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AGENDA magazine.blog

Paul Wackers

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Every week, AGENDA goes in search of the sound & vision of Brussels. This week we follow the blue tape to the temporary dwelling of American artist Paul Wackers.

Never mind the blah-blah concept. Alice Gallery wanted more, so it has just done it. As a result, Encore, located in a 1930s modernist building right next to the gallery, offers room for three apartments and a ground-floor space that can take on as many shapes (exhibition space, event venue, temporary studio) as there are ideas. And since you have to start somewhere, why not keep it close and intimate, and offer the artist currently on show at the gallery temporary accommodation in Brussels. Enter Paul Wackers: "The last four or five years, I have done about one residency every year. It's

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not something that I go out of my way to find, but every once in a while an interesting setting presents itself, so why not? It's nice to clear your head from the everyday stuff, from normal life, getting groceries and all that. It's refreshing to have to think about everything again."



It can be a temporary clean slate: let go of all your preconceptions and start anew. Paul Wackers: "You never know how a residency is going to influence you. It could just be colours or shapes, or it could bring about a greater change." Like the time he went off to work in Norway: "For some reason I wanted to start working on drawings there, but I never figured out how to do them in a way that felt comfortable. In the studio there was this closet full of extra materials that previous residents had left behind, including some ink. That's where I started doing ink drawings, which are now a big part of my work. That would never have happened if I had just been at home."

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In Brussels there hasn't been anything quite as spectacular disrupting the regular work flow of Paul Wackers, except time itself: "For the last two years, I have been working hard and continually showing my stuff. It doesn't bother me to have to produce so much in such a short period of time. I kind of enjoy it, because it forces me to stop second-guessing things and just go with it. I believe it is just a helpful way to work. But here and now I have had a little more time on my hands, and that has been really fun. When I was a few weeks into making these paintings, I realised that these are the first ones I made that didn't have a real purpose outside of my wanting to do them."

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Next to his black and white ink drawings/collages, at Alice Gallery, Wackers is presenting a new series of paintings that feel both intimate and surrealistic, with a series of whimsical and colourful objects on each meticulously composed canvas, presenting a staggeringly rich range of textures and shapes. Links to everyday reality (plants, vases, little flags, a table, a rack) provide the order and structure that leave a space for the chaotic and boundlessly creative state that painting and crafting are. Painting as a language that not only has the literal use that serves convention and communication, but also the words and phrases that whisk you off on a highly enticing metaphorical trip to the depths where art and life ferment to the stuff that dreams and stories are made of. A “New Alphabet” that is both familiar and undecipherable, that suggests common cores, but that defies easy appropriation. Paul Wackers: “I like the idea of the painting as a stage to set up; a structure I can build to make room for something really unstructured to happen, so it feels contained or believable. Once the stage is set, I let anything happen. The layering [for which he uses blue tape that he brings with him from the States - KS] is a technique that allows me to still have a very active hand while having it look very controlled and deliberate, and to force that contrast between things that seem impossibly loose and things that are so rigid. Different arrangements can change the mood or feeling. I never know where it’s going to go, but I don’t fight it.”

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“You could definitely see my paintings as explorations of weird thoughts, random moments, and connections. One thing is almost always a reaction to the thing before, so it is like a fluid movement, a stream of consciousness. What the objects and shapes mean, I don’t always know, and everyone can make up their own story, but I like to think I have a relationship with them. [*Hesitates*] There’s no reason for me to tell you exactly how everything is, that’s an annoying way to go. I didn’t like school, so I’m not going to pretend to teach you. But for me to make any of them, I need to remember how things looked, how they felt. I can put a shape down, but if I want it to be something, I need to think about what it was supposed to symbolize. They are like little characters, these things you can throw into a painting to make it into a story. That’s why ‘New Alphabet’ seemed like an interesting way to title the show. I feel like I finally maybe understand something about it all... Just don’t quiz me on that.” [*Laughs*]

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This understanding is the result of an exploration through time and space. “At first I was really exploring landscapes, great outdoor scenes filled with strange structures. Those paintings were wide open and very moody. Yeah, it’s been a journey. [Laughs] Through time, I slowly got closer and closer to my subject, and then all of a sudden I ended up inside and I started doing all these interior scenes. Eventually I got to this very singular still life, just the objects on shelves, and now I think I’m starting to pull it back again. It could have had something to do with moving from California to New York. In California I was definitely more engaged with landscape and the outdoors, because it was just there all the time. In New York, you end up living with your stuff more, you need that space. So, it has been like this weird, slow zoom in, now that I figured out what’s there, I can pull back and maybe see the bigger picture again. We’ll see, we just have to keep moving.”

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Whether he looks at the world from up close or from afar, Paul Wackers' work is so enthralling because it reveals such an honesty, towards both life and art. His paintings are monuments to the small things that might mean the world, and to the mental landscapes in which these small things can grow larger than life. "When I go for a hike, I always tend to end up with a pocket full of rocks or a weird stick, stuff like that. I have got piles of those sorts of insignificant things, as well as ceramic objects I myself or others made, all over my studio and my house. When I got here, with nothing but my brushes and my blue tape, I went to the market to get a plant and gather a few subjects. So yes, I kind of do live with the things that exist in my paintings. They are always there in the background, and they influence me when I don't expect it. If you look at the paintings I made during my stay here, that window with the curve is the window in my apartment upstairs. And that's actually the corner of Alice's apartment... All of these things creep in and become the playground for the painting. You need something, you know. If we were to rely on ourselves all the time, we would all fail miserably. There's no way we're all that interesting on our own."

All photos © Gautier Houba

Borough: Brussel/Bruxelles

Exhibition: "New Alphabet": > 24/10, Alice Gallery, alicebxl.com

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