

GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

PARIS - BRUXELLES

Sophie Kuijken

September 10 – October 25, 2026

8, rue Charles Decoster, 1050 Ixelles



C-P.M.E., 2026
Acrylic and oil on plywood pane, 121 cm diameter

Galerie Nathalie Obadia is pleased to present a solo exhibition in Brussels by the Belgian artist Sophie Kuijken. Bringing together a body of recent paintings, several of which were previously shown in the major retrospective dedicated to her at the Matmut Contemporary Art Centre – Daniel Havis (Saint-Pierre-de-Varengueville, France) until February 2026, this exhibition also reveals a new format in the artist's practice: the tondo. Although Sophie Kuijken explored the circular format some twenty years ago, drawn to the compositional challenges it imposes, it is now experiencing a renewed momentum. Invited to create a tondo for an exhibition at the Musée Cérès Franco (Montolieu, France), the artist rediscovers the richness and possibilities offered by this format.

Passionate about both ancient and modern art since childhood, she distinguishes herself through a body of work free from any form of imitation. A graduate in 1988 from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent (K.A.S.K.), she subsequently made the radical choice to withdraw from the art world: for more than twenty years, the artist worked in her studio, away from public view. This withdrawal allowed her to develop the autonomy and integrity of her pictorial language. Her work was eventually revealed to the public in 2011, on the occasion of a solo exhibition at the Dhondt-Dhaenens Museum, at the initiative of Joost Declercq, then director of the institution, who was struck by the virtuosity and quiet power of her painting.

The works in this exhibition extend Kuijken's longstanding interest in portraiture. The artist states in an interview: "When I was a child, leafing through art books or visiting exhibitions, it was always the portraits that fascinated me most." She continues: "After my studies, I first tried to suppress this obsession with portraiture (...), at the end of the 1980s portrait painting seemed a completely outdated genre. But for me, it quickly proved unavoidable. (...) Details that had nothing to do with the figure gradually disappeared, until only the figure remained." These figures, however, never become models in the traditional sense. Refusing the presence of a live model in her studio, stating that "scrutinising a person closely with the intention of painting them is, in her view, something very personal, even intrusive," Sophie Kuijken constructs her figures herself from a vast repertoire of images collected on the internet over several decades. "The images gathered are raw ingredients that I then have to dissect, edit and reassemble," she explains. Legs, eyes, fingers and accessories are thus extracted, cropped and layered until her characters are built.

These combinations produce subtle dissonances, fostering a form of the “uncanny” around these figures. Slight shifts emerge as one looks more closely: a subtly deformed hand, an unexpected posture, the coexistence of elements drawn from different genres or periods. As French art critic Julie Chaizemartin writes, these figures are “magnificent fakes, inventions, disturbing imaginations”. Difficult to date and impossible to identify precisely, these portraits create ambiguity, appearing to the viewer as both familiar and foreign.

This tension between pictorial tradition and contemporary visual culture is also expressed in the choice of the circular format. Without explicitly referencing it, the tondo evokes an ancient memory of painting: a form inherited from Antiquity and developed during the Italian Renaissance, concentrating the gaze within a closed, often intimate or domestic space. Today, it also echoes the uses of digital imagery – notably profile pictures on social networks. Without seeking to draw a direct parallel, Sophie Kuijken thus explores the potential of a form which, from painted panel to screen, continues to frame and individualise the face. Nevertheless, the artist remains attached to the diversity of formats, with certain figures or postures – particularly standing characters – finding their place more naturally in non-circular compositions.

“I do not paint being, I paint passing,” writes Michel de Montaigne in *Essais* (1595)¹. By invoking both the memory of the great pictorial tradition and contemporary digital images, Sophie Kuijken’s work resonates with this idea of transformation. Presented at eye level, these figures establish a silent face-to-face encounter that engages the viewer in an experience of meeting. French art critic Marc Donnadiéu reflects, while contemplating Sophie Kuijken’s work: “What, in the end, do we see of the world around us, of its present and its past, of its history and its memory, of the people who have populated it and still do? Do we truly look at this larger world in which we are included? And in what way does it, in turn, look back at us?”²

A conversation with the artist Sophie Kuijken, moderated by the Belgian researcher and cultural mediator Samuel Mareel, will take place at the KMSKA (Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp) on September 24 at 6:30 p.m., as part of LAAT TALK (in Dutch).

— Marie Chappaz, Editorial writer

1. Montaigne, “On Repentance,” *Essais*, Book III, Chapter 2, 1595.

2. Marc Donnadiéu, *The Gift of a Presence in the World*, in Sophie Kuijken (monograph), Brussels, Éditions Racine, 2018, citing Georges Didi-Huberman: “We must close our eyes in order to see when the act of seeing sends us back, opens us up to a void that looks at us, concerns us and, in a sense, constitutes us,” *What We See, What Looks at Us*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1992

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

Since 2011, Sophie Kuijken has enjoyed important solo exhibitions such as *Picture this* at Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens in Deurle (Belgium, 2011), Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Brussels (Belgium, 2014, 2016, 2020 and 2022) and Paris (France, 2017, 2021, 2024 and 2026), Centre Culturel de Maasmechelen (Belgium, 2015), as well as a solo show at Art Brussels (Belgium, 2015) and Art on Paper in Brussels (Belgium). In 2020, the artist presented several works for *Le retour de l'Agneau* at Saint Bavo Cathedral in Ghent (Belgium) alongside the famous altarpiece by the Van Eyck brothers. In autumn 2025, Sophie Kuijken presents an original monographic retrospective at Centre d'art contemporain de la Matmut - Daniel Havis near Rouen (France).

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).

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