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Roger Raveel, Man, Bucket, etc., 1967, Private collection © Raveel - MDM. Photo: Peter Claeys



ROGER RAVEEL

A Retrospective

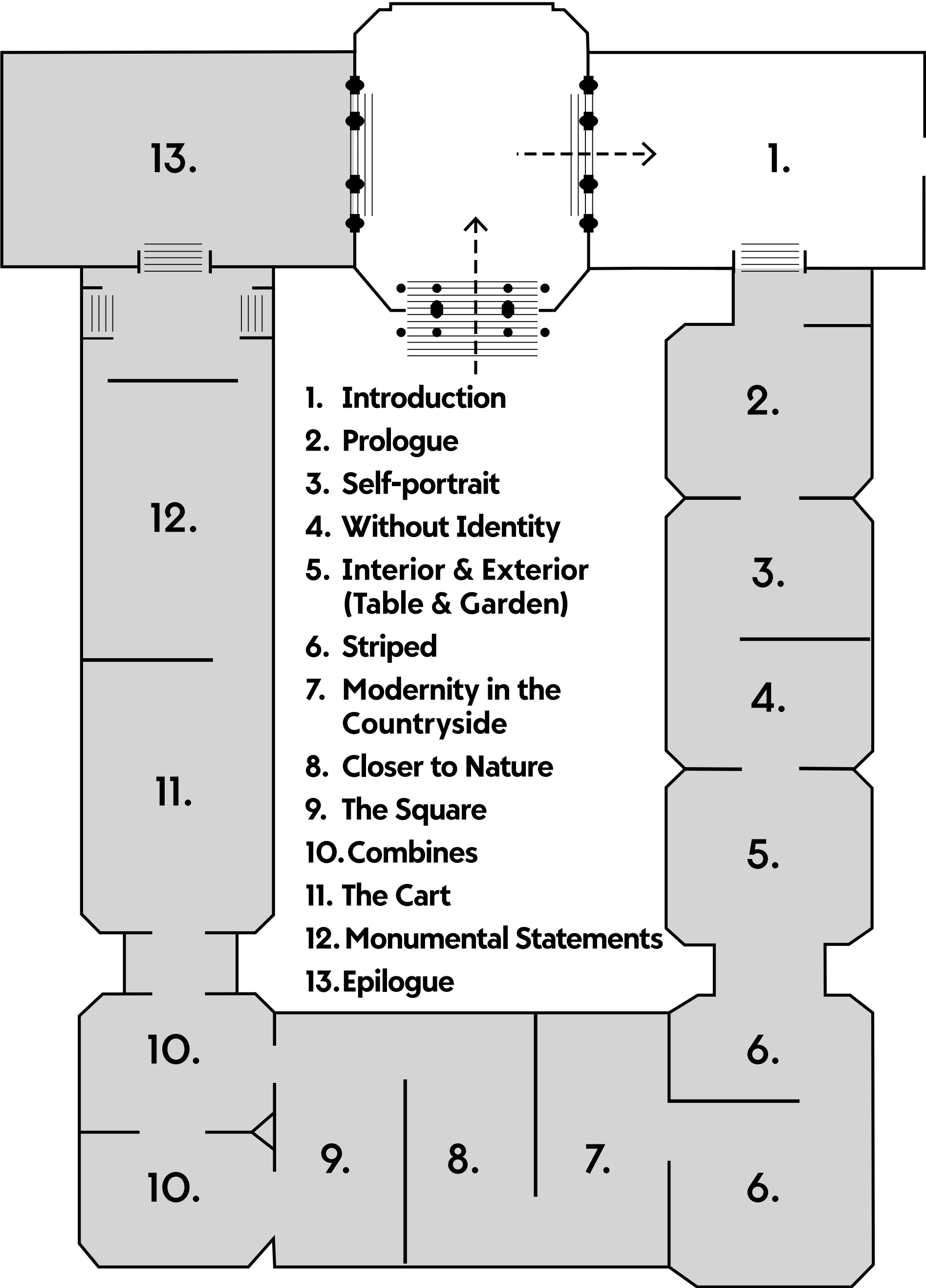
18 MARCH – 21 JULY '21

Visitor's guide **EN**

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INTRODUCTION

Roger Raveel (1921–2013) would have turned a hundred in 2021. An ideal opportunity for the Centre for Fine Arts (BOZAR) to look back at the extensive oeuvre of one of the most important Belgian painters of the second half of the twentieth century.

