

Joyful colours that mask the apocalypse

A look at the publication of a book of interviews and the beguiling chromatic marvels of Jeff Kowatch's one-man show at Galerie Faider in Brussels.

Jeff Kowatch's new solo exhibition brings out colors that dance weightlessly through an indeterminate space. The shapes are ever supple, disregarding all the rules, even fleeing them, behaving as free electrons, first clumped together in a group, seeking each other out through elective affinities, and then driven by an impulse to slip away for a temporary taste of solitude, far from the clamor of the crowd, even if it is a joyous one. This painting is, truly, a hymn to joy, a song of gladness with the remarkable power to cheer its viewer, thanks to its magical use of delicately muted material, and the sensual aroma of tonalities which are simultaneously gentle and distinct. The artist acts as a cloud-maker, producing formations that seem steeped in the manifold lights of a tender burst of fireworks - one which does not dazzle the viewer, but melts into the atmosphere and enchants us, sinks into our being, with that extraordinary ability to convey the individual moments of an undefinable happiness, right there before us, without any particular reason.

A floating space

Each one of Jeff Kowatch's paintings is the product of a highly refined technique requiring patience, method and skill. They express personal emotion and an intimate and intense perceptivity that the artist is able to transmit and share without imposing his own inwardness on the viewer. His paintings are abstract, eschewing any form of figurative reference, but they offer themselves up generously, like gifts we receive without quite feeling we deserve them. No need to ponder what mechanism is at work, as these paintings act on us so immediately, sweeping any resistance away. Depending on your personal affinities, you might first be taken with a dominant green, punctuated by varied shades of mauve, or, instead, by illusory repetitions of startling red that finds its resting place amidst whites, pinks, blues that are alternately pale and emphatic, in which a streak of ochre fades to nothing. The offerings multiply in a delicate haze of uncertain contours, living and vibrating with a slightly mysterious luminosity. No rules govern these paintings, which are not compositions but rather floating spaces, without dimensions, establishing their harmony as stars and clouds do in the unpredictable living world of the heavens.

The dark side

Though we may perhaps not attach any great significance to the works' titles, chosen after the fact, since there is no concept guiding the paintbrush, which is wholly directed by the intuitions and feelings of the present moment, it is nevertheless crucial to note that the impetus for this series of paintings came from Kowatch's reading of a critical text in which he came across the phrase "Apocalyptic Carnival."

Since the motivation that gave rise to his creative instincts came originally from the circus, the carnival and clowns - subjects that are traditionally joyful by nature - the painter has been able to draw on all the power of oxymoron, and the elements ultimately hidden in the circus of celebration that he offers his viewers, through his palette of colours and the softness of material. He explains this in a conversation with Paul Emond: "I realized I could use bright colors while knowing behind them there's a disaster." Indeed - behind them there's the apocalypse! Who said that abstract painting was meaningless?

The biggest piece in Kowatch's body of work is a reference to Ensor's famous painting, in the same format, 2.58m x 4.30m (approx. 101 ½ x 169 ⅓ inches): "Christ's Entry into Brussels", bought by Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Kowatch entitled his work "Christ Leaving Brussels" and declared the painting "is me today".

Life at a glance

The American Jeff Kowatch was born in Los Angeles in 1965. He has lived and worked in Brussels for around ten years. He became interested in painting from a very early age and learned how to paint independently. He trained professionally as an actor and had also trained in meditation when he took the decision to become a painter. He has been exhibiting his work regularly in galleries in Los Angeles and New York since the end of the 1980s, as well as in Paris, Amsterdam and Belgium since 2005. His paintings are included in the public art collections in the United States.

"I chose the subject of the carnival and the circus because I wanted to paint those colors, feelings, emotions, the ridiculous side of life, the sarcasm, and that's connected with the place where I am right now."

Book release

A newly published work will be available at this exhibition: "Jeff Kowatch - Conversations with Paul Emond". The quotations are taken from this work. In it, the artist talks about his trajectory, his method of working, his visual reference points - which are often drawn from the old greats such as Rembrandt or Vermeer but also Bruce Nauman - his literary and theatrical affinities from Chekhov to Nietzsche, from Henry Miller to Cervantes. He also discusses his relationship with religion and zen meditation, the importance of emotion and instinct, and about his three key foundation blocks: material, subject and the unknown. From Éditions Tandem, within the series entitled "Conversations avec."

Heavenly Body, oil on canvas, 195.5 x 130.5 cm (approximately 77 x 51.5 inches), 2016

Cirque d'antan, oil on canvas, 33 x 33 cm (approximately 13 x 13 inches), 2016

Jeff Kowatch, "Apocalyptic Carnival." Galerie Faider, 12 rue Faider, 1060 Brussels, until 18th December, Wednesday to Saturday, 2 to 6 p.m. Information: www.galeriefaider.be