

21 September 2017 by Christof Verbiest

## In life and in art, Tinus Vermeersch refuses to plan ahead

### The act of painting

To say that Tinus Vermeersch was raised in an artistic family is to put it mildly. His father, his mother and two of his brothers are artists, and his grandfather José was a painter and sculptor.



Even so, “I never had the ambition to become an artist,” Vermeersch tells me, sitting in his studio, which is in a barn next to his house in the pastures bordering the West Flemish city of Roeselare.

But he did, and a remarkable one at that, as a small but arresting show at the Hopstreet Gallery in Brussels demonstrates. An expanded show with a larger selection of works will open at the Directeurswoning art house in Roeselare in December.

His parents never pushed Vermeersch or his brothers to become artists, he says. But art was ubiquitous in their home and the most natural of things. “Not that we didn’t play outside or watch TV; we did,” he says. “But in my memory, the four of us were always drawing. When we drew, we liked to imitate my father’s and grandfather’s work.”

At one point, Vermeersch, now 41, realised that drawing was the thing he liked the most, so in the fourth year of secondary school, he switched to a study programme in arts education. After graduating, he studied painting for two years at the Kask art school in Ghent and sculpture for three years at the Luca art school in Ghent.

## Life-changing moment

“I had no clear goal, except that I wanted a job that involved drawing. That could have been creating illustrations.”

He completed a one-year stint as a teacher, took odd jobs as a freelancer and created work in his spare time that he didn’t show. In 2005, an exhibition featuring the work of the Vermeersch family changed his life. He was 28 at the time.

“At that point, I was making cartoons, illustrations and ink drawings,” he says. He didn’t want to put all his work out into the world quite yet, so he included only his ink drawings in the show.

## *When I begin, I don’t know what I will paint, but I want to be sure that I know how to paint it*

That decision appears to have been a smart one – his work received high praise, and Hopstreet, a contemporary art gallery focused on young and emerging artists based in Europe, asked if they could represent him. Since then, interest in his work has continued to grow, and art is Vermeersch’ main occupation today.

**The new show** – just three sculptures and eight miniature paintings – captures an important change in Vermeersch’ oeuvre. After years of having worked with tempera paint, the standard in painting until the beginning of the 16th century, he is here presenting a series of works in oil.

Vermeersch explains that he likes to quickly paint one layer after another, and tempera dries very quickly. “I can keep on painting without waiting. Working with tempera for me is also more akin to drawing than to painting with oil.”

## Kindred spirits

After a pause, he adds: “Maybe I started using tempera out of fear. When I started painting, I thought that oil paint had a lot of gravity. It’s steeped in history, and it’s much more complex to work with.”

Many of the works he created in this previous period appear to show landscapes, but Vermeersch notes that he didn't model them after real-life examples or photos. "They originate from the motion of the painting," he explains, moving his hand from left to right. "I want to fully master the material I work with. When I begin, I don't know *what* I will paint, but I want to be sure that I know *how* to."

Beginning a work with no conception of what it will be seems rather uncommon, but not for Vermeersch. "With the new works, I only knew I wanted to paint figures, but whether they were going to have round heads or not, and be coloured red or green – those things I decide while working on the painting.

*The subjects of pre-18th-century works often don't interest me, but I'm fascinated by the sublime way they're painted*

Whatever those in-the-moment decisions, the end result can always be interpreted in multiple ways. "I don't want it to be too obvious," he says. "I like this ambiguity."

On second thought, he quickly adds: "It should be painted distinctly; it's the meaning that's equivocal."

Many of his paintings bring to mind Renaissance art and the Flemish Primitives – and for good reason, Vermeersch says. "Not that I can't enjoy some contemporary art, but I have more of an affinity with what happened before the 18th century. The subjects of those works often don't interest me, but I'm fascinated by the sublime way they're painted. If you think of the Flemish Primitives or Renaissance paintings, there isn't much variation in the subjects. With contemporary art, I have the impression that the content prevails."

Does that mean that the subject of his paintings isn't the most important aspect? "What I paint is important because you always want to create an image," he nuances. After a pause, he adds: "I don't paint to create images, but the other way round: I think I create images so I can paint."

*Until 28 October at Hopstreet Gallery, Sint-Jorisstraat 109, Brussels*

*Photo: Tinus Vermeersch, courtesy Hopstreet Gallery Brussels*