BOZAR EXPO

22.02 > 03.08.2014

Michaël Borremans

As sweet as it gets

PALEIS VOOR SCHONE KUNSTEN, BRUSSEL
PALAIS DES BEAUX-ARTS, BRUXELLES
CENTRE FOR FINE ARTS, BRUSSELS
WWW.BOZAR.BE  |  +32 (0)2.507.82.00

PRESS DOSSIER

DMA DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Press Release</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biography Michaël Borremans</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalogue text from the curator, Jeffrey Grove</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visitor's Guide</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOZAR: Extra events</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinematek</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalogue</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical information</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press contacts</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PRESS RELEASE

Michaël Borremans. As sweet as it gets

BOZAR will present a major survey of this Belgian artist’s work, consisting of approximately 100 works. A must-see for all art fans!

22.02 > 03.08.2014

Michaël Borremans Automat (I) 2008 80 x 60 cm Oil on canvas Private Collection Courtesy Zeno X Gallery Antwerp © Photographer Peter Cox & Michaël Borremans

The Belgian artist Michaël Borremans (born in 1963, Geraardsbergen) made his international breakthrough in the late 1990s and has since participated in various group and solo exhibitions in Belgium and abroad. In 2014, BOZAR, in collaboration with the Dallas Museum of Art, will present a much anticipated retrospective of his work in his home country. Michaël Borremans. As sweet as it gets gives an overview of his varied body of work from 1990 to the present, with an impressive selection of about 50 paintings, 40 drawings, and 5 films.

The exhibition lays bare the mutual relations between these various art forms and takes visitors on a journey into the artist’s mysterious and hallucinatory visual world. There is a certain dimension to Borremans’s works which are teeming with symbols and references to historic paintings. His work constitutes a subtle subversion of the iconographic conventions of painting and he often refers to historic masters such as Velázquez, Goya, and Manet. At the same time, his work is firmly rooted in the present and frequently alludes to literature, photography, and film as sources of inspiration. Borremans’s work exudes a sense of alienation and disruption with often quite unconventional compositions, unsettling scenes, and suggestive psychological spaces. In so doing, it ties in with the rich, surrealist past contained in the works of other Belgian artists such as René Magritte and Paul Delvaux.
Together with the artist, the exhibition’s organizing curator Dr. Jeffrey Grove selected well-known works, as well as works that have been rarely shown, from private and public collection in Europe and the United States together with the artist.

After the Centre for Fine Arts the exhibition will travel to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in Israel (04.09.2014 > 31.01.2015) and the Dallas Museum of Art in the United States (15.03 > 05.07.2015).

Credits: Michaël Borremans Sleeper 2007-2008 40 x 50 cm Oil on canvas Private Collection Courtesy Zeno X Gallery Antwerp © Photographer Peter Cox
Michaël Borremans (born in 1963, Geraardsbergen) obtained a Master of Fine Arts from the Hogeschool voor Kunst en Wetenschappen Sint-Lucas Gent, majoring in engraving. Until the age of 30 he worked as an art teacher, engraver and photographer. After producing his first drawings and paintings in the late 1990s, Borremans has built a mature body of work over the past two decades which has garnered international attention. Borremans’s work has already been the subject of solo exhibitions at several museums, including the Museum Für Gegenwartskunst in Basel (CH, 2004), S.M.A.K. in Gent (BE, 2005), La Maison Rouge in Paris (FR, 2006), the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hannover (DE, 2009), the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver (U.S., 2010) and the Kunsthalle Helsinki (FI, 2011).

Works by Michaël Borremans are also held in several public collections internationally including the Dallas Museum of Art (Dallas); S.M.A.K. (Ghent); The Art Institute of Chicago; The Israel Museum (Jerusalem); Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles); the Museum of Modern Art (New York), National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa); the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis).

In 2012 Borremans was awarded the 2011-2012 Prize of the Flemish Community for Visual Arts.

Michaël Borremans is represented by Zeno X Gallery in Antwerp and by David Zwirner in New York.
NOT TOO SWEET

Like Michaël Borremans himself, the title of his mid-career survey *As sweet as it gets* is, on one level, humorous and open, and yet also possessed of potentially darker intentions. The expression “as sweet as it gets” seems emphatic and clear: it conveys nothing less than a feeling of absolute contentment, the sense that everything is right with the world. At the same time, this simple phrase, oddly familiar and intentionally vague, raises any number of questions. Connotation is everything of course, and meaning is often determined solely by inflection. As anyone who has spent time in the American South knows, for instance, the innocuous wish, “Good for you!” can mean either “aren’t you great” or “aren’t you stupid!”

In a similar vein, *As sweet as it gets* may imply either the embrace of a sunny present or a resigned acceptance that things are as bad as they will ever get. The tense ambiguity lingering in that expression provides an appropriate metaphor for Michaël Borremans’s work, characterized as it is by subtle symmetries of stunning beauty and disturbing abjection, humor and despair, strength and fragility, and life and death. For lurking in the shadows of the sunny construction, “as sweet as it gets,” resides something darker: a sensibility that recognizes that if anything is “as sweet as it can get,” it can quite easily—and will most likely—soon turn bitter.

The question Borremans might rightly be asking, then, is: if the world in which we find ourselves (or life itself, this moment in Borremans’s career, or this exhibition) is “as sweet as it gets,” then what does that say about our prospects for the future? The hazy area separating what is spoken and what is represented, what is imagined and what is intended, provides the fertile ground that Michaël Borremans cultivates in producing his work. This luminous territory, a delirious site of conflicting cause and effect, provides the conflict that makes Borremans’s work, and any attempt to interpret its meaning, alternately vexing, thrilling, and completely confusing.

The narrative of Michaël Borremans’s career to date—little-known etcher of engravings and dabbler in photography enjoys a rapid rise to his present position as one of the preeminent painters of his generation—is by now well known. At the relatively late age of 33, Borremans first took up painting, and it was not until 2000, when he was 37, that Borremans had his first important exhibition of painting and drawings at S.M.A.K. in Ghent. In reasonably short order, significant gallery showings followed in 2002 at Zeno X Gallery in Antwerp, and in 2003 at David Zwirner Gallery, New York, and the response was immediate and enthusiastic. Borremans appeared to have emerged as an artist fully formed—no awkward early outings or experimental stumbles along the way littered his path.

Confidence and maturity have informed Borremans’s work from the beginning, and he continues to rivet attention with evocative bodies of work in painting, drawing, and film that immerse the viewer in situations at once oddly familiar and slightly illogical. Characterized by an ineffable sense of dislocation, his disparate work in all media is unified by a visual syntax that captures Borremans’s subjects in compelling states of intermediacy and indeterminacy. His work appears to explore complicated psychological states, yet these manifestations confuse simple logic. Intentionally deploying inexplicable signifiers colliding in ambiguous
spaces of unsettling beauty, Borremans fulfills a wish “to create an atmosphere outside time, a space where time has been cancelled.”