Bringing to light the universal in the everyday: that is how one could summarise Raveel's ongoing artistic quest. He stood out radically from his contemporaries by developing a distinctly personal visual language, balancing between figuration and abstraction, and inspired by his everyday surroundings. Raveel lived his entire life in his native village of Machelen-aan-de-Leie. A remarkable choice at a time when the art world was becoming increasingly international.

The exhibition starts in 1948, the year in which Raveel's characteristic realism begins to take shape. Through ten thematic chapters, the exhibition attempts to analyse Raveel's unique vision and his peculiar view of the relationship between art and reality. These themes keep recurring in various combinations throughout Raveel's oeuvre. They may be understood as frames of reference orienting his artistic quest, or as variations on his overarching subject: humankind in its everydayness and in its universality.

TEN WORKS OF ART HIGHLIGHTED



Self-portrait with Cigarette

1952

Oil and metal on hardboard

Collection of the Flemish Community/Roger Raveel Museum,
Machelen-aan-de-Leie © Raveel - MDM. Photo: Peter Claeys

This is one of the earliest paintings in which Raveel turns a concrete observation into something universal through thorough simplification. Raveel paints a self-portrait, but one deprived of identity: a dummy rather than a human

being. That in itself is a contradiction, since portraiture is, after all, about the recognisability of the person portrayed.

Raveel's depiction of himself and his clothes is sketchy. Eyes, eyebrows, nose, lips and an ear are barely perceptible in the flat, greyish surface: Raveel scratched them into the wet paint using the back of his brush. The cigarette he holds is little more than a strange, rather thick, almost shapeless 'line'. And the colours of the portrait can hardly be called 'realistic' either. Just look at the green fingers and orange-red hair. The painter uses that same remarkable orange for the strange dotted line that runs around the face.

Raveel intends this work as a statement, to assert that art has little to do with the faithful reproduction of visible reality. The artist does something other than imitate what he sees. In this regard, notice also the highly stylised, 'unrealistic' background, which consists of two areas of colour cut by a diagonal. It seems as though they are held together by a metal strip. In his later work, Raveel will integrate objects into his work more frequently. This is the first time he is doing so. The small cabinet, the stripes and the somewhat shapeless bowl are also elements that will recur regularly in later works.



Man with Wire in Garden

1952-53

Oil on paper on plywood

Collection of the Flemish Community/Roger Raveel Museum,
Machelen-aan-de-Leie © Raveel – MDM. Photo: Peter Claeys

In *Man with Wire in Garden*, Raveel continues the stylisation of everyday reality. The man in the painting is Gustaaf Raveel, the artist's father. But instead of a recognisable face, Raveel paints a series of coloured squares and lines. It almost looks like a miniature painting by Piet Mondrian.

Strange as it may sound, a painter like Mondrian suited Raveel quite well, although he never practised pure

geometric abstraction. He probably felt an affinity with Mondrian's quest for the universal.

In this painting, you might also detect Mondrian's influence in the evenly painted green, red, orange and black geometric areas that represent the hedge, the path, the roof and the side walls of the houses. Mondrian would never have used green or orange, since those colours were too close to everyday reality.

A remarkable feature are the grooved hands of Raveel's father, which are painted in an entirely different style. Did Raveel want to paint them as realistically as possible, in contrast to the flat, monochrome colour fields? Or are the lines a way of modelling the hands and fingers and giving them volume?

Notice also the concrete posts, an important feature of Raveel's art.



Woman with Revolver

1950

Oil on hardboard

Linda and Guy Pieters Foundation, Saint-Tropez © Raveel – MDM.

Photo: Peter Claeys

The outdoor scenes set in Raveel's village, Machelen-aan-de-Leie, usually include the artist's father as a character. The indoor scenes, by contrast, centre on Zulma, whom Raveel married in 1948.

After the death of Raveel's mother, Zulma De Nijs kept managing her liqueur shop in order to bring in some sorely needed income, the young couple being poorly off. That is why Raveel used paint and canvas sparingly

during this period, and often produced small works on paper and hardboard. Until her death in 2009, Zulma remained the most ardent and unwavering defender of her husband and his oeuvre.

