

'Johan van Mullem's emotional portraits'



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ROSALIND ORMISTON: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHAN VAN MULLEM

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Rosalind Ormiston talks to painter Johan Van Muller:



For nearly 50 years, Belgian figurative artist Johan van Mullem (b.1959), has been drawing and painting faces. It is a subject that absorbs his attention and one that created continuity for him during a nomadic childhood as the young son of a diplomat father living in different countries. He was born in Isiro, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, to Flemish parents. Today, after a successful career as an architect, Van Mullem has taken his love of portraiture to a professional level. His first major London show in November 2012 – a collaboration between Hus Gallery and Andipa Gallery – explored his lifelong love and practice in 'Movements of the Soul', an exhibition of 33 works. We met at the Andipa Gallery on the first day of the exhibition.

Rosalind Ormiston: During the last two years you have given up your architectural practice to concentrate on painting. What motivated this change?

Johan van Mullem: I always wanted to be a painter. It took me 53 years to do it!

RO: Can you recall your first inspiration for drawing and painting portraits?

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JvM: Rembrandt has always been present without being able to explain why. As if it was someone I knew so well without being able to talk about him. He is more than an inspiration. He is a presence. A kind of understanding sharing. It is a feeling I can discover sometimes with a work. I never say 'I will do this'. I love the colours of old drawings, aquatints, sepia prints. When I started painting I wanted to use these 'colours'.

RO: There are diptychs and triptychs on display in the artworks chosen for 'Movements of the Soul'. Is there a comparison to Rembrandt's

dialogue between all the paintings? Are they intended as a series?

inspired to Rembrandt's

JvM: With each painting I like to discover something new, to progress, so there is always a programme with different levels of progression, which can make it look like a series of work with the same subject. But I discover the global universe of my work once pieces hang together. I have the impression sometimes all the pieces are just one work.

RO: *The 33 works chosen for this exhibition, in ink on board, or pen and ink drawings, are titled 'Sans Titre' [Untitled], with only a number to differentiate the works. Has that been a conscious choice of recognition since you began to exhibit professionally?*

JvM: I think my paintings have to live their own lives once I have finished my work. I agree with the idea the most difficult thing in painting is to know when it is finished. I would say then you have to disappear, let the painting go. A painting doesn't need an identity that would induce something in the persons that look at it. Art a way to touch the invisible reality, which is different for each of us, and make it better, more understandable having an image through which to approach our own 'human' story

RO: *Your pen and ink drawings are delicate, intimate, portrayals of people. What spurs you to draw the subject and do you have models for your drawings?*

JvM: I work the same way as my paintings. No models, only what I feel. It can be a warming up before painting. It can be a way of concentrating when I have to listen. It is often a way to get into an unconscious world when am surrounded by people in a cafe for example. But for sure I almost always have a blue pen in my hand and can't stand sitting for more than ten minutes without drawing.

RO: *The current exhibition displays art work created in 2011–12. What are you working on now? And what are your plans for 2013?*

JvM: I am more and more convinced that 'faces' will be my unique subject. But there is so much to discover about it. There is so much to explore, so many colours that all give different light. Sculpture that is a complete, unbelievable, new and exciting experience, charcoal, etc.... 24 hours a day will never be enough. Hopefully we have got some more lives!

RO: *Johan, Thank you for talking to Cassone*

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