ALMINE RECH

The Wall: Werner Mannaers
To Make Meringue, You Must Beat The Egg

Mar 7 — Apr 13, 2024 | Brussels

Almine Rech Brussels is pleased to present *To Make Meringue, You Must Beat The Egg*, Werner Mannaers' first solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from March 7 to April 13, 2024.

Letter to: Werner Mannaer

It's a privilege to visit an artist's studio, time and time again. Visiting you at the start of 2024 in Borgerhout was no exception. I immediately thought back to our first meeting sometime in 2008 in preparation for the exhibition 'ANYTH_ =' at S.M.A.K. in Ghent. That very first studio visit caught me off guard. The studio was smaller than your current one, but both places reeked of freedom, of searching. On my last visit, a red piece of paper displayed your swift handwriting, reading: “Making the viewer part of the problem”. Whether you borrowed that sentence somewhere or phrased it yourself, it takes us straight to the heart of your oeuvre. 3 things can be distilled from that line: the viewer, the problem, and making the former part of the latter. Involving the viewer means engaging them by crafting an in-between. It means drawing them into the unlikely challenge of painting today, while art history breathes down our neck and digital image production looms. It is both a problem and a question. Why does it still make sense to paint today? One possible answer might be that it makes sense as long as there are spectators. Yet there's more to it, as your idiosyncratic oeuvre of drawings and paintings shows. In the Renaissance, the idea of a painting as a window to the world was born. In Werner Mannaers' drawings and paintings, the work is a window onto itself *and* the beholder. Werner Mannaers' oeuvre invites us to stretch our vision, to shift our visual experiences (and expectations) ever so slightly, searchingly scanning a drawing or painting. Each work consists of an accumulation of events in form and colour. Some of these are controlled, others decided by chance. More than just colour, Werner Mannaers uses the pigment of art history. This does not necessarily make the artist a citation-artist, but one who seemingly grinds his knowledge and admiration for art history together. How wonderful to note that in German, the word Maler (painter) almost has the same origin as the word Mahlen (to grind). Regardless of whether this speculative etymology is accurate, it brings us closer to what Werner Mannaers does. Each work is a condensed milling of influences, never forgetting the unique interaction between the artist's life and his work. Then, there's his interest in music, which immediately brings me to the much overlooked power and meaning of improvisation. In free jazz and improvised music, improvisation has to do with the now, with the moment, with an ability to respond to the immediacy of the environment, regardless of whether it is sonorous or not. And this, too, is Werner Mannaers. Which suddenly reminds me of a remarkable quote by music giant Steve Lacy: “In classical composition you have all the time you need to decide what you want to say in 15 seconds, in improvisation you have 15 seconds”. Werner Mannaers leans into that idea: the directness of his work has the musicality of an improvised exploration by, say, Steve Lacy on his soprano saxophone. The drawings (and paintings) are a boundless exploration of form, rhythm, repetition, layering, imagination, nuance, play... You may have noticed that I have firmly avoided the word 'abstract'. To teasingly push the point - in whatever direction - I would call Werner Mannaers a figurative painter. This to make it clear that the act of categorising a visual language can only simplify an artistic reality. Of course, the artist's work is more closely aligned with a tradition of painters labelled as abstract. But I deliberately distance myself from this. Because Werner Mannaers' work is also a way of being alive, the belief that drawing and painting can be a form of resistance, a response to the instrumentalisation of our world, and thus to the instrumentalisation of art. Perhaps Werner Mannaers is the kind of artist that does the following: "Making the problem part of the viewer".

- Philippe Van Cauteren (S.M.A.K Artistic Director), Berlin, January 14 2024