In 1950 Raveel paints her at a small wooden table. Before her are a number of objects. Everything was worth painting, he thought, including therefore the most banal, everyday things. That had to be possible in contemporary painting. And so he painted a chromed coffee pot (quite modern at the time), a wine glass, a book (the Bible?) and a small bowl.

But why did he paint a revolver? It is a bizarre, rather mysterious object, which is completely out of place here. Raveel never gave an explanation for its presence. Was the revolver inspired by a comic strip? Or did Raveel want to introduce tension in the still life and sharpen our gaze with this strange object, which seems so incongruous here?

Whatever the case may be, it is a fact that he painted each object in a different way – the coffee pot as realistically as possible, the glass only in outline. As if there was not the slightest connection between the objects.



Yellow Man with Cart

1952

Oil on canvas

Collection of the Flemish Community/Roger Raveel Museum,
Machelen-aan-de-Leie © Raveel – MDM. Photo: Peter Claeys

The yellow man seen from behind draws all the attention. Without a doubt, *he* is the subject of this painting. Such figures, wearing a striped suit and a cap, will later become distinguishing elements of Raveel's oeuvre and form part of his trademark.

These striped figures have raised many questions over the years. Curator Franz W. Kaiser has put forward a hypothesis. Raveel simply wanted to distance himself from attempts to depict visible reality as faithfully as possible. On the other hand, he did not want to lapse into the radical two-dimensionality of the flat surface. The compromise between plasticity and flatness may well have been the use of parallel stripes. By employing these stripes – a kind of hatching, as it were – Raveel was able to give his figures volume without painting realistically. The yellow man stands in a not very idyllic back garden, between concrete posts and a light blue fence. He is holding a cart: a wooden crate with bicycle wheels, an element that will recur frequently in Raveel's work. But the perspective is incorrect, and that is a deliberate intervention by Raveel. He did not want to pursue 'realism'.

Have you noticed the strange blue stripes behind the yellow man? This is how Raveel depicts one or more birds taking off. It is his way of indicating that it is impossible to perceive birds in flight clearly. A few fleeting stripes must therefore be enough.



From My Garden

1949

Oil on paper on plywood

Collection of the Flemish Community/Roger Raveel Museum,
Machelen-aan-de-Leie © Raveel – MDM. Photo: Peter Claeys

In *From My Garden*, Raveel has painted a banal back garden. There is in fact hardly any 'garden' to speak of in terms of grass and trees. The protagonists are concrete posts and fences as well as windowless houses. Raveel uses concrete to introduce the intrusion of modernity in the countryside and in his village of Machelen-aan-de-Leie.

The painting brings to mind a claustrophobic interior. Raveel schematises visible reality – in a manner reminiscent of Mondrian almost – in a series of horizontal and vertical elements, although with a strikingly slanting goal which stands on an invisible football field. The horizon itself is no longer visible in the countryside, but vanishes behind a concrete fence. The sky is just as grey as the concrete. Raveel renders that concrete almost tactilely, as if you can feel the coarse grain, while some of the posts are nothing more than white rectangles with black edges.

The structure of the painting is defined by geometric abstraction, but at the same time Raveel shows us the true image of a genuine Flemish village, parcelled out and densely built-up.

The sense of alienation is further accentuated because Raveel does not use shadows. As a result, the objects lack any weight and seem to float. He does as he pleases with the perspective, however, and introduces some strange yellow spots (a haystack?), which lend the work a surrealistic touch.



Green Presence in Blue Space

1958

Oil on hardboard

Collection of the Province of East Flanders/Roger Raveel Museum,
Machelen-aan-de-Leie © Raveel – MDM. Photo: Peter Claeys

It is almost ironic. In the mid-1950s Raveel wants, as he puts it, to 'immerse himself in the reality of nature' because he feels alienated from his immediate surroundings. So he places his easel in the garden of his home to experience nature in the most direct way.

But, contrary to what you might expect, he abandons all figuration and starts to paint abstractly.