Originally trained in the art of engraving, Borremans taught and practiced etching and drawing for approximately ten years, but it was not until the late nineties that he began to produce drawings as an independent practice. These meticulously crafted works, sometimes executed over a period of years, are composed of ink, varnish, and gouache, or, most frequently, simple graphite. They resonate with mysterious signs and hallucinatory symbols and contain notes and directives in the marginalia that alternately misdirect and instruct the viewer. Compendia of historical allusion, pop-culture references, and peculiar, sometimes troubling, dichotomies of dimension and scale, Borremans’s drawings are embedded with drama, wit, and occasionally, anarchy.

At the same time, Borremans deftly undercuts the illustrative didacticism that the precision of his drawings might suggest with his bracing formula for mischievous humor bound with withering critique. Subverting form through the omission or distortion of connective tissue, Borremans often informs his work with humorous, social-political commentary aimed at the collective indifference of contemporary society, negotiating a passionate if detached form of analysis of the political and cultural landscape, one that he feels takes pride in acts of indifference. Particularly in his drawings, with their allusions to theatrical tableaux, stage sets, sculptural plinths, official monuments, and film projections, Borremans uses shifting levels of unreality, furthered by radical shifts in scale, to create impossible conflations of illogical relationships (*The Good Ingredients – De Goede Ingrediënten*, 2006, and *Le Sculpteur de Beurre*, 2000–01).

An allusive theme that frequently emerges from Borremans’s work is an indefinable sense of time and place. Delfim Sardo characterized this phenomenon, writing that, “in his paintings, Michael Borremans constructs a time frame using . . . a diffuse and ironic melancholy.”ii A sense of melancholy and indeed, deep sadness, can emanate from the physical states and abject locations in which Borremans’s subjects find themselves (*Magnetics, II*, 2009). They are often depicted in situations of subjugation, alteration, manipulation, or forcible compliance, made to be the subject of study, or appear forced to undergo manipulation and change (*The Modification, II*, 2001). Balanced between misanthropy and tenderness, these carefully crafted beings seem ready to mutate, suppress, and alter (or be altered) at a moment’s notice.

Borremans’s drawings and painting do at times appear to focus attention on the manipulative deeds of individuals in positions of power, but their presence is only implied; no omnipotent leader or omniscient force appears to dictate the proceedings. His compliant characters might be interpreted as metaphors for those subjugated by the systematic agency of institutional oppression, or victims of their own obliviousness. However, Borremans is always quick to caution that any one determined reading misses the point of his work. He has also always maintained that the characters, perhaps more properly called figures, that populate his images are not truly subjects, but instead symbolic entities. Lacking cognitive identity, they act only as vehicles of manipulated expression.

The lugubrious feelings of inertia and hopelessness that inform the actions of many figures populating Borremans’s work, coupled with their lack of initiative, seems to indicate a world
of subjugation from which these hapless figures might never exit. However, this tragic darkness is often leavened with a bracing dose of wry commentary or ironic detachment that may best be qualified as absurd. Other writers have cautioned against such a reading. In 2009, Martin Germann observed that descriptions of Borremans work, often use words such as absurd, mysterious, or enigmatic. But, as interpretation, the latter terms in particular lead us nowhere . . . Borremans operates in a terrain north of such terminology, so that anyone who attempts to classify his oeuvre risks getting lost in it, or running aground on its complex beauty.

Certainly, to run amok on this point would be Borremans’s wish; nothing would delight him more than to have those who view his work constantly vacillating between their own understanding of beauty and abjection, and confused by his complex adjudication of what that might look like.

It is an absurd proposition and an attitude that Borremans’s art reflects so precisely. Absurdity encompasses more than a facile understanding of the word, generally understood as something that is either extraordinarily inappropriate or not logically explained. Instead, I would suggest that the most productive, relevant understanding of “the Absurd,” as it applies to Borremans’s practice, is the theory articulated by Martin Esslin in his text “The Absurdity of the Absurd,” the introductory essay to his groundbreaking and influential book, The Theatre of the Absurd. First published in 1961, this landmark publication gave birth to the idiom that quickly became an indispensable catchall, before curdling into cliché.

Like many sayings embedded in the popular lexicon, the expression, “theatre of the absurd,” possesses more specific meaning and a more compelling source than is generally understood by those of us who blithely toss off the phrase when referring to kooky scenes and circumstances. Its origins are more interesting and by far more resonant with Borremans’s sensibility. In The Theatre of the Absurd, Esslin was responding to a phenomenon emerging in the theater of the 1950s, particularly among playwrights in Paris and Europe, including Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter, among others, who were attempting to create a new type of theater, one that shattered dramatic conventions and largely ignored psychological realism, while drawing attention to their character’s inability to communicate with one another. Describing this new convention of the stage, Esslin wrote, “If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings.”

Through a simple act of substitution—transposing the object to which Esslin’s essay refers, “the play,” with the figure(s) of Borremans’s imaginary scenes—we discover the appropriate linkage between two disparate textual bodies. The stage Esslin describes perfectly frames the type of spaces Michaël Borremans imagines for the figures populating his work. It is consistently the architecture of the theatre, and its stage in particular, that structures so
many of Borremans’s pictures, drawings, and films. The stages his characters occupy are often positioned within other sets, barren spaces reminiscent of museum galleries, research laboratories, screening rooms and storage facilities. They also occupy public spaces including vast lawns, public spaces and civic piazzas (Whistling a Happy Tune, 2006, and N.Y.C. 24th of September 2030).

Particularly in Borremans’s more recent cycles, the figures and still lifes he paints clearly reference theatrical spaces, conjuring associations with the artist’s studio or an actor’s rehearsal space, with planks or canvases arranged against walls (The Bodies (I), 2005). In his paintings, space is often defined as diffuse, or absorptive, with figures portrayed luminously against dimly lit and monochrome backgrounds (Man Holding His Nose, 2007). Commenting on the effect of these structures and spaces as they manifest in Borremans’s drawings and paintings, Hans Rudolph Reust observed,

“The spaces in Michaël Borremans’s drawings are often variously interconnected, split between architecture and projection, and related to one another only on the two-dimensional plane of the drawing surface. Yet the painted images appear to recognize space as a continuum in which individual, usually isolated figures are obscured in areas of deep shadow, in an all-encompassing darkness that shines back as if from the seventeenth century.”

A Mannerist as well as Surrealist sensibility informs these images as well, with their historic allusions to Roman portrait busts and other types of memorial sculpture. Protagonists may be pictured in close-up or further isolated against backdrops of ambiguous architecture, cast in faint light or deep shadow, denying any notion of subjectivity to the actors in the theaters he magically summons. These figures might also emerge from or be placed upon these surfaces to resemble sculpture, chess figures, or porcelain figurines. Iconographic typologies present from the start continue to structure his practice in all media. These include subjects, either solitary or in groups, standing or sitting at tables, working at and or manipulating objects on a floating surface or allusive plane (The Apron, 2009, and Four Fairies, 2003).

The various stages that structure many of Borremans’s paintings are often occupied by lone figures in pensive or semiconscious states. They are usually depicted squarely in the center of the compositions, though their faces are almost always partially obscured, and a psychologically charged mood prevails. It is this unavoidable stress, the physical and psychological isolation of Borremans’s figures, that connects his methodology even more firmly to the rich history of Surrealism. Paul Nougé observed in Histoire de ne pas rire, his seminal theory of Belgian surrealism, that “the subversive power of an isolated object is directly related to the intimacy it has with our body, with our spirit, with our-selves.”

