

GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

BRUSSELS

SOPHIE KUIJKEN

1 June - 23 July 2016

Rue Charles Decoster 8 - 1050 Brussels



Sophie Kuijken, Z.P., 2015-2016. Oil and acrylic on wooden panel, 150 x 96 x 1,8 cm (59 x 37 3/4 x 0 3/4 in.)

The Galerie Nathalie Obadia is delighted to present the second solo exhibition by Sophie Kuijken in Brussels. For many, the first, held in 2014, was a discovery. This Belgian artist, who was born in Brussels in 1965, worked in secret for almost 20 years and only showed her work in 2011 when Joost de Declercq, the director of the Musée Dhondt-Dhaenens (Deurle, Belgium), offered the artist her first personal exhibition.

Sophie Kuijken's new works have maintained the same remarkable aura. Through her portraits of men and women, she offers us the very essence of being, and the emotions, doubts, intellectual questioning, dreams and personal dramas that go with it. Her paintings reflect her vision of the mystery of the human condition, as is attested by this gallery of anonymous individuals whose age she has only an approximate idea of and whose sex is sometimes open to question. Neither their clothes nor accessories offer us a close idea of the identity of her subjects: they are, in fact, rather elements that throw doubt on the period in which these figures were born, on their profession and the office they perform(ed). Animals, which are often included in Sophie Kuijken's paintings, add further ambiguity to the possible scenarios we witness.

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The strangeness of her portraits is the result of the method she uses of taking images she finds on internet to create her figures. She makes her searches on the basis of keywords, like a name, a place or a number. She is given a set of individuals whose anonymity she enhances by amalgamating their features. The effigies she creates out of this haphazard combination retain nothing in common with their original models. The final painted portraits are thus a form of visual recycling, one removed from all reality despite the impression of verism they radiate. Sophie Kuijken mischievously exploits this disparity and plays on appearances.

It may take her several months to build up a portrait. It is created by a long, patient combination of layers of oil and acrylic paint. Overlays of the matter and the juxtaposition of glazes generate deliberate morphological deformations, a technique used by Renaissance painters like Parmigianino in his *Madonna of the Long Neck* (1535, Uffizi, Florence), and Rosso Fiorentino in his *Dead Christ with Angels* (1525–26, Fine Arts Museum, Boston). This Mannerist practice was extended into the 19th century by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, who lengthened the back of his famous *Grande Odalisque* (1814, Louvre, Paris), thereby sacrificing anatomical realism for linear elegance.

Closer to Sophie Kuijken is the famous *Portrait of Albert Devis* (Musée d'Ixelles, Belgium) painted in 1897 by the Belgian artist Henri Evenepoel (1872–1899). Apart from its format, this painting has evident similarities with Sophie Kuijken's standing portraits, such as *H.I.B.*, *M.H.* and *A.L.*, in which a figure is shown against a dark, featureless ground that would otherwise get in the way of the magnetic gaze of the figure. The importance of the accessory, in the case of Albert Devis a cane made of ossicles, is strengthened by its incongruity. The accessories used by Sophie Kuijken, whether they are objects, jewels, tattoos or animals, also stand out for their peculiarity. They seem to wish to signify something in the same way as an iconographic attribute does in a religious or mythological painting. However, in Sophie Kuijken's case, the accessories remain enigmatic.

The remarkable portraiture of Sophie Kuijken is currently being astutely deciphered by the Musée d'Ixelles, which has chosen to include a work by this contemporary artist among the ancient portraits it holds. This allows us to assess everything that it has in common with – and that distances it from – classical art. This first comparison evinces, above all, the mysterious component in each of her portraits that does not have to meet, as it used to in the past, the expectations of the client. The art of Sophie Kuijken is thus developed without the need for an accommodating attitude towards her fictional models. They, however, continue to perturb us with their secret charms. They surrender themselves to us fearlessly and, even if it means upsetting us, observe us with the intentness that we reserve for those around us.



Sophie Kuijken, *M.Z.H.*, 2015-2016. Oil and acrylic on wooden panel, 105 × 250 × 3,5 cm (41 3/8 × 98 3/8 × 1 3/8 in.)

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Born in 1965 in Bruges, Sophie Kuijken lives and works in Willebringen, near Louvain, in Belgium.

Graduating from the Ghent Academy (K.A.S.K.) in 1988, the path she follows and works she paints are highly uncommon. She enters a period of introspection and isolation that will last almost twenty years during which she continually paints portraits, a genre that will remain her favourite vehicle for pictorial experimentation.

Her anonymity comes to an end in 2010 when a Belgian collector succeeds in entering Sophie Kuijken's studio and decides to take her work to be seen by Joost Declercq, the director of the Dhondt-Daehnens museum in Deurle (Belgium). The upshot will be her first monographic exhibition a year later, in 2011, in the museum.

In 2014 the Galerie Nathalie Obadia gives Sophie Kuijken her first solo exhibition in Brussels. The same year, she participates in her second group show – “Vestige” – an exhibition on the theme of recycling presented by the Fondation Francès in Senlis (France). Sophie Kuijken is invited to be part of the exhibition on account of her original manner of recycling words and images that she finds on internet and which she compiles to produce a simulacrum of reality, thus creating a new type of portrait.

Also in 2014, the fashion designer Dries van Noten presents Sophie Kuijken in his exhibition “Dries van Noten Inspirations” held at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris (France), then in 2015 at the Momu (Fashion Museum in Antwerp, Belgium).

In 2015, the Centre de Maasmechelen in the province of Limbourg (Belgium) mounts a second monographic exhibition of the artist and the Galerie Nathalie Obadia devotes a solo show to her work to coincide with the Art Brussels fair.

In 2016 the Musée d'Ixelles (Brussels, Belgium) chooses one of Sophie Kuijken's works to place alongside a selection of portraits from its collection in the exhibition “Portrait Bourgeois”.

The same year, the Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Brussels mounts her second solo exhibition.

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Brussels**

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Rodrigo Matheus

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Brook Andrew

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Bourg-Tibourg

Joris Van de Moortel

*Birds, Robin Hood, Acoustics,
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September - October 2016

Andres Serrano

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