The painting *Green Presence in Blue Space* shows how Raveel depicts the (green) garden and the (blue) sky with powerful, seemingly uncontrolled brushstrokes. But he is no impressionist: he wants to capture neither the landscape nor the light accurately. So there is no horizon with the green garden below and the blue sky on top. Instead, Raveel is concerned with making his experiences tangible. It is as if his paintings themselves are becoming nature in a kind of highly individual 'action painting'. The uncontrolled vegetal growth of green paint, while blue and black paint blows like the wind and the sun is both at its zenith and setting in an orange glow. Because Raveel uses pure colours, the light seems to radiate from the canvas.

A square gradually begins to appear in a number of paintings. Is it the laundry hanging out to dry in the garden? Sheets, dishcloths or pillowcases? It is in any case a man-made form, which Raveel contrasts with the organic forms of nature.



March Magic

1962

Oil on canvas and wood

Mu.ZEE, Ostend © Raveel – MDM. Photo: Ludion Publishers

The white square with its thick black contour features prominently in *March Magic*. Raveel introduces tension into the painting by explicitly confronting the taut white 'void' with the hasty brushstrokes with which he has painted the brown earth (a muddy path?), green grass and yellow flowers (budding broom?). Sterile white versus burgeoning life in the spring month of March. Moreover, he paints the earth in various shades of brown and the grass in numerous shades of green, while the white is just 'white': speckless and monochrome.

The square almost immediately calls to mind the now iconic black square that Kazimir Malevich painted in

1913 as a revolutionary statement – also because of the spiritual dimension it had for both artists. But Raveel most likely did not know Malevich, since the Russian painter was virtually forgotten when Raveel painted this canvas in 1962. For Raveel, however, the square was primarily a man-made form that did not exist in nature. In his paintings, therefore, it is the counterpart of nature. The white square floats in this painting as if it were a ghost. Note also the other, smaller white square that has been deliberately and clumsily painted over with brown paint. This will only tickle the viewer's curiosity, Raveel must have thought.



The Window

1962

Oil on canvas and mixed media

Private collection/Roger Raveel Museum, Machelen-aan-de-Leie ©

Raveel - MDM. Photo: Peter Claeys

In *The Window* Roger Raveel achieves for the first time a synthesis of abstraction and figuration, art and reality. He combines an 'abstract' painting with an object. By adding a concrete object to a painting, he wants his art to 'flow out' into reality, as he put it. His art was to become a part of life as much as possible. *The Window* is therefore a physical presence in the space where it is exhibited. At the same time, *The Window* is a complex work of art with several meanings. Behind a white wooden open window, Raveel has mounted one of his quasi-abstract canvases, at the exact place where we would

rather expect to see a figurative landscape or a view of a garden. Ever since the Renaissance and the writings of the Italian architect Alberti in 1435, the window has been a metaphor for painting itself: a painting is an open window on the world. But because Raveel has placed a painting, which seems to belong to the preceding, quasi-abstract period, behind the wooden window, he once again interprets this old metaphor in his very own way. Raveel had always believed that art had little to do with the faithful reproduction of visible reality. This brings us back to the first painting in this visitor's guide, *Self-portrait with Cigarette* from 1952.



Self-portrait with Cart

1981

Oil on canvas and mixed media

Collection of the Province of East Flanders/Roger Raveel Museum,
Machelen-aan-de-Leie © Raveel - MDM. Photo: Peter Claeys

Roger Raveel returns decisively to realistic figuration with *Self-portrait with Cart*. It is in 1972 at documenta 5 in Kassel that he first saw work by American photo- and hyperrealist painters, among whom Richard Estes and Chuck Close. The result is visible in this self-portrait and in the cart. But Raveel is still Raveel. The background

has largely been painted in an abstract manner, with a strange white spot (the sun?) as a mysterious, open element. The object is a real bicycle wheel that he has fixed to the painted cart.

The white square has become a mirror, which Raveel has attached to the chest of his self-portrait. It is the next step in the attempt to let the work of art 'flow out' into reality. Whereas the white square was an open element, the mirror reflects the space in which the painting hangs or the viewer looking at the work. For Raveel, the mirror is another way of incorporating the outside world in the painting.

In this work, only the bicycle wheel comes 'out of' the canvas. In 1968 already Raveel had presented the entire cart as an autonomous, movable object. *Cart to Carry the Sky* was a painted wooden cube, mounted on two bicycle wheels, with a mirror on top reflecting the sky and the clouds.