Borremans has previously stated that he believes his own work has “a particular Belgian touch,” commenting only somewhat ironically that, “it would be perfect on biscuit tins.” At the same time, Borremans has often referred to his paintings as “magic.” Whether he is referring to the making of the work—his images often appear almost as if they were apparitions—or rather to the effect his work has on the viewer, is unclear. In either case, an apt allusion would be to compare Borremans’s creative arena to that of a magician’s stage, a theater in which he becomes the actor, conjuring illusions that test our powers of perception and challenge our understanding of physics and logic through intentional acts of misdirection.
Borremans engages each of these strategies as he conspires to create highly theatrical spaces, which also serve as the setting for scenes of abnegation, interruption, and neglect to be enacted. Purposely laden with “clichés and other elements that are part of the collective unconscious,” Borremans’s depictions lead one to understand that there is often no logical explanation for what he portrays. He confesses that the characters in his paintings are subconscious expressions, but he does not imply that they are imaginary: “Sure, there is nothing there. On the other hand, all is there.” Just as his complex and open-ended scenes lend themselves to conflicting moods—at once darkly comical, disturbing, and grotesque—there is an undeniably theatrical dimension to his work that is staged and uncertain.

We should also understand this magical stage as connected equally to a mysterious, performative space that can only be interpreted in the most existential sense. If, as Adorno’s articulation of psychological theory assures us, works of art are essentially “projections of the unconscious,” then the myriad stages Borremans conjures in his work may serve a more literal function in the world by delimiting the arena in which the artist explores his own conscious and unconscious imaginings. As Noël Carroll, a distinguished American philosopher of film noted in The Philosophy of Motion Pictures, “a theatrical performance is also a detached display,” and Borremans, perhaps more than any artist today, understands the tension between the emotional connection with his audience that his works engender and his own dispassionate assurance that they in no way depict reality, and are therefore only objects on display.

Continuing this theatrical metaphor, we may liken the figures that populate Borremans’s paintings to absent actors, ostensibly living objects having no conscious, physical, or metaphoric grip on their circumstances. Borremans admits that he sees these figures as soulless vessels who figure in a parallel dimension outside their control. This metaphysical condition resembles the anguished and bewildered protagonists in a play by Beckett; Borremans’s subjects don’t think or decide; they wait or proceed through actions that define their futility. This nihilist conception is abject and impractical, but also deeply Romantic. And Borremans is nothing if not Romantic.

Describing the activities in which his figures conduct themselves, Borremans has observed that the actions “are often senseless,” maintaining that, “the work switches between an aspect of the absurd and a Romantic connotation, like a Vanitas.” If we take Borremans’s analogy as predicated on an understanding of “the Romantic” as Schlegel articulated it—“a life feeling that oscillates between enthusiasm and irony”—then we might more productively understand the dueling voices—or multiple factions—wrestling for control of Borremans’s consciousness, while volleying between hope and despair.
Borremans continues to make painting his most consistent field of investigation, though drawing plays a constant and essential role. In his drawings, Borremans can realize more complex scenarios that often have an intentionally narrative quality. His paintings, however, convey a sense of quietude, and even impart a feeling of tradition. Particularly in his painting, Borremans actively channels precursors from the history of art, ranging from Chardin to Goya. And while Borremans’s paintings may constitute an engaged dialogue with the history of the craft, his unconventional compositions and curious narratives disrupt that link with tradition, casting his work ever deeper into an indefinable place and time. Borremans deftly elicits these historical analogues without slipping into homage or imitation, instead infusing his painting with a critical, contemporary consciousness.

Borremans’s uncanny capacity to transcend time and space in his work is undoubtedly shaped by the influence of photography and film, thoroughly modern media which have always exerted a keen influence on his work and continue to inform his visual style both as a source of inspiration and a compositional structure. In his earliest paintings, such as The Preservation, 2001, and The German I, 2002, Borremans generally relied upon an endless well of scavenged images, including found photographs, film stills, and images cribbed from magazines and the internet, as his source material. Now he meticulously stages and photographs his models in his studio, carefully composing and directing scenarios he then photographs, exerting complete and exacting control over the origin of his images.

A compelling reason he chooses to exert this degree of control is that by the early to mid-aughts, Borremans found that particularly in those paintings of his that relied exclusively on found source materials, the trace of time embedded within them announced itself so profoundly that viewers often misunderstood the motivation behind his work to be somehow nostalgic. Nostalgia is a quality Borremans abhors, and a sensibility that many have incorrectly construed as pivotal to constructing the intention in his painting. What many critics have perceived as subtext in his work (the photographic referent) often became the prevailing text of their interpretation, leading to suggestions that Borremans was instilling sentiments or allusions in his painting that were not intended. Borremans realized that photography has fundamentally changed the handling of the images (sic). It saddles you with a psychological problem. Only the “now” exists, not the past or the future, but photography captures the past: that creates mental short-circuits. In this sense I find photos a little scary—they fill you with a mixture of fascination and disgust, like an accident, a dead body.

Throughout his oeuvre, and his experiments in all media, interlocking narrative and serial imagery have always been critical compositional strategies for Borremans. The unusual angles, close-ups, subdued palette, and secluded figures Borremans uses to compose his
paintings may heighten a sense of the fragmentary or incomplete, creating a feeling of discomfort and unease, but they also connect logically to the visual language of film. Indeed, in addition to producing paintings and drawings, Borremans has over the years matured into a filmmaker producing moving and provocative images of hallucinatory beauty.

It is easy to relate the physical structure of these ongoing images to the sequential nature of film stills, individually isolated from the connecting reel of the moving image. In 2002 Borremans executed a number of works, each of which mark the first in a series of interrelated images that he would revisit time and again in drawing, painting, and film. These include *The Prospect*, *The Journey (Lower Tatra)*, *The German I*, *The Walk*, and *Drawing*. *The Prospect* marked the first appearance of the structure that also came to the known as “The House of Opportunity,” as in *The House of Opportunity (The Chance of a Lifetime)*, 2003, a series that now includes 18 works in all media. *The Journey (Lower Tatra)* is likewise part of a series that includes at least six other articulations of the theme. For three drawings included in this exhibition, *The German I*, *The Walk*, and *Drawing*, is part of a larger series of interrelated works that also comprise a film: respectively these are *The German*, 2004–07, *Add and Remove*, 2007, and *Weight*, 2005. The two other films included in this exhibition, *The Storm*, 2006 and *Taking Turns*, 2009, also relate to larger bodies of drawing and sculpture. For the latter work, the drawing *Automat* and the paintings *Automat (I)*, *Automat (2)*, and *Automat (IV)* could almost be seen as preparatory studies, though it also shares an affinity with earlier paintings including *Replacement (I)* and *A2*, 2004. The fifth film included in the exhibition, *The Storm*, 2006, is something quite different. Not only is it the only 35-millimeter projected film, it is also a film that appears to have been directly influenced by the making of another film, *The Feeding*, 2006. (*The Feeding*, 2006, likewise finds its referent in the painting *One at the Time*, 2003.)

