

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

How Jef Geys's Conceptual Enigmas Speak to Life

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Devon Van Houten Maldonado 2 days ago



Jef Geys, "The Shadows of Lisbon [Paravents]" (2018), MDF, aluminum, piano hinges, photographic wallpaper, 57 x 71 in (all images courtesy Yale Union)

PORTLAND, Ore. — [Jef Geys](#) liked to create enigmas. Only a few short months after his death this past February, the city of Portland hosts his cool conceptualism in the extraordinary, cathedral-like exhibition space of [Yale Union \(YU\)](#), somewhat of an enigma itself. Geys passed away during the planning of the exhibition currently on view, which is quite

full of life despite becoming sadly posthumous, a surprise considering the artist's origins in gray and melancholy Belgium, not unlike the Pacific Northwest of the United States where his work seems at home.

Maybe Geys's most important legacy is as an educator — he saw teaching as a form of collaborating with his students. A huge part of his oeuvre, like his pedagogy, veered toward the unsensational or the

everyday, though always with an air of hidden beauty and delight. One gets the impression that he, as much as any artist ever managed to, achieved an integration of art and life. But Geys was also an instigator and his work contained a social critique, sometimes even while managing to be funny.



Jef Geys, "Black with Cirkel" (2017), oil on canvas, bubble wrap, tape, plastic, paper, marker, paint, 28 x 21 x 2 in

In the show at YU, several series stand out as emblematic of Geys's career: a series of flowers pressed under glass paired with 18th-century erotic drawings, a series of paintings of seed packets, and a series of artworks wrapped in packaging material. All three exemplify the lightness of the artist's work in the show that spans from the 1960s to 2018. Perhaps the most iconic Geys image is the slightly deformed heart shape that has appeared repeatedly in his shows and publications as a visual signature.

The heart, like the rest of his projects, cannot be so easily defined, fluctuating between multiple representations, such as a heart, a human figure, or a uterus.

Geys continuously removed forms from their contexts, as is the case with the series of pornographic drawings and dried plants on view at YU. The works, originally conceived for a project at the park at the Middelheim Museum in Antwerp, which he divided into a grid and harvested one plant from each quadrant, reference two important aspects of his practice: First, his work hinges on the archive, continually recycling and referencing itself again in new projects. So his work was never really finished, often complicating the idea of a fixed art object with an action or ephemera. Second, it illustrates Geys's love-hate relationship with the grid, which, according to the artist, he was always seeking to escape but remained fascinated by its confines. "For me nothing is so binding as the laws of the grid," Geys is quoted in the exhibition material. "Sometimes the invisible rules of the game are more

interesting than the game itself.”



Jeff Geys, “Equisetaceae Paardestaartenfamilie Equisetum arvense L. Heermoes [Middelheim “AEG”]” (1999), ink on paper under Plexiglass, dried flowers and collage on paper, wood frame and glass, 20 x 15 in.; 19 x 14 in

At YU, the pieces are displayed not in a garden but in a gallery. Still, the pressed flowers with names like *Equisetaceae* *Paardenstaartenfamilie* *Equisetum arvense* L. Heermoes and the pornographic drawings, which Geys created to mimic classical erotica, do have an inherent relationship. We don’t know what the artist saw in the coupling — is the chain of dandy lovers connected via lips and genitalia symbolic of the rhizomatous stems of the field horsetail plant? — but the combination makes sense

at a primitive level. The mediocrity of the unremarkable plants and the forged orgies contained in the drawings create a comical circle of life.

Elsewhere, too, Geys was concerned with how we impose the grid onto nature. In his seed packet series, which he repeated twice every year from 1963 to 2018, Geys painted, and thus made artificial, the packets of seeds that he planted in his garden. “At the crux of the seed packets series was my conviction to blow-up, screw-up and even falsify something that is already ‘false,’” wrote the artist in *Architecture as Limitation* published for the 1991 São Paulo Biennial. “Reality must serve to keep us dumb and unhappy: consumer cattle.” This quote gets at the artist’s lifelong social critique and the structures that he sought to upset. The derisive allusion to “consumer cattle” also references a series by

Geys, *Cow Passport* (1965–2014), another longterm project meticulously archived throughout his career, stemming from the system used to buy and sell cows as consumer goods, again questioning our artificial relationship with the natural world.



Jef Geys, “Large Seedbag” (2016), “Carnevale di Venezia” (2016), oil on canvas, bubble wrap, tape, marker, 56 x 36 in

The seed packets exemplify Geys’s interest in packaging, perhaps most poignantly in his *Bubble Paintings* series. Some of the last works created before his death and among the newest in the show at YU, one of the seed packet paintings is even included in the *Bubble Paintings* series, wrapped in, you guessed it, bubble wrap. Though the painting is visible through the plastic, other works in the series are hidden within boxes and packing tape. Geys sacrificed his storage in order to create a work that remains covered and unseen, like

a butterfly locked in a cocoon.

By concealing the *Bubble Paintings* underneath packaging, they seem to disappear as artworks. This practice and others in his performative and pedagogical career get at a larger metaphysical foundation upon which Geys worked. Wondering where Geys is now that he has passed on, I imagine he’s in the invisible space that so fascinated him and occupied his work, that he, like his work, remains there in the shadows, unseen.

[Jef Geys continues at Yale Union](#) (800 SE 10th Avenue, Portland, Ore.) through June 10.