

SOPHIE KUIJKEN

Thursday 16 January - Saturday 22 February 2020



Sophie Kuijken, *VL.K.L.*, 2019.
Oil and acrylic on plywood panel, 100 × 240 cm (39 3/8 × 94 1/2 in.).

Galerie Nathalie Obadia is happy to present Sophie Kuijken's fourth solo show in its Brussels base, following her Parisian exhibition in 2017, and her two previous Brussels exhibitions in 2016 and 2014.

For more than 20 years, Sophie Kuijken has painted in the privacy of her studio without ever showcasing her production, which she ended up destroying after many years of research. It is thanks to Joost Declercq, former director of the Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens (Belgium) that, in 2011, Sophie Kuijken accepted to exhibit her work for the very first time. These years of closeted practice allowed her to develop an original and powerful body of work solely focused on portraiture.

For the first time, this exhibition gathers painting and drawing, her two favorite media. The Belgian artist is mainly known as a painter, but she has been practicing drawing all throughout her career and still considers it a major field of pictorial experiments.

The eight paintings presented in this show are real technical achievements. In the manner of the great Flemish Primitives, Sophie Kuijken's figures and backgrounds are the results of a patient accumulation of thin layers of acrylic, oil paint and glazing she overlaps until obtaining a perfectly smooth and deep surface. Her paintings absorb the light of the media she uses and reveal their full density.

Her drawings are more ethereal on the other hand. Sophie Kuijken delicately draws the outlines of her figures on plaster surfaces she makes herself using a metallic or copper point, before highlighting some details with touches of pencil. Some of them, like *t-R.O.X.*, display darker backgrounds made out of a mixture of chalk, pigment and charcoal the artist prepares in her studio. This lengthy process is unforgiving: Sophie Kuijken's gesture has to be precise and final.

Although her technique varies from painting to drawing, her subject matter underlines the link between these two practices. Sophie Kuijken composes her portraits from multiple images she finds on Internet and sometimes stores for many years before using them. Her work process is truly fascinating. Through collecting photographs based on formal properties, she has elaborated a true visual science. Symbolism and historic context put aside, the artist merely observes the recurrence of patterns and accessories, of postures and outfits.

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These odd associations give birth to almost mystical protagonists, as is the case in *Z.W.K.H.*, a very elegant human-size portrait of a young woman wearing a light blue dress. From up close, one notices a thin bridle on the woman's right foot inspired by the sandals of antique statues. In another painting entitled *C.M.H.*, the face of the protagonist is framed by two blue strips bearing white stars, as if for a military helmet. Very visible in the composition, this war symbol seems contradictory with the humble kneeling posture of the subject.

Sophie Kuijken also pays careful attention to hands and faces, which are very bright and meticulously executed. French poet Paul Valéry (1871-1945) once said: "The deepest thing in man is the skin". And it is through this thin membrane that parts us from the world that Sophie Kuijken expresses the complexity and tension that moves her protagonists. A feeling of tension reinforced by her dark and plain backgrounds, which only purpose seems to make the protagonist bodies stand out. Stripping them of all temporal and spatial framework, they also underline their unreal nature.

This is why one can hardly associate Sophie Kuijken's work with a particular era, and neither can one determine the gender of her protagonists for sure. In fact, the artist seems to take pleasure in this ambiguity and cultivate the doubt in her viewer by playing with twin portraits, like in *V.L.K.L.*.

Like the creature of the novel *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* by British novelist Mary Shelley*, Sophie Kuijken's portraits are undeniably human yet at the same time strangely otherworldly. Made-up anonymous beings, they question us about our own humanity.

In January 2020, several of Sophie Kuijken's paintings will also be showcased at the St Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent, which is among the most majestic cathedrals in Europe, and the home of the famous altarpiece of the Van Eyck brothers *The Adoration of the Mystical Lamb* (1432). Displayed next to the recently restored altarpiece, Sophie Kuijken's works will open a fascinating dialogue between two eras.

* *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, Mary Shelley, Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor & Jones, 1818.



Sophie Kuijken, *C.M.H.*, 2019.
Oil and acrylic on chipboard panel, 122 × 63 cm (48 1/32 × 24 13/16 in.).

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Sophie Kuijken is born in Bruges (Belgium) in 1965. She lives and works in Willebringen, near Leuven (Belgium).

She was trained at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent (K.A.S.K) and graduated in 1988. This was followed by a period of introspection and isolation that lasted twenty years, during which the artist painted many portraits, a genre that was the principal medium for her pictorial experiments. This anonymity ended in 2010, when a collector discovered Sophie Kuijken's studio and presented her works to Joost Declercq, the director of the Dhondt-Dhaenens Museum in Deurle (Belgium). The latter held her first monographic exhibition in 2011, followed, in 2013, by her first group exhibition, entitled 'XXH', in the Dr Guislain Museum in Ghent (Belgium).

In 2014, the Galerie Nathalie Obadia held Sophie Kuijken's first solo exhibition in Brussels. That year, she took part in 'Vestige', her second collective exhibition, devoted to the theme of recycling at the Fondation Francès in Senlis (France). The Belgian artist was invited there because of her original way of recycling words and images that she collects on the Internet and then compiles to create simulacrum of reality that characterise her portraits in a new genre. In the same year, the fashion designer Dries Van Noten included one of Sophie Kuijken's works in his exhibition 'Dries Van Noten Inspirations', which was held by the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris (France), and was subsequently presented in 2015 at the MoMu (Antwerp's Fashion Museum, Belgium). Sophie Kuijken's second monographic exhibition was held in the Cultural Center Maasmechelen (province of Limburg, Belgium) in 2015.

On the occasion of Art Brussels 2015, the Galerie Nathalie Obadia presents Sophie Kuijken first Solo Show.

In 2016, the Musée d'Ixelles (Belgium) chose one of Sophie Kuijken's paintings to feature in an exhibition of portraits selected from its permanent collection. At the same time, the Galerie Nathalie Obadia held her second solo exhibition in Brussels, followed by a first solo exhibition in Paris in January 2017. And in November of that year, Sophie Kuijken was one of fifty artists, including Luc Tuymans, Michaël Borremans, Ann Veronica Janssens, and Thomas Lerooy, who took part in «*Ecce Homo*», a collective exhibition held concurrently in several museums in Antwerp (Belgium) that brought together the most prominent artists of the Belgian artistic scene.

In 2018, Racine Editions (Belgium) published the first monograph «*Sophie Kuijken*».

In 2019, Sophie Kuijken was invited by the Maison des Arts in Brussels (Belgium) to participate in the group exhibition «*Who are you?*», which brought together works from the collection, with those of renowned contemporary artists on the subject of portraiture.

In January 2020, Sophie Kuijken's enigmatic portraits will be exhibited alongside the Van Eyck brothers' famous polyptych «*The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*» (1432), in St Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent (Belgium).

In 2023, the Musée d'Ixelles (Brussels, Belgium) will dedicate an important solo show to Sophie Kuijken on the occasion of its reopening.

For any further information, please contact :
valerie@nathalieobadia.com / + 32 (0)2 648 14 05

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Brussels

Galerie Nathalie Obadia
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