Perhaps more than any other film Borremans has produced, *The Storm* looks and feels as if it were intended to function as a painting. As the process of making films has refined and focused his practice, the definition of space, light, and immutable timelessness that pervade Borremans’s paintings increasingly possesses a distinctly cinematic quality. A characteristic that ties Borremans’s films more directly to his painting is their silence, a “terrible muteness” that connects to the stillness of his paintings, a likening attributable to the fact that Borremans is using film as a painterly medium.
Like his paintings, the films contain no narrative and the actors lack subjectivity. As always, Borremans professes no interest in seeing his objects as subjects.

This level of objectivity, a sensibility that might be construed equally as indifference, is a hallmark of Borremans's production in all media. At once questioning and rejecting the subjectivity of his actors, Borremans’s analytic stance has served to obscure his more humanistic inquiry into the meaning of human agency. Borremans is the first to contradict himself in any discussion of the narrative qualities his works possess. Terms describing and ascribing inaction, detachment, and deferral to his intentions and those of the “things” he depicts are the foundation of his rhetorical riffs, and over the years his adamant rejection of intentionality has successfully shaped his reception as an artist distinguished by his disaffectedness, as when Michael Amy observed, “the detachment that infuses the Belgian artist Michael Borremans’s work is arguably its most striking feature,” or when Massimiliano Gioni asserted that, “For Borremans, the most seductive form of spectacle resides in an act of suspension, a kind of inaction.”

Terms including “detachment” and “inaction” may well describe the character of the figures Borremans often portrays in his work, but in the making of it, the artist occupies an opposite stance. Patrick Murphy once characterized Borremans as “the ringmaster of his work,” and like the ringmaster leading a circus, Borremans has increasingly taken on the role of auteur, inscribing his paintings and films with the trace of his complete control in all processes of their making. Another manifestation of Borremans’s increased confidence in the mastery of his materials and desire to challenge his own abilities is the ever-increasing scale of the pictures he paints. While intimate works on paper remain a foundation of his oeuvre and he continues to produce the modestly-sized paintings that first brought him notoriety, a pronounced expansiveness has informed his painting practice in recent years. This propensity for creating paintings on not just a cinematic scale, but on an operatic level, was first expressed in a body of work from 2005.

The fifteen paintings comprising the exhibition Horse Hunting presented a range of portraits and still lifes, but also reflected a desire on Borremans’s part to paint works that were aggressive, and “anti-charming,” while also presenting an intentional engagement with the painting of artists whose work he reveres, especially Manet. Borremans’s ambition and reach were articulated most strikingly in a painting from this group, The Avoider, 2005, his first and to that date only painting of truly epic scale. Measuring over twelve feet, or nearly four meters in height, this beautifully ambiguous figure who Borremans described as “Christ-like,”
assumes any number of roles in the viewer’s mind. The Avoider is simultaneously a gallant flâneur, the rakish dandy, an imperious observer, or a disheveled bum. That his pose is a virtual quotation of the figure in Courbet’s The Meeting, or “Bonjour Monsieur Courbet,” 1854, is clear. The *pentimento* of a staff the figure holds in his hand, and the ambiguously cast shadows lend both a mysterious and tangible corporeality to this ultimately benevolent figure.

It would be nearly six years before Borremans presented another new body of work that encompassed this magnitude in the ambitious exhibition *The Devil's Dress* in 2011. That exhibition of ten paintings featured five executed on a masterful scale, including *The Wooden Skirt* and *The Devil's Dress*, both 2011. The figure—perhaps an actor—in *The Devil's Dress*, like many characters in Michaël Borremans’s paintings, appears to be involved in some mysterious, psychologically charged scenario. Positioned within a barren space reminiscent of an artist’s studio or a highly staged theatrical set, the “dress” of cardboard becomes the object of one’s focus. We are left to ponder: what is this scene, who is this actor, and what is its meaning? Perhaps the devil’s red dress is nothing more than a red herring, a device the artist uses to distract the viewer from realizing that the true subject of the work is, in fact, nowhere to be found.

Clearly, this work suggests a dialogue with previous art historical epochs and of course in *The Devil's Dress* analogies to Edouard Manet’s *Dead Toreador*, 1864, are all but unavoidable. The image of death, and death as a referent, is a constant motif in Borremans’s visual language and descriptive syntax. In a conversation from 2009, Borremans remarked on an inconsistency that he was beginning to notice creeping into his work. He observed, “It is an interesting contradiction. I paint everything as if it is dead, but the painting is alive—as painting.” The “death” Borremans refers to, in this case, may be attributable to his refusal to grant the figures he portrays any measure of subjectivity. This may also relate directly to Borremans’s contention that he does not paint from nature, but rather from culture.

The issue of mortality is a tendency expressing itself increasingly in Borremans’s work from recent years in which he has actively addressed the question of death through a process in which he seems to actually revivify seemingly dead objects through the very act of painting. It is illuminating to think of the act of painting as one of transference, in which the artist confers both life and meaning on essentially inert objects. And, of course, it is tempting to associate the process of painting itself with the act of transubstantiation, which in Roman Catholic theology denotes the change of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.
occurring in the Eucharist, a principle that non-believers can only comprehend as a sort of magical conversion. This intangible exchange resonates with the transference Borremans speaks of in the act of painting his paintings.

This concatenation of intention and interpretation as they relate to representation and death arguably takes on more urgent meaning in the cycle of paintings Borremans most recently completed for his 2013 exhibition, *The people from the future are not to be trusted*. After a long dry spell following his 2011 exhibition in New York, Borremans felt trapped by his studio, unable to ignite the creativity he needed to produce new work, and haunted by the “ghosts” he felt lingering in his usual workspace. Although he had always lived and worked in the same set of rooms, he struck out for the first time to find a new environment in which to paint. Perhaps by an act of providence, his new studio turned out to be the crumbling, decommissioned chapel of a catholic church in Ghent.

This sacred space served as the incubator where Borremans realized an astonishing cycle of works, including four monumental figures—two of them towering nudes, *Nude with Cheese* and *The False Head*, both 2013—as well as complex still life paintings. As discussed in “Voices from the Chapel,” another conversation excerpted in this publication, this extraordinary environment seems to possess magical qualities that affected Borremans in an almost spiritual way. Indeed, he decided to keep the space sacred and with very few exceptions, did not allow visitors to enter this sanctum.

Borremans has spoken of the atmosphere in this chapel in almost metaphysical terms. He has described speaking to the Virgin, and also talking to his brushes while painting in the chapel. Borremans felt the effect of that space profoundly, and it is manifested clearly in the work he produced there. Three paintings not only possess names that associate them directly with religious dogma—*The Angel*, *The Virgin*, and *The Son*—the figures (or subjects) depicted in each painting portray actions that underscore their association with the Church. *The Angel*, an almost shocking image of a beautiful Androgyne in flowing pink dress, is a towering painting almost 10 feet, or 3.12 meters, in height. This “angel,” however, has no wings, nor does it seem particularly celestial or benevolent. Instead, the black make-up concealing its already partially obscured face suggests nothing less than an Angel of Death.