Farmyard with Live Dove

1962-63

Oil on canvas and mixed media

Private collection/Roger Raveel Museum, Machelen-aan-de-Leie © Raveel - MDM. Photo: Peter Claeys

The monumental triptych *Farmyard with Live Dove* brings together virtually all aspects of Roger Raveel's art. The most striking element is the live turtle dove sitting in a cage on the central panel. Raveel here wants to integrate not only an object – a cage – but also a living animal into a painting, so that the boundary between art and life is completely erased.

A second aspect is the monumentality of the work. Due to its impressive dimensions, the work of art acquires a

great physical presence and a different relationship is established with the viewer, who feels overwhelmed by the painting.

The work is largely abstract, although Raveel did introduce some figurative elements. There are the recognisable (white) concrete posts, although they are strongly stylised here. There is some grass, mud, blue sky and a concrete fence, while on the right panel, a roughly painted dove flies up, as if trying to escape its two-dimensionality. Raveel confronts a painted and a living dove: art versus real life.

He positions the cage with the white dove against the background of a large white square, as if he wants to play off tangible life against unfathomable spirituality. Or does the white dove here also have a symbolic meaning that underlines the spirituality of the square?

Farmyard with Live Dove is a grand synthesis and at the time was a ground-breaking work. When the triptych was shown at the *Forum 63* exhibition at St Peter's Abbey in Ghent, other participants in the exhibition were mainly filled with envy. Because of its literal integration of art and life, it was very much in the manner of the international new realism. The other artists demanded that the work be replaced by another or that it be shown in a less prominent place. Raveel then cancelled his participation, removed the work himself and informed the press.

AROUND ROGER RAVEEL

01.04 - 21.07.2021

Wij, Roger Raveel

Raveel was born in the village of Machelen-aan-de-Leie in East Flanders, where he lived his entire life. It is there that the documentary filmmakers Pieter Verbiest and Bertrand Lafontaine set to work with their camera, in search of the people who had known him well. As a result, the film *Wij, Roger Raveel* ('We, Roger Raveel') is not only a portrait of one of the most radical innovators in Belgian or even European painting but also a portrait of some of his most loyal supporters.

Co-presentation: VRT - Canvas

[MORE INFO](#)

07.05.2021 · 09:00 - 17:00

Reading Images. Creative Art Criticism in Belgium (1945-1985)

A special event on creative art criticism practiced by many leading Belgian writers, such as Louis Paul Boon, Marcel Broodthaers, Hugo Claus, Christian Dotremont and Jean Dyréau. This form of literary and journalistic criticism allows the author to break free of traditional descriptive restraints in favour of dense, creative critiques that can sometimes be as powerful as its subject matter. The extraordinary day-long event will round off with a meeting with Roland Jooris, former curator of the Roger Raveel Museum, as well as renowned poet and art critic.

Coprod.: Studiecentrum voor Experimentele Literatuur (UGent/VUB)

[MORE INFO](#)

03.06.2021 · 20:30

The Village

With Paul Demets, Chris De Stoop & Lize Spit

Three authors talk about the village as a theme in their work. To what extent does that village actually exist these days? Flanders was once synonymous with rural life, but in recent decades it has become so urbanised that we could be forgiven for mistaking it for one big city with countless patches of greenery spread throughout. What is the importance of the village as a cultural space with all the aspects that go along with it (social, ecological, artistic, etc.)?

[MORE INFO](#)

VISITING TIPS

Guided tours

From 18 March, guided tours are available again for small groups. Book your visit now via www.bozar.be/guidedtours.

Lunch Tour

Every Friday afternoon, we offer an hour of culture. Together with a guide, you will discover some of the highlights of the exhibition in 45 minutes.

26.03 - 16.07.2021 - 12:30

Guides on Screen

Our guides will be working virtually through a video platform to offer you and your colleagues, friends or family an interactive tour of selected highlights of the exhibition. Info and reservation via www.bozar.be/guidedtours.

