

Le Soir

Zen Sensuality

An enthralling exhibition of the American painter Jeff Kowatch, who is showing his most recent works in two galleries in Brussels.

A native of California who spent ten years in New York, Jeff Kowatch (1965) has been living in Belgium since the early 2000s. Represented here by Galerie Faider and in Paris by Galerie Vieille du Temple – renamed Galerie La Forest Divonne in 2015 – it makes perfect sense for the artist to exhibit in both galleries this autumn. At Faider, he is showing his oil paintings on canvas, which have a smooth, blurry and cottony finish, whereas at La Forest Divonne he is exhibiting works on paper: *“This is an aspect of his work that I like very much, because he makes his movements and the material aspect of his work clearly visible”*, the gallery director, Jean de Malherbe, tells us. For this series, Kowatch worked with oil paint sticks on large-format Dibond aluminium panels without glass.

PICTORIAL PLENITUDE

A practitioner of meditation and a Master Dharma Teacher of Zen, Jeff Kowatch seeks a subtle visual equilibrium. *“From the outset, pastel work can be characterised by resistance, and hence a certain form of fierceness that is not brutality but enthusiasm, ardour and passion”*, Michel Draguet comments in the exhibition catalogue. Having spent one or two years working on each piece, superimposing fine pictorial layers, the artist repeats the same movements unceasingly, like in his meditative practice. His works are the result of a continual repetition of movements. In his Brussels studio, *“Everything exudes order and moderation, self-emptying and concentration. Drawings are clipped to the back wall”*, we learn from Michel Draguet, who is well acquainted with the place. *“The magic of different colours spread out into bright fields and the line that perpetually gravitates around the sheet, then on the smooth surface of the aluminium. Painting and drawing: two modes of expression with the same way of being in the world.”*

By settling in Brussels, Jeff Kowatch has moved closer to the cradle of the oil painting technique. He has mastered the use of “glaze” that is so characteristic of Flemish painting, while also following the great tradition of American abstract artists, from Mark Rothko to Brice Marden. We should not forget either the Ostend native, James Ensor, to whom Kowatch pays tribute in *“Christ Leaving Brussels”*, which is just as carnivalesque and colourful as the Ensor work that served as model, and whose dimensions are the exact same as those of the great painting now in “exile” at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, Kowatch’s hometown – it’s all linked together! A world of light with polyphonies that are sometimes delicate and sometimes ferocious, that seize our gaze and *“evoke both late Monet and his magical nymphs and the mystical Rothko who unravels in his fields of pure colour the diversity of a world devoted exclusively to the spiritual”*.

30 YEARS IN PARIS, 3 IN BRUSSELS

This autumn also marks an important anniversary for the Galerie La Forest Divonne, which opened its doors in the Marais in 1988. On this occasion, Marie H el ene de La Forest Divonne and her son, Jean de Malherbe, director of the Saint-Gilles gallery, take stock of the gallery's past and consider their recent opening in Brussels. *"I want to become a Belgian gallerist!"*, Jean de Malherbe declares.

Settled here with his wife and children, the thirty-something wishes to do things differently from other French galleries in Brussels who, very often, have a manager here but in fact direct everything from Paris. *"I think that our project makes sense only if we become part of the fabric of Belgian cultural life, including, personally, creating relationships of trust over the long term. We try to promote artists that we are passionate about, not necessarily the big names, and this can only be done via direct contact. We are in fact trying to work more and more with Belgian artists: next spring we will be exhibiting Catherine Franois and, in September, Tinka Pittoors. We feel that Brussels has come to occupy a key position in the contemporary art world, in particular for young artists. They emphasise open-mindedness and the availability of art lovers. In Brussels, we are now followed by significant art collectors, who often have more freedom than those in Paris and who do not buy through an art consultant".*

Ali enor Debrocq

"Jeff Kowatch. Full Circle", until 23 December. Galerie La Forest Divonne, Tuesday through Saturday from 11 am to 7 pm, 66 rue de l'H otel des Monnaies, 1060 Brussels. 02-544.16.73; www.galerielaforestdivonne.fr; Galerie Faider, Wednesday through Saturday from 2 to 6 pm, 12 rue Faider, 1050 Brussels, 02-538.71.18, www.galeriefaider.be. Shuttle service between the two galleries on Thursday 8 for the opening.