cowboy and Western attire that the artist sourced from Hollywood studios during a recent trip to Los Angeles. If Borremans gives his monkey an uncanny alertness, the cowboy outfit “makes his human model into a figurine.”³ As Tylevich further observes, “Borremans creates an imbalance between viewer and subject. He muddies the presupposed allegory of the human figure. Representations of our own image often evoke empathy. But Borremans makes us question whether his images feel anything for us in return.”⁴

Complementing the portraits are a group of small-format panel paintings of landscapes that likewise build on the motifs and ambiguities of similar works from *The Acrobat*, the artist’s closely related 2022 solo exhibition at David Zwirner New York. Though the portraits and landscapes directly engage and subvert their respective genres, Borremans also sees them as linked: “A portrait of mine can be perceived as a landscape because it also appeals to the subconscious,” states the artist. “The work is never literal, it can never be perceived that way. It’s more emotional.”⁵ In these landscapes, Borremans uses scale as a tool of mystification that unsettles the relationships and hierarchies between subjects and objects. *The Gardener* (2023) shows a forested tableaux with the monkey figurine making a reappearance at a size that dwarfs a vitrine-like structure and several human figures below. *The Smell* and *The Smell II* (both 2023) include enlarged Cadillac hood ornaments that appear massive compared to the miniaturized cars and reclining humans in the middle and foreground. Here, as in the portraits, Borremans sets the literal and figurative stage, allowing unseen and unspoken tensions to simmer beneath the surface of his works, drawing the viewer into them.

The Monkey follows the April 2024 opening of Borremans’s solo exhibition *The Promise* at Prada Rong Zhai, Shanghai, as well as *The Acrobat*—a show much lauded by critics including John Vincler of the *New York Times*, who stated that Borremans “may be the greatest living figurative painter.”⁶

² Katya Tylevich, *Michaël Borremans: The Monkey*. Exh. cat. (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2024), p. 8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

⁵ “Michaël Borremans in Conversation with Julian Taffel,” *Marfa Journal* (April 2024), n.p.

⁶ John Vincler, “Art We Saw This Spring,” *New York Times* (June 8, 2022), accessed online.

Michaël Borremans (b. 1963) was born in Geraardsbergen, Belgium, and in 1996 he received his M.F.A. from Hogeschool voor Wetenschap en Kunst, Campus St. Lucas, in Ghent. Borremans continues to live and work in Ghent.

David Zwirner has represented the artist's work since 2001. In 2022, the solo exhibition *Michaël Borremans: The Acrobat* was on view at David Zwirner New York. Previous solo presentations of the artist's work at the gallery include *Fire from the Sun* (Hong Kong, 2018), *Black Mould* (London, 2015), *The Devil's Dress* (New York, 2011), *Taking Turns* (New York, 2009), *Horse Hunting* (New York, 2006), and *Trickland* (New York, 2003).

Borremans's work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at a number of prominent institutions. A comprehensive solo exhibition will open at Museum Voorlinden in Wassenaar, the Netherlands, in November 2024. In April 2024, Prada Rong Zhai opened *Michaël Borremans: The Promise*, the presentation of which is installed in a 1918 historic home in the Jing'an district of Shanghai. In 2020, the two-person presentation, *Michaël Borremans / Mark Manders: Double Silence*, was on view at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan. Also in 2020, *Michaël Borremans: The Duck* was on view at Galerie Rudolfinum, Prague. *Michaël Borremans: Fixture* was presented at the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo de Málaga, Spain, in 2015–2016. A major museum survey, *Michaël Borremans: As sweet as it gets*, which included one hundred works from the past two decades, was on view at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 2014. The exhibition traveled later in the year to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, followed by the Dallas Museum of Art in 2015. *Michaël Borremans: The Advantage*, the artist's first solo museum show in Japan, was also on view in 2014 at the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo.

In 2011, *Michaël Borremans: Eating the Beard*, a comprehensive solo show, was presented at the Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, and traveled to the Múcsarnok Kunsthalle, Budapest, and the Kunsthalle Helsinki. In 2010, he had a solo exhibition at the Kunstneres Hus in Oslo, as well as commissioned work on view at the Royal Palace in Brussels. Other venues that have hosted solo exhibitions include the Kestner Gesellschaft, Hanover, Germany (2009); de Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam (2007); Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.), Ghent (2005; traveled to Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art, London, and Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin); Cleveland Museum of Art (2005); Kunsthalle Bremerhaven, Germany (2004); and the Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel (2004).

Work by the artist is held in public collections internationally, including the Art Institute of Chicago; Cleveland Museum of Art; Dallas Museum of Art; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.), Ghent; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

For all press inquiries, contact

Sara Chan +44 203 538 3165 sara@davidzwirner.com

Niamh Brogan +44 203 538 3165 niamh@davidzwirner.com