

## IMPENETRABLE (BRUSSELS)

Otto Berchem (b. 1967 in Milford, CT, USA) lives and works in Amsterdam and Bogota, Colombia. He studied art in New York and Edinburgh as well as at the Rijksacademie in Amsterdam.

One of the most popular applications of a flag is to symbolise a nation or country. Social and political movements also use flags to communicate, increase visibility and as an instrument of unification - to show that the members belong together. Some political flags became national flags, like that of the Soviet Union and later the national-socialist flag of Nazi Germany. Because flags symbolise ideologies, people are prepared to fight and die for flags. Sometimes flags arouse strong emotions. Sportsmen often burst out in tears on the podium when their national flag is hoisted.

Earlier this year Otto Berchem realised the installation *Impenetrable*, with 19 flags of diverse dimensions, in Galeria Pilar in São Paulo, Brazil. Each flag referred to a Latin-American revolutionary movement. Otto Berchem changed the look of the flag by changing the colours and replacing essential elements such as symbols and letters with circular openings. Otto Berchem played a game by making the code (a language, communication) impenetrable. He appropriated the flags of these revolutionary movements and translated them into his own chromatic alphabet. By doing so, he created a new object that represents its own territory. A territory that is impenetrable for those who don't know the code.

With the work *Impenetrable* Otto Berchem looks at art history from his own artistic experience, more specifically the Latin-American tradition of the *Penetrable* (or *Pénétrable*) as we know it from Jesús Rafael Soto (1923-2005) and Hélio Oiticica (1937-1980). The formal characteristics of the work of both artists served as inspiration when setting up Otto's works in Galeria Pilar.

For the first *Window* project (in a space of scarcely more than three cubic metres!) at Hopstreet Gallery in Brussels, Otto Berchem created new flags that are interpretations of European left-wing movements such as the Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF), Brigade Rosse (BR), Cellules Communistes Combattantes (CCC), and Action Directe (AD). In a certain sense, the work in the window can also be seen as the failure of these Marxist, Maoist, anti-capitalist factions. The symbols were appropriated by Otto Berchem and are now impenetrable and meaningless. This failure is further accentuated by the fact that the work is shown in a place that used to function as a shop-window and is now part of a commercial gallery that functions in a capitalist market economy.

Patrick Ronse, August 2015