

Geoffrey de Beer | La Frivolité de la Campagne

September 2 to October 14, 2017

Season Opening | September 1 | 17 to 21h

balzer projects is delighted to welcome Belgian artist Geoffrey de Beer for his first solo show in Switzerland. On view is an entirely new series of works, inspired by the colorful architecture of small French Alsatian villages, the “golden ratio” of traditional painting composition, the form and color theory of the Bauhaus, poetry and the quest for aesthetic excellence.

Geoffrey de Beer’s work is generally conceptual and political. His quasi-scientific methodology of strictly dispassionate experimentation and reporting is firmly situated within an institutional context and heavily extended into an institutional critique. However, his new series exhibited in Basel, breaks with previous conceptual and performance-based artistic strategies and treads radically new territory.

On view in La Frivolité de la Campagne is a completely new series of – quite simply - abstract installations with iridescent glass panels. His installations only use two types of material – glass and oak. The glass panels are placed on oak shelves as bas-reliefs. Sometimes, he installs one glass panel, sometimes two or more, some panels are smaller, others larger. In some works the glass panels are placed next to each other; in others, they are overlapping. All of them have beautifully poetic, funny, ironic, symbolic or literary titles.

Most of his work until now has been centered upon the economics of the art market, researching alternative ways to promote and sell art. In his graduation project, entitled “Artomatic”, the artist set out to challenge the art market (specifically the monopoly galleries within the city of Antwerp), with its opaque structures and processes. He was selling works of his fellow students together with important Belgian artists, such as Luc Tuymans, Jef Geys, Guillaume Bijl, Walter Swennen, but not in a gallery space, but in vending machines. The works were priced between €2 and €20, and available 24/7.

In another project aimed at de-historicizing and challenging the art historical canon, de Beer staged so-called “Art-Jacking” performances. Here, he had himself invited behind the scenes of different museums to add objects to works of other artists. In addition to starting a visual dialogue between the works, his intention was to challenge the institutionalization of art and strategies of display.

In “Avant-garde Below Zero” de Beer was marketing and selling deep-frozen artworks, traveling from door to door like a salesman in a van. His target audiences lived in very specific types of middle-class, English cottage-style family homes. After placing flyers and promotional material in these peoples’ mailboxes, de Beer and his team contacted the individuals directly to “take their orders”. The team was particularly interested in researching potential “collectors”’ readiness and willingness to “consume” art, in the same way they would consume frozen food or other daily necessities. Needless to say, that the home owners did not buy a single frozen artwork. Instead, collectors interested in contemporary art who heard about this project, expressed strong interest and were often offended that they remained excluded from the project.

Moving within the parameters of art politics and social and institutional critique, de Beer grew somewhat impatient with and tired of the process-based and research-oriented work. He increasingly felt the urge to search for “aesthetic perfection”, away from his extensive project and performance-based work. While studying sculpture at the Royal Academy in Antwerp, he took some extra courses in glass blowing and cold glass implementation techniques at the Arts and Crafts

Institute in Mechelen. It was only natural to him to start working with glass, “back to the roots”, as it were.

The artist prefers glass over any other translucent material; it is at once fragile and breakable, yet durable and sustainable. Glass does not wear easily, does not scratch or electro-statically discharge. He uses glass that is mechanically produced in the United States and shipped to the Netherlands. (Mostly, it is cut up into pieces for the production of Tiffany window decorations and lamps.)

When he started to work with glass, de Beer “discovered” that he likes to travel. As he drives to the glass factory in Zierikzee in the Netherland to pick up the panels, he travels along the sea; it is calming, inspiring and is now an essential part of his conceptual process. When visiting Basel for the first time, he travelled on the smaller roads through the French Alsace region, admiring some crazily painted houses along the streets, combinations of purple, orange, pink, green and blue. This trip not only inspired the title of his exhibition, but some of the color combination of the glass panels.

The glass panels come in infinite colors and combinations. No panel resembles another. Depending what colors and substances are mixed together, the panels have different surfaces; sometimes, they are shiny and smooth, sometimes rough and edgy, translucent and opaque. They have very sharp edges with can crack when installed. As little manipulation of the basic material and size as possible is undertaken to expose the beauty of the glass. Occasionally, viewers succumb to the temptation to touch the surface of the panels, experience the work through all different senses.

Geoffrey de Beer (*1978) lives and works in Antwerp (Belgium) and La Roche Morey (France). He graduated in 2002 from the Sculpture Department at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp. In 2010 he started a PhD in Arts entitled “The artist as a Hub-hopper” focusing on young artists’ need to network at the beginning of their career.

Geoffrey de Beer about his work:

“In my former line of work, I was questioning some of the politics and strategies of the contemporary art scene, while I was suggesting alternatives. Doing so I had to choose my methodology and aesthetic strategy to serve the storyline or the addressed topic. Now, I am coming from the opposite direction, with purely the aesthetical experience of creating in mind. There are some reappearing artistic strategies, but with a lot more poetry than irony.

When I was addressing the bigger topics in contemporary art, I was looking upon the art scene as a great cosmopolitan city with huge facades, with perfect running machines behind them. But the more I got the opportunity to look behind the facades, the more I saw, that these machines were not running all that smoothly. The facades crumbled.

After a while I started to look upon the same scene as a small village with small village problems! It was at that point when I found a pure sense of poetry on the other, smaller sides of the facade. The title “ La Frivolité de la Campagne” somehow refers to what is behind the facades of the smaller houses. It is indeed an “aesthetic escape” an escape into beauty and simplicity, but I am not running away, I am just finding an alternative path. This process is very enjoyable and there is a lot I want to learn.”