The other two paintings, *The Virgin* and *The Son*, appear intended to flirt more directly in their association with religious beliefs, especially the magical, mystical, redemptive qualities Faith holds for many believers. This thoroughly modern Virgin—she appears to be wearing a dancer’s leotard—is also somewhat absurd: she wears strange slippers to conceal her feet. With her palms turned upward and her gaze cast down, she appears ready to receive or display to the viewer her unseen stigmata. *The Son*, on the other hand, is a small and intimate painting, a closely cropped portrait of an adolescent boy’s angelic face. Like all of the figures in Borremans’s painted universe, the son’s gaze is indirect, in this case cast downward. But beaming from his eyes are two streams of illumination, or heavenly light. Suggesting states of transcendence, and acts of conference, these two images vibrate with spiritual inflections that are both indescribable and oddly alien in Borremans’s oeuvre.

Drawing attention to this manifestation is not intended to underscore an association between Borremans’s personal theosophy and more formal religious structures: certainly, Borremans has consistently indicated in his work, and in his statements about art generally, that he
remains a skeptic. But perhaps somewhere in the space between certainty and improbability, there remains room for an artist as dedicated to ambiguity as he professes to be to also enter into the occasional investigation of what may lie on the other side of that equation. In the 1927 tract describing his interpretation of religion and its evolution, The Future of an Illusion, Sigmund Freud described religion as “a system of wishful illusions together with a disavowal of reality, such as we find nowhere else but in a state of blissful hallucinatory confusion.” It is possible that in the hallucinatory worlds he has been generating for the past twenty years Borremans is continuing to discover solutions to the confusion that riddles daily life, discovering not only new challenges, but new meaning as well. If life is “as sweet as it gets” today, perhaps it will get even better tomorrow?

CREDITS

Image 1 Michaël Borremans, ‘Magnetics (II)’, 2009, oil on canvas, 36x30 cm, Private Collection, Belgium, © Peter Cox

Image 2 Michaël Borremans, ‘Four Fairies’, 2003, oil on canvas, 110x150 cm, MOCA, Los Angeles, © Peter Cox

Image 3 Michaël Borremans, ‘Replacement I’, 2004, oil on canvas, 83x65 cm, Private Collection, London, © Peter Cox


Image 5 Edouard Manet, ‘The Dead Tornador’, ca. 1864, oil on canvas, 75,9x 153,3 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, Widener Collection

Image 6 Michaël Borremans, ‘The Lesson’, 2006, pencil on paper and plastic, 152x23, Private Collection, USA, © Peter Cox
VISITOR’S GUIDE

THE AVOIDER

Like the ringmaster leading a circus, Borremans has increasingly taken on the role of auteur, inscribing his paintings and films with the trace of his complete control in all processes of their making. Another manifestation of Borremans’ increased confidence in the mastery of his materials and desire to challenge his own abilities is the ever-increasing scale of the pictures he paints. While intimate works on paper remain a foundation of his oeuvre and he continues to produce the modestly-sized paintings that first brought him notoriety, a pronounced expansiveness has informed his painting practice in recent years.

This propensity for creating paintings on not just a cinematic scale, but on an operatic level, was first expressed in a body of work from 2005, and *The Avoider*, 2006 was the first painting of massive scale. It is also part of the first body of work for which Borremans staged every scenario he painted, recruiting friends to pose and model for photographs he took and then used to inspire his paintings. As such, *The Avoider* marks a doubly important departure, a virtuoso portrait that announces its intention to stand alongside the greatest portrait painters in history.

Measuring over 12 feet, or nearly four meters in height, this beautifully ambiguous figure, whom Borremans once described as “Christ-like,” assumes any number of roles in the viewer’s mind. The figure embodies dichotomous signals: his comportment is at once haughty (the gaze) and humble (the dirty, bare feet); and he is at once a flâneur of the city—note his pink shirt and jaunty scarf—and a shepherd of the country, surveying the field as he grasps his walking stick. That his pose is a virtual quotation of the figure in Courbet’s *The Meeting*, or “Bonjour Monsieur Courbet,” 1854, is without question, but the painting also channels the stature of Manet’s great figures and Sargent’s society portraits. As in all Borremans’ work, a fascinating multiplicity of associations ripples through the painting. For instance, the clearly-present pentimento of an earlier staff and the haunting shadows that form an aura around the figure echo the artist’s interest in cinema, and indeed, recall the photographic works of Gerhard Richter.

THE FIGURE

Iconographic typologies present in his work from the very beginning continue to structure Borremans’ practice, particularly the figure and the still life. His figures, whether solitary or in groups, often stand or sit at tables; work at or manipulate objects on a floating surface or allusive plane; and appear to emerge from, or be placed upon, surfaces or plinths to resemble sculptures or figurines. These protagonists may be pictured in close-up or further isolated against backdrops of ambiguous architecture and cast in faint light or deep shadow.

Denying any notion of subjectivity to the actors in the theater he magically conjures, Borremans has declared that the subject, to him, is always an object—not a representation of a living thing. A strategy that Borremans employs to enforce this idea is to deny the figure’s gaze: the characters in his paintings...
never address the viewer directly; rather their eyes are always downcast or averted. As Borremans explains, “the direct gaze is not suitable. Then [the painting] becomes a portrait.” Portraiture has historically been used to confer authenticity, originality, and uniqueness upon its subject, but this is actually the opposite of Borremans’ intention. Likening the figures that populate his paintings to living objects lacking a conscious physical or metaphoric grip on their circumstances, Borremans sees them as absent actors who factor in a parallel dimension outside their control.

In painting, Borremans generally portrays figures in isolation, depicting images of sentient subjects as disengaged or deadly objects and soulless porcelain figures with the finesse of a fine-portrait, as in The Visitor, 2013 (not in the exhibition), a conflation of reality and illusion. Perhaps ironically, as his paintings have focused increasingly upon tropes of artifice and performance, the presence of live actors as the source of his characters has increased the sense of reality and verisimilitude that many viewers perceive in his work, which Borremans would declare is not at all intended.

Take for instance, Man Holding His Nose, 2007, and Sleeper, 2007-2008. Each of these paintings functions technically as a “portrait” in terms of focusing on and reflecting the physiognomy and character of a subject. Such a proposition, though, is antithetical to Borremans’ assertion that his objects are not subjects. Nonetheless, as he has mastered the use of painting and film to invoke in the viewer a sensory awareness of time in the transitory sense, rather than as a moment frozen in time, the implicit humanity of his characters appears to assert itself more fully.

Another essential genre that Borremans continues to explore is the still life. Classically considered an arrangement of still-living, but soon-to-expire flowers, fruits, insects, or other already-stilled symbols of decay, including skulls, bones, and porcelain figurines, there is an equally strong presence in the still life tradition of singular objects serving as physical manifestations of psychological states, thereby representing absence. From the beginning, Borremans has painted displaced objects as if they were human subjects, and replicated the human body as if it were a hardened, unconsciousness figure, as in The Preservation, 2001. Other works such as Swingers, 2005, and 10 and 11, 2006, further disclose Borremans’ tendency to isolate and enliven cold, hard “things” and transform them physically and metaphysically through the act of painting absence.

Borremans has returned to these isolated objects and porcelain figures time and again, but only rarely has he painted an apparently naturalistic subject, such as The Branch, 2003. Here the subject of the painting is more likely the shadows the branch cast, rather than the object itself. This type of deferral is often a subtext in Borremans’ paintings—the ostensible subject of the image is nothing more than a
place holder for another intention that cannot easily be manifested physically. A watershed in the crystallization of this type of thinking was Borremans’ painting *The Performance*, 2004 (not in the exhibition). *The Performance* is silent and active, anthropomorphic and minimal, sentient and mute. Simultaneously a model, a still life, and a subject, it is also a metonymic stage upon which the painting performs itself.

This painting realized a new plateau of suggestiveness in the way an otherwise inert object—a still life—could imply dynamic, psychological potential. Even so, this still life was not a painting *from* life, but rather the simulacrum of a photograph that Borremans took of the draped table. More recently, the meaning of representing a still life has become complicated in Borremans’ oeuvre. In 2013 he painted *Dead Chicken*, a small but extremely potent image that was in fact, painted from life—or in this case, death—as Borremans worked directly from the object, rather than an image of it. Although Borremans has always maintained that he paints Culture, not Nature, in this one recent instance he contradicted himself, to highly productive ends.

**MORTALITY**

Michaël Borremans once observed: “It is an interesting contradiction. I paint everything as if it is dead, but the painting is alive—as painting.” The issue of mortality is a tendency expressing itself increasingly in Borremans’ work from recent years in which he has actively addressed the question of death through a process whereby he seems to actually revivify seemingly dead objects through the very act of painting. This tendency was expressed most forcefully in a body of work that Borremans produced in 2005-2006, which he admits he intended to be “anti-charming; explicit, masculine, terrifying … to show man as a symbol of war.”

Among this group were three paintings, *Bodies, The Bodies (I) and The Bodies (III)*, all 2006 (the first and last one are not in the exhibition), which consider this notion, and refer to iconic history paintings that clearly image or imply death. *The Bodies (I)*, on view in this gallery, quotes the iconic image of Manet’s *Dead Toreador*, 1864 (itself an update on Mantegna’s *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*). As we know by now, ambiguity is an essential characteristic of Borremans’ work in all media, and ambiguity is itself the opposite of finality—even the finality of death. With equal facility, Borremans has mined this tension in a body of work that seems to imagine figures (individuals) not only as subjugate supplicants coaxed into positions of sublimation, but as hovering in the space between life and death.

A key example is found in the figure depicted in *The Load*, 2008. This character in a costume-like cap is deliberately ambiguous; whether it is male or female, child or adult, is difficult to determine, and beside the point. Thrown into high relief, the figure’s indeterminate shadow suggests both a sleeping—living—character, and a hanging—dead—figure. In a related manner, any number of Borremans’ paintings suggests a simultaneous dissolution of recognizable space and an intentional disassociation with the human figure.

His technique is critical. In recent paintings, the subject holds an increasingly tenuous grip on our understanding of reality (if it is described as logical space) and a firmer hold of imagination. Paintings including *Magnetics (II)*, 2009, increasingly diminish the presence of character in favor of suggestive atmosphere. The subjects in these paintings are patent constructions that serve as objects to explore the effects of light and shadow and psychological states. Light both obscures the subjects’ presence and
invites the viewer’s analyses. Intentionally conflicted and simultaneously obscured; the characters appear less determined and increasingly vague and amorphous: suspended between life and death.

**ABSORDITY AND MELANCHOLY**

An allusive theme that frequently emerges from Borremans’ work is an indefinable sense of time and place. A sense of melancholy and indeed, deep sadness, can emanate from the physical states and abject locations in which Borremans’ subjects find themselves. They are often depicted in situations of subjugation, alteration, manipulation, or forcible compliance, made to be the subject of study, or appear forced to undergo manipulation and change (*The Whistler*, 2009). Balanced between misanthropy and tenderness, these carefully crafted beings seem ready to mutate, suppress, and alter, or be altered, at a moment’s notice.

Borremans’ drawings and painting do at times appear to focus attention on the manipulative deeds of individuals in positions of power, but their presence is only implied; no omnipotent leader or omniscient force appears to dictate the proceedings. The lugubrious feelings of inertia and hopelessness that inform the actions of many figures populating Borremans’ work, coupled with their lack of initiative, seem to indicate a world of subjugation from which these hapless figures might never exit. However, this tragic darkness is often leavened with a bracing dose of wry commentary or ironic detachment that may best be qualified as absurd.

His compliant characters might be interpreted as metaphors for those subjugated by the systematic agency of institutional oppression, or victims of their own obliviousness. However, Borremans is always quick to caution that any one determined reading misses the point of his work. He has also always maintained that the characters—perhaps more properly called “figures”—that populate his images are not truly subjects, but instead symbolic entities. Lacking cognitive identity, they act only as vehicles of manipulated expression.

**THE SPIRITUAL**

Following a dry spell in 2012, Borremans felt trapped by his studio, unable to ignite the creativity he needed to produce new work and haunted by the “ghosts” he felt lingering in his usual workspace. Although he had always lived and worked in the same set of rooms, he struck out for the first time to find a new environment in which to paint. Perhaps by an act of providence, his new studio turned out to be the crumbling, decommissioned chapel of a catholic church in Ghent.

This sacred space served as the incubator where Borremans realized an astonishing cycle of works, including four monumental figures—two of them towering nudes—as well as complex still life paintings. This extraordinary environment seemed to possess magical qualities that affected Borremans in an almost spiritual way. Indeed, he decided to keep the space sacred and with very few exceptions, did not allow visitors to enter this sanctum. Borremans has spoken of the atmosphere in
this chapel in almost metaphysical terms, describing speaking to the Virgin and also talking to his brushes while painting in the chapel.

Borremans felt the effect of that space profoundly, and it is manifested clearly in the work he produced there. Three paintings not only possess names that associate them directly with religious dogma—The Angel, The Virgin (not in the exhibition), and The Son, all 2013—the figures (or subjects) depicted in each painting portray actions that underscore their association with the Church. The Angel is an almost shocking image of a beautiful androgynous creature in a flowing pink dress, a towering figure painting almost 10 feet, or 3.12 meters, in height. This “angel,” however, has no wings, nor does it seem particularly celestial or benevolent. Instead, the black makeup concealing its already partially obscured face suggests nothing less than an Angel of Death.

Another painting, The Son, 2013, appears, intended to flirt more directly in its association with religious beliefs, especially the magical, mystical, redemptive qualities Faith holds for many believers. The Son, as opposed to The Angel, is small and intimate, a closely cropped portrait of an adolescent boy’s angelic face. Like all of the figures in Borremans’ painted universe, the son’s gaze is indirect, in this case cast downward. But beaming from his eyes are two streams of illumination, or heavenly light. Suggesting states of transcendence, and acts of conference, these two images vibrate with spiritual inflections that are both indescribable and oddly alien in Borremans’ oeuvre.

**THE STAGE**

Without question, a high degree of theatricality infuses Michaël Borremans’ work, influenced as it often is by the arrested moments of photography and discontinuous moments of film. Therefore, it is not surprising that a performative quality pervades his work and that the architecture of the theatre, and the stage in particular, structure so many of his pictures, drawings, and films. An apt allusion for this stage might be to the creative arena of a magician’s stage, a theater in which Borremans becomes the actor, conjuring illusions that test our powers of perception and challenge our understanding of physics and logic through intentional acts of misdirection.

The stages his characters occupy are often positioned within other sets, barren spaces reminiscent of museum galleries, research laboratories, screening rooms and storage facilities. Some characters, such as with the actor in The Devil’s Dress, 2011 are positioned within barren spaces reminiscent of an artist’s studio, with planks or canvases arranged against walls, whereas in other paintings, they are portrayed luminously against dark, monochrome backgrounds. In his painting, the unusual angles, closeups, subdued palette, and secluded figures that Borremans often employs in his painting may elicit the sense of the disturbing and the grotesque. Yet, while all these qualities are present in The Devil’s Dress, the image—a nude,
supine figure wears a red cardboard box around the torso—does not express aggression, but rather submission, or the absolute lack of any threat.

Typical of Borremans, any sign of disturbance or clues to time and place are omitted from the picture plane. In all his work, Borremans often pays detailed attention to clothes and textiles; indeed, fabric folds sometimes appear like visual representations of convoluted mental states and the clothes, themselves, seem to transform their wearers into sculptural forms which in this work, leads one to focus on the “dress.” In *The Devil’s Dress*, we are left to ponder: what is this scene, who is this actor, and what is its meaning? Perhaps the devil’s red dress is nothing more than a red herring, a device the artist uses to distract the viewer from realizing that the true subject of the work is, in fact, nowhere to be found.

**THE STORM**

Perhaps more than any other film Borremans has produced, *The Storm*, 2006, looks and feels as if it were intended to function as a painting. As the process of making films has refined and focused his practice, the definition of space, light, and immutable timelessness that pervade Borremans’ paintings increasingly possesses a distinctly cinematic quality. A characteristic that ties Borremans’ films more directly to his painting is their silence, a “terrible muteness,” as Ann Demeester termed it, that connects to the stillness of his paintings, a quality attributable to the fact that Borremans is using film as a painterly medium.

Like his paintings, the films contain no narrative and the actors lack subjectivity. The subjects in his films are invested with nothing approximating personality or character; therefore, one could argue correctly that they do become bodies in the most subjugate sense. But equally, and to Borremans’ mind undeniably, they are sculptures just as the films are paintings. In this dynamic it is interesting to consider Borremans’ engagement with the living subjects he has reified into voiceless protagonists in his paintings and films, a realization both chilling and accurate for an artist like Borremans who professes no interest in seeing his objects as subjects.

Especially in film, but also through the act of painting, Borremans is actively transforming—enacting the transmutation of—his subjects into a state of object-hood. This action also infers a state of transference, both in the physical sense of the term (touching), and the psychological element it suggests.

**DRAWING**

Originally trained in the art of engraving, Borremans taught and practiced etching and drawing for approximately ten years, but it was not until the late 1990s that he began to produce drawings as an independent practice. These meticulously crafted works, sometimes executed over a period of years, are composed of ink, varnish, and gouache, or, most frequently, simple graphite. They resonate with mysterious signs and hallucinatory symbols and contain notes and directives in the marginia that alternately misdirect and instruct the viewer.
Compendia of historical allusion, pop-culture references, and peculiar, sometimes troubling dichotomies of dimension and scale, Borremans’ drawings are embedded with drama, wit, and occasionally, anarchy. At the same time, Borremans deftly undercuts the illustrative didacticism that the precision of his drawings might suggest, with his bracing formula for mischievous humor bound with withering critique. Subverting form through the omission or distortion of connective tissue, Borremans often informs his work with humorous, social-political commentary aimed at the collective indifference of contemporary society, negotiating a passionate if detached form of analysis of the political and cultural landscape, one that he feels takes pride in acts of indifference.

Particularly in his drawings, with their allusions to theatrical tableaux, stage sets, sculptural plinths, official monuments, and film projections, Borremans uses shifting levels of unreality, furthered by radical shifts in scale, to create impossible conflations of illogical relationships. A Mannerist as well as surrealist sensibility often informs these images, with their historic allusions to Roman portrait busts and other types of memorial sculpture. As examples in this and the following room make clear, drawing plays a serial function in Borremans’ oeuvre as well. In different ways, a drawing may inform a painting, which then informs the development of a film, that in turn, may form the basis for another

FILM

Throughout his oeuvre, and his experiments in all media, interlocking narrative and serial imagery have always been critical compositional strategies for Borremans. The unusual angles, close-ups, subdued palette, and secluded figures Borremans uses to compose his paintings may heighten a sense of the fragmentary or incomplete, creating a feeling of discomfort and unease, but they also connect logically to the visual language of film.

In 2002 Borremans executed a number of works, each of which mark the first in a series of interrelated images that he would revisit time and again in drawing, painting, and film. These include The Prospect, The Journey (Lower Tatra), The German I, and The Walk, included in this and the next gallery. The Prospect marked the first appearance of the structure that also came to be known as “The House of Opportunity,” a series that now includes 19 works in all media, a large number of which are included in the final gallery of this exhibition. The Journey (Lower Tatra) is likewise part of a series that includes at least six other articulations of the theme. It is easy to relate the physical structure of
these ongoing images to the sequential nature of film stills, individually isolated from the connecting reel of the moving image.

Three other works from 2002 included in this exhibition, the painting *The German I*, and the drawings *The Walk* and *Drawing*, are part of larger series of interrelated works that also include a film: respectively these are *The German*, 2004–2007, *Add and Remove*, 2007 and *Weight*, 2005, on view in this and the following gallery. The two other films included in this exhibition and seen in this and the previous gallery, *The Storm*, 2006, and *Taking Turns*, 2009, also relate to larger bodies of drawing and sculpture. For the latter work, the drawing *Automat*, 2008, and three paintings from 2008, *Automat (1)*, *Automat (2)*, and *Automat (IV)*, could almost be seen as preparatory studies, though each also shares an affinity with earlier paintings, including *A2*, 2004.

**ARCHITECTURE OF FEAR AND DESIRE**

Architecture as the embodiment of dreams and reality is a connecting theme in Borremans’ work, and is often explored in more complex form in his drawings, which, as Borremans points out, can contain much more information than a painting. *A Mae West Experience*, 2002, for instance, conflates ancient spiritual and pagan associations of “idol worship” with a Post-industrial understanding of pleasure and celebrity. In a more menacing way, *The Swimming Pool*, 2001, hints at architecture’s oppressive potential.

In this provocative drawing, Borremans again uses shifting levels of reality, defined by scale, to create impossible tableaux of illogical relationships. Marginalia, notes, and supplementary sketches position this drawing among a group Borremans refers to as “official monuments, projections, and installations.” Central to the image is the unsettling sight of a youth with four puncture wounds to his chest being inscribed with the declaration, “People Must Be Punished.” Whether it is a giant static backdrop, an animated film projection, or a window into another reality is unclear. What is unmistakable, however, is that the swimmers in the pool are completely indifferent; a community engaged in frivolous activity overtaken by an act of startling oppression.

*The Swimming Pool* conjures disturbing associations with Franz Kafka’s short story *In the Penal Colony*. In Kafka’s terrifying tale, an apparatus carves into a prisoner’s body the term of his sentence, leading slowly to his agonizing demise. As the officer in charge of administering the sentence proclaims, “Guilt is never to be doubted.” Is it possible that Borremans subscribes to this belief? Is the inscription “People Must Be Punished” less an observation than a heartfelt conviction?

An allusive theme that emerges in Borremans’ drawings is an indefinable sense of time and place, a state and location where subjects are often depicted in situations of subjugation, alteration, manipulation, or compliance. Contained—even vitrified—they are often made the subject of study and undergo forced manipulation and change. Balanced between misanthropy and tenderness, these carefully crafted characters are positioned to mutate, suppress, and alter themselves (or be altered) at a moment’s notice.
Throughout his career, Michaël Borremans has utilized and expanded upon any number of continuous and contiguous images, ideas, and techniques to create interrelated works in all media. While each work in his oeuvre is necessarily linked to core themes that he deploys over and over again, no visual image has recurred in his practice more frequently, consistently, or over such a sustained period of time as the group of drawings and models loosely referred to as the “House of Opportunity.”

This recurring motif is that of a multi-mullioned structure, as much a barn as a house—perhaps even a bee hive—that shifts radically in scale and dimension, according to the scenario in which it is inserted. These drawings dispense with any sense of reality that scale would imply. Indeed, the alluring, multi-mullioned structure functions variously as a miniature table top model (or science experiment) surrounded by Lilliputian bodies, to an enormous installation in the Louvre (In the Louvre— The House of Opportunity, 2003), which again dwarfs the figures that surround it. Each itineration in this ongoing sequence, which now numbers some seventeen drawings and two models, places the House of Opportunity front and center in scenarios and scenes of engagement that have echoes in many of Borremans’ drawings and paintings of other subjects.

Like other groups of sequential drawings Borremans has executed, this series implies a cinematic narrative that is constantly shifting and defying expectation—the only connective tissue is the architectural monument as a subject; the mise-en-scenes it occupies have a surreal disconnection.

In various drawings we see tiny figures observing the house, themselves being observed by a towering figure, as in The Journey (True Colors), 2002; we see a woman tipping the house on its side, as in The House of Opportunity: Voodoo!, 2004–2005; and in KIT—The Conversation, 2002, Borremans’ inscription reveals his sardonic sense of humor and simultaneous frustration with the “mediocrity” and lack of criticality he fears is diminishing in society in general and in the art world in particular.

The text reads in part:

*Scale models that have no further use for us are very easy to transform into artworks, of course, an artist must recognize it as his own work but that is never a problem. So if you’re not happy with this design it will transform into a work of art, which triples the price!!*

*Oh, we don’t have to feel guilty if we’re not taking it then?*

*No worry m’am!*

*All right, we will take it then. But only as an artwork!*
Speaks for itself m’am!

A seductive and mystifying structure, this dwelling expresses, as do so many of his other drawings, Borremans’ interest in exploring how architecture functions as both a repository for and signifier of collective desire. Universally, the house promises to be each of ours private refuge; in Borremans’ hands, the safety and comfort of home becomes a more dizzying and mysterious place, indeed.
**BOZAR : EXTRA EVENTS**

**BOZAR MUSIC**

In a coproduction with the Klarafestival, Bozar presents on the 22nd of March *Winterreise* by Muziektheater Transparant and Ensemble intercontemporain, with a set designed by Michaël Borremans.

Muziektheater Transparant and the Ensemble intercontemporain's *Winterreise* brings together three internationally renowned artists: the visual artist Michaël Borremans, the stage director Johan Simons, and the composer Mark Andre. Their collaboration focuses on Schubert’s song cycle about a Romantic traveller. Borremans’s paintings and Schubert’s Winterreise express a similar melancholy and solitude. Johan Simons is also a Schubert enthusiast: he has already directed Elfride Jelinek’s *Winterreise* at the Münchner Kammerspiele. At the request of the Ensemble intercontemporain, the French composer Mark Andre has composed a number of short musical commentaries. This contemporary *Winterreise* offers a new angle on this timeless work, thanks to the collaboration of artists of our own time, while at the same time the Centre for Fine Arts presents an exhibition devoted to the work of the Belgian artist Michaël Borremans.

**BOZAR STUDIOS**

BOZAR STUDIOS will organise various family-friendly activities relating to the exhibition. In addition to the **discovery tours** and **day-long workshops** during the spring and Easter half-term the annual **Family Day** (27.04.2014) will also be dedicated to the artist.

**CINEMATEK**

**Carte blanche Michaël Borremans**

22.02>03.08.2014

CINEMATEK asked this pluri-disciplinaire to share with us his cinematographic influences and his favorite films. A Carte Blanche of 15 titles to be discovered in the course of March and April. ([www.cinemathek.be](http://www.cinemathek.be))
The exhibition catalogue aims to be the “ultimate tome on Borremans.” Besides an overview of the exhibited works, the beautifully illustrated publication will also provide a retrospective of Michaël Borremans’s work to date, in words and images. The book contains an in-depth interview between the curator and the artist as well as 50 essays by authors, curators, filmmakers, and musicians such as David Lynch, Katerina Gregos, Thomas Gunzig, Hans Rudolf Reust, David Van Reybrouck, Caroline Lamarche, Marc Didden, Michael Amy, Jan Hoet, and Mauro Pawlowski. The artist has been closely involved in the design of this publication.

Michaël Borremans. As sweet as it gets
304 pages
Hardcover
49€
3 versions, FR - EN - DUTCH
BOZAR BOOKS & Hatje Cantz
# PRACTICAL INFORMATION

## MICHAEL BORREMANS. AS SWEET AS IT GETS

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BOZAR Centre for Fine Arts  
23, Ravensteinstraat  
1000 Brussels

### Dates

22.02 > 03.08.2014

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Thursdays: 10 a.m. > 9 p.m.  
Closed on Mondays

### Tickets

€12 - €10 (BOZARfriends). More discounts at: [www.bozar.be](http://www.bozar.be)  
Combination ticket Zurbarán + Borremans: €18 – €16 (BOZARfriends)

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### BOZAR Information & tickets

+32 2 507 82 00 – [info@bozar.be](mailto:info@bozar.be) - [www.bozar.be](http://www.bozar.be)
PRESS CONTACTS

BOZAR – Centre for Fine Arts
Rue Ravensteinstraat, 23
B – 1000 Brussels
Info & tickets: T. +32 (0)2 507 82 00 - www.bozar.be

Déborah Motteux
Press officer BOZAR EXPO
T. +32 2 507 83 89
T. +32 471 951 460
deborah.motteux@bozar.be

Hélène Tenreira
Senior Press Officer BOZAR THEATRE, DANCE, CINEMA, CORPORATE
T. +32 (0)2 507 84 27
T. +32 (0)475 75 38 72
helene.tenreira@bozar.be

Laura Bacquelaine
Press Officer BOZAR MUSIC, LITERATURE
T. +32 (0)2 507 83 91
T. +32 (0)471 86 22 31
laura.bacquelaine@bozar.be

Barbara Porteman
Press Officer BOZAR MUSIC (World music, jazz, electro, ...), FESTIVAL & ARCHITECTURE
T. +32 (0)2 507 84 48
T. +32 (0)479 98 66 04
barbara.porteman@bozar.be