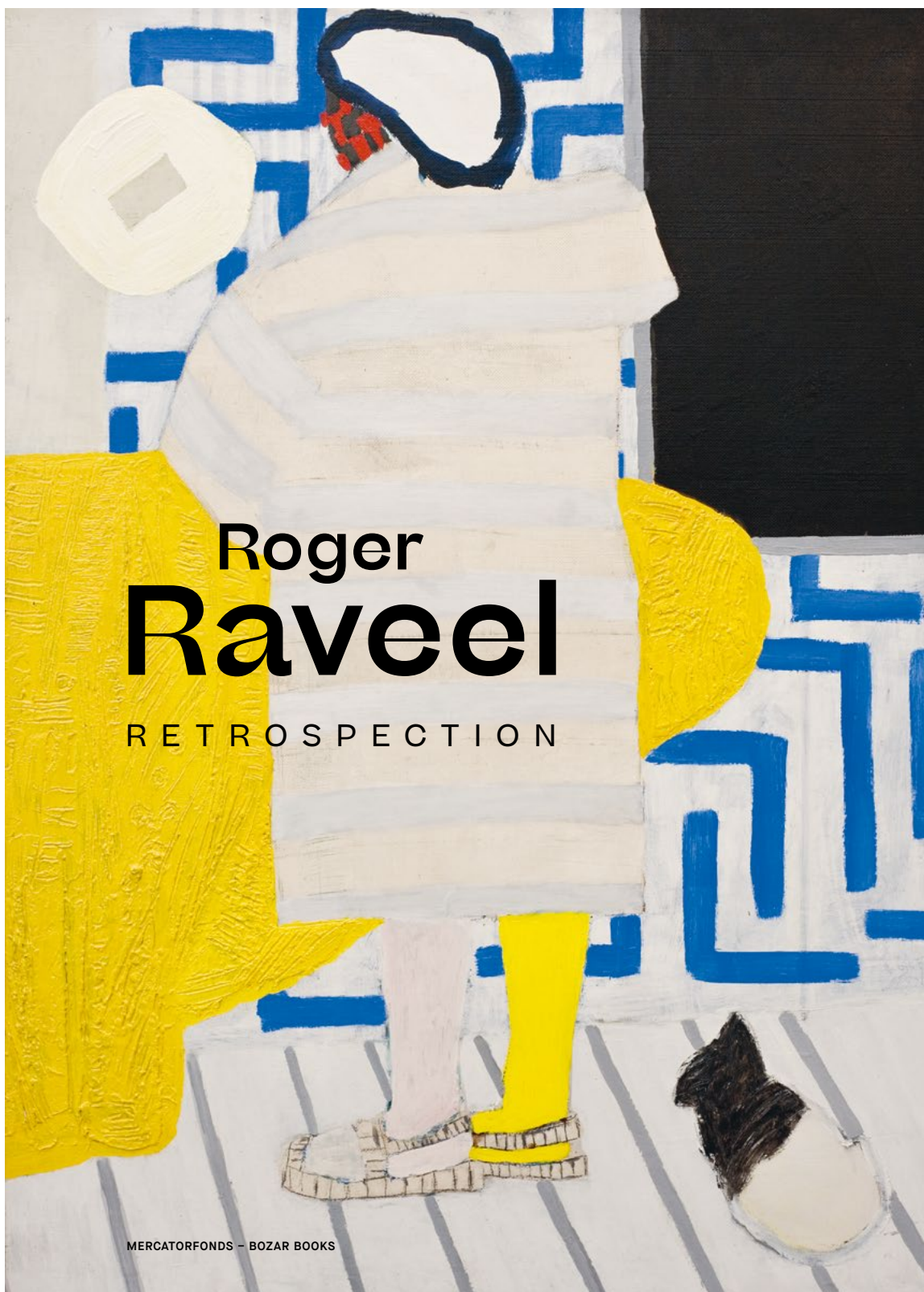
Roger Raveel with your whole family!

Explore the exhibition together with your children during an interactive guided tour for the whole family.

Primary, secondary, higher and part-time art education

Discover Roger Raveel with your school group thanks to Guides on Screen, an interactive guided tour or a discovery tour! Check regularly www.bozar.be/education or subscribe to the Schools newsletter via www.bozar.be/newsletter to be kept informed.

CATALOGUE



ROGER RAVEEL. RETROSPECTION
MERCATORFONDS & BOZAR BOOKS
Trilingual version NL/FR/UK · 224 pages
€ 34,95 (BOZAR BOOKSHOP)

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**ROGER RAVEEL:
A RETROSPECTIVE
18.03.2021 - 21.07.2021
CENTRE FOR FINE ARTS, BRUSSELS**

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