



Features

The Ghost of Geys: Art as Artifice at Yale Union

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May 8, 2018

In-depth, critical perspectives exploring art and visual culture on the West Coast.

Jef Geys, the artist's posthumous exhibition currently on view at Yale Union (YU), is a compilation of works that conceptually teeter between the liminal authorships of artist and curator, creative freedom and institutional limitations. The exhibition serves as an accidental retrospective for the Belgian born artist after his unexpected passing this February. Released simultaneously with the exhibition is a late edition of Geys's newspaper published by YU, *Kempens Informatieblad*, the last one to ever be produced. In *Kempens*, a self-proclaimed "anti-catalogue," Geys vocalizes his artistic expression and research, further contextualizing his desire to bring unconventional works and practices to the surface.



Jef Geys (installation view), 2018; Yale Union, Portland, Oregon. Courtesy of Yale Union. Photo: Lusi Lukova.



Jef Geys. Viola Alpina, 2010; oil on canvas and two frames; 55 x 35 in. Courtesy of Air de Paris. Jef Geys. Floristan, 2012; 10 stamps, published by the Belgian Postal Service; 6.5 x 6 in.

Noted for his conceptualism and an eagerness to test the limits of the art world, Geys began producing work as early as the 1950s, a period exalted for its fluctuations in social and political experimentation. As an artist, activist, and educator, the central focus of Geys's oeuvre eschews rigidity in favor of playfulness, fabricating a tantalizing game of cat and mouse within the larger institution of contemporary art. What Geys aimed to illuminate was the extent to which the hand of the artist and the curator—both essential to the practical execution of an exhibition—could at times be problematically interchangeable. Peeling away at layers of highly stylized methods of curation and display, Geys highlighted the subjective nature of art-making and appreciation.

After several years of failed attempts at a Geys exhibition (ranging from conceptual disagreements to funding complications), YU now welcomes an ample collection of works that effectively summarizes the artist's many years of making. The first piece seen upon entering the space is *Untitled (Male Figure)* (2018), a large and somewhat unsettling black cardboard cutout printed by curator Nicholas Tammens at a local Walmart. One may aptly question if the ghostly, anthropomorphic outline is the remnant essence of Geys himself, a looming and constant presence overlooking his work. The emotional weight of these works (there are two cutouts in the show) is tempered by the inclusion of the brightly colored signatures of local Da Vinci Arts Middle School children with whom Tammens worked closely. The outsourced signatures also read in alignment with Geys's personal belief about the transformative influence of the artist's signature; he believed that works that bear overt traces of the artist's hand become instantly commodified, and more valuable. A dichotomy of construction exists here: the cardboard cutout is at once personalized (perhaps even autobiographical) to the artist, and by the same token, entirely independent of his own crafting.

Influenced by environmental politics and the geographical landscape of Belgium, themes of locality, seriality, and production figure prominently in Geys's studies. In *Viola Alpina* (2010), from his "Seed Packet" Series, Geys enlarges the label from violet seed packets (the same ones he used in his own garden) and transforms it into a large-scale oil painting. For *Large Seedbag* (2016), he does the same with a packet of morning glory seeds. In this piece, the seeds' corporate logo sits prominently in the foreground. On a separate wall of the gallery, Tammens has shelved disjointed BMW parts to create *Morceaux de BMW* (2011) next to *Ten Model Paintings* (1965/1980s), a series of mass-produced paintings ubiquitous in Flemish popular culture and reminiscent of kitsch art seen in American doctors' offices or roadside motels. In his *Middelheim Series* (1999) of botanical diptychs, studies of foliage are juxtaposed with caricature studies of 19th-century porn. The common thread between these series appears to be one of critical appropriation. Geys places a comical emphasis on the commodification and materialism of traditional contemporary art. In these works, he demonstrates how a reduced assemblage of lived experiences and mass-consumed content blurs the already distorted relationship between industry and other forms of cultural production. In recognizing the subtle absurdity of a cardboard cutout, an old BMW part elevated on a pedestal, or the mass-produced Douven factory paintings, his divisiveness lies in relaying a critical awareness of one's role in our defunct and highly formal art world. The question at the core of this is: When does art become criticism?



Jef Geys. *Morceaux de BMW*, 2011; BMW z4 metal components, wooden shelf; 2 x 15 x 12 in. Courtesy of Essex Street. Jef Geys. *Ten Model Paintings*, 1965/1980s; ensemble of 10, oil on canvas; 16 x 20 in. each. Courtesy of Air de Paris.

Porsche Black (1980s/2016), a lacquered fiberglass sculpture; the *Gavra* series (1980s), large-scale, wall-mounted emulations of tile work; and the *Cow Passport* series (1965-2014), a selection of diagrams of his father-in-law's livestock, demonstrate many of these same tensions. With *Cows*, Geys manipulates mass-produced drawings and fills them in with forged identifications—typically misnaming the cows, labeling anatomical parts incorrectly, drawing abstract shapes in the space of the body, or adding text where the diagram itself should be. Geys is once again playing within the allotted lines, quite literally here, yet simultaneously pushes against their restrictive properties and value. This type of playful deceit continues with his “Bubble Paintings,” which received their nickname as a result of the layer of bubble wrap that Geys adhered to cover the supposed “content” of the art itself. Consequently, these pieces become more about their presentation than the work obscured underneath. Tammens received very clear instructions not to remove the final layer of bubble wrap, or the piece would be compromised.¹ Such restrictions highlight the nominal nature of what constitutes a work of art. These wrapped pieces become imbued with a double mortality—first in their nomination and second in their concealment, hinging on the whimsical desire of the artist at odds with public expectation. Demonstrating this fleeting phenomenon, a week after the opening, *Black with Cirkel* (2017) was found displayed with its back facing outwards, opposite of its previous positioning, bubble wrap still intact.



Jef Geys. *Black with Cirkel*, 2017; oil on canvas, bubble wrap, tape, plastic, paper, marker, paint; 28 x 21 x 2 in. Courtesy of Air de Paris.

The main attraction of the exhibition is *The Shadows of Lisbon* (2018): seven paravents (folding screens) personally crafted and fabricated onsite by Tammens using a set of specific parameters given by Geys. The images shown on the paravents are cropped from photographs Geys took in Lisbon in 1988. These photographs were previously shown in 2012 at Culturgest under the title, *As Sombras de Lisboa* (“The Ghosts” or “The Shadows of Lisbon”). Their current use as backdrops for the screens reads like a site-specific elegy, emerging in form as shadowy, ghost-like tendrils that breathe new context into images that have lived (and been consumed) before. Viewers are encouraged to move through this altered visual landscape and note the ways their perception shifts as their bodies circumambulate the work.



Jef Geys. *The Shadows of Lisbon* [Paravents 1-7], 2018; MDF, aluminum, piano hinges, photographic wallpaper; 57 x 71 in. each. Courtesy of the Artist and Air de Paris

Jef Geys (both man and exhibition) offers a ripe spin on the preconceived nature of the culture of contemporary art. The works form their own visual language by reducing art to its sign and signifier, its elemental components, and its reception. At the heart of the exhibition are revelations about the relationship between Geys and Tammens, despite Geys's subtle critique of the "verbose use of judgment in curators."² Tammens speaks to his relationship with Geys, and to curating this exhibition, as "essentially, putting all of the anxiety of art-making onto me."³ And, upon Geys's death, he felt a shift in his own role as he now bore responsibility for an artist who could no longer articulate the nuances and ever-shifting dynamics so critical to his practice. The modes of institutional critique employed by Geys while he was alive show a desire to put the unspoken workings of the art world into view and make known what is widely concealed from the public. By providing Tammens a sort of faux authorship over some of the works (with his participation in their construction), Geys teases about auteur-ship and the supposed manner in which galleries and curators have the ability to qualify art. This confusion of power dynamics and intentional blurring of boundaries could be problematic, but in this instance, it achieves Geys's goal of illuminating the procedural aspects behind the display and consumption of contemporary art.

Jef Geys is on view at Yale Union in Portland, OR through June 10, 2018. Jef Geys: Quadra, curated by Francis May, is on view at the Musée des Arts Contemporains in Belgium through September 9, 2018.