



Altered States: Transitional Space in Johan Van Mullem

By *Jordan Mattos* - Jan 18, 2014



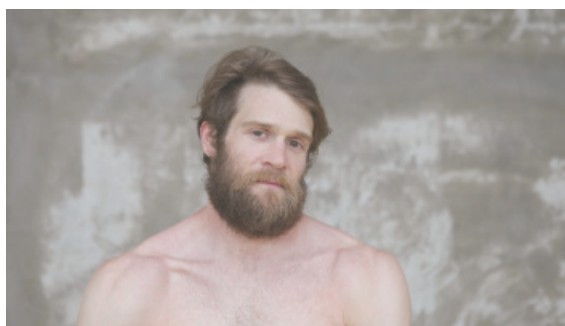
The Belgian artist Johan Van Mullem paints the dark, distorted faces of people you might have seen in a dream and could not recognize. The pieces now on display at Chelsea's C24 Gallery, part of his first exhibition in the United States, recall the chilling self-portraits by the English painter Francis Bacon and the Hollywood body horror technique in which an actor's head rocks in horrific fast and blurry motion. Yet there is a strange tenderness to the portraits. Amid the weary swirls of flesh-toned bandages there are occasional splashes of summery, almost floral magenta or violet. Van Mullem has the tendency to highlight the eyes, making them opaque and glittering in the same instant. The effect is of a kind, elderly face, staring back at you from an indistinct, half-remembered dream.

More directly, Van Mullem's images parallel a multinational background. Born in Bruges and traveling through the Congo and Tunisia, his color spectrum does not surpass the terrestrial. There is a cumulative impression of wayfaring through an imaginary ethnic transformation; some of the portraits morph from a weathered Medieval European to that of an African tribesman. The majority of the works pause in between this transition, and are caught in the middle.

The artist's memories of returning to a sombre Belgian sky after having spent a summer in sunlit Tunisia have left a vibrant imprint, as if the transformative experience of arriving in a new country might alter the physique. The absence of an observable identity and the presence of a transitional unfolding in the pieces resist easy readings. We don't know who these faces are, or who they are about to become, and the artist would have it no other way.

"Johan Van Mullem" is open now and runs through February 22 at C24 Gallery in Chelsea. 514 West 24th Street (646) 416 6300

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An independent filmmaker and designer with works showcased in Paper, Bidoun magazine and the New Museum of Contemporary Art Bookstore, Jordan curates a selection of international movies for several film festivals. A native New Yorker and voracious cineaste, Mattos designed the award statuette for the Cinema Eye Honors for Nonfiction Films, and draws a line of t-shirts inspired by his favorite cult movies.

