

The world of Knikov

For the past few years a monumental painting by Bob Kovel and Philip Knipscheer has hung high on the wall in Amersfoort City Hall. It is called De Staalmeesters. At least that is the name the people who work in City Hall have given this magnum opus by the artist-duo Knikov. In fact, the painting was not inspired by Rembrandt's like-named masterpiece but by a rather dreary portrait of the Cort van der Linden Cabinet that hangs in the Senate chamber. This canvas by Piet van der Hem - an early twentieth-century painter I had never heard of - was the painting Bob Kovel and Philip Knipscheer had in their minