

Sophie Kuijken

January 20 - March 16, 2024

3, rue du Cloître Saint-Merri, Paris 4^e



A.U.E., 2019
Pencil, pastel, paint and chalk on plasterboard
87 x 150 x 2,5 cm (34 1/4 x 59 in)

Galerie Nathalie Obadia is delighted to host a solo exhibition of Belgian artist Sophie Kuijken in Paris, represented by the gallery since 2014.

Passionate about old master and modern art from a very young age, Sophie Kuijken aims to develop a body of work that is personal, far removed from imitation. After studying painting at the Royal Academy of Fine Art in Ghent (K.A.S.K.) in 1988, the artist spent twenty years isolated in her studio, painting, locked away from prying eyes. This radical approach was accompanied by a complete break with the art world, exhibitions, newspapers and magazines that could influence her work as an artist. It was not until 2011 that her paintings were revealed for the first time. The artist met Joost Declercq (former director of the Dhondt Dhaenens Museum), who, awed by the virtuosity of her works, decided to give her a solo exhibition at the museum.

The present exhibition brings together a selection of never-before-seen oil paintings and drawings on plaster, most of which are shown to the public for the first time. The works on display are a continuation of the artist's research on portraiture, testifying to her fascination with faces and gazes. A persistent mystery clings to the depicted figures, who look at once foreign and familiar, even though it is quite impossible for us to have come across them before. The portraits are chimeras, constructed from multiple photographic fragments. In an ultra-contemporary approach to painting and drawing, the artist groups together, cuts and superimposes images of legs, eyes, fingers and accessories she gleans from the internet. Subtle details betray the process with which she arranges these unexpected compositions: an unusual skin tone, abnormally long fingers or an atypical pose -such as the newborn's crossed legs -destabilize the viewer's gaze. These anonymous figures, built from scratch, are an original counterpoint to the history of portraiture, which has always been intrinsically linked to a live model. The painted subjects, drowned in a digital flux, now anchor themselves at the heart of the works for what seems like forever.

These temporal discrepancies are reflected in the creative process behind the works on display. Sophie Kuijken's drawings on plasterboard give her a much greater spontaneity of gesture than her oil paintings, which are created by superimposing thin layers of paint. Despite their disparity, "the two go hand in hand and influence each other," declares the artist. One must think of them as "one big family."

Art history runs through the faces, bodies and backgrounds of the works. In her oil paintings, light, precise brushstrokes are applied to the wood panel, creating morphological deformations. Light emerges from fabrics; silhouettes stretch out and raw-toned flesh elongates, recalling Renaissance Mannerism. These deformations, common in Italian painting like in the works of Parmigianino (1503-1540), suggest the ongoing transformation of the beings captured at the heart of the canvas. Chalk, pencil and watercolor drawings on plaster also distort the bodies with their fine, delicate strokes, giving the subjects a more vulnerable aspect, symbolizing the fragility of existence. There is no permanence for Man in the portraits depicted.

"I do not paint its Being, I paint its Passage," writes Michel de Montaigne in his *Essays* (1595). In rejecting the constancy of being, he asserts that the self corresponds to "a diversity of faces."¹ By summoning different temporalities, from the great history of painting to the contemporary world, bathed in its digital universe, Sophie Kuijken seems to echo the French philosopher, in her desire to paint the constantly changing being. Most of her mysterious figures float in an impenetrable monochrome, preventing any temporal and spatial anchoring. Each member of this *great family* is an allegory of the mysteries of existence. The figures rise to the visitor's level, in a poignant face-to-face encounter, observing each other as through a mirror, reflecting each other's double.

To mark its reopening, the Musée d'Ixelles (Brussels, Belgium) will dedicate a solo exhibition to Sophie Kuijken in 2025.

¹Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, Book 3: Chapter 2 (Of Repentance)

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

Graduated in 1988 from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent (K.A.S.K), Belgium, Sophie Kuijken's work is today a unique contribution to the art of portraiture. Through her technical mastery, the artist overlays several strata of different temporalities, from the great, unchanging history of art, to the common, random resources of the digital age. Portraits built from photographic fragments gleaned from the Internet mark an original counterpoint to the history of portraiture, intrinsically linked to the live model. This multiplication of sources, this original dispersion of the subject, creates a diffuse mystery, that of a half-familiar, half-chemical figure, flirting with the bizarre. The portraits become allegories of the mystery of existence, and stand before their fellow human beings who look at them - or at themselves in the mirror.

Since 2011, Sophie Kuijken has enjoyed major solo exhibitions such as *Picture this* at Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens in Deurle (Belgium, 2011), Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Brussels (Belgium, 2014 and 2016) and Paris (France, 2017), Centre Culturel de Maasmechelen (Belgium, 2015), as well as a solo show at Art Brussels (Belgium, 2015) and Art on Paper in Brussels (Belgium, Belgium). To mark its reopening, the Musée d'Ixelles (Brussels, Belgium) will dedicate a solo exhibition to the artist in 2025.

Sophie Kuijken has also taken part in significant group shows with *XXH* at the Museum Dr Guislain in Ghent (Belgium, 2013), *Vestige* at the Fondation Francès in Senlis (France, 2014), at the Maison Belge in Cologne (Germany, 2014), *Dries van Noten - Inspirations* at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris (France, 2014) and at MoMu, the Fashion Museum in Antwerp (Belgium, 2015), *Portrait bourgeois* at the Musée d'Ixelles in Brussels (Belgium, 2016), *Ecce Homo* at the Museum Mayer van den Bergh in Antwerp (Belgium, 2017), *Who are you?* at the Maison des Arts in Brussels (Belgium, 2019), *Le retour de l'Agneau* at Saint Bavo Cathedral in Ghent alongside the famous altarpiece by the Van Eyck brothers (Belgium, 2020), *I feel really awake* at the Maison du Peuple in Saint-Gilles (Belgium, 2020) and *Paroles de cheval* at the Haras national du Pin in Le Pin-au-Haras (France, 2021).

Sophie Kuijken's first monograph was published by Éditions Racines in 2018.

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For any further information, please contact : Eva Ben Dhiab
evab@nathalieobadia.com / + 33 (0) 1 53 01 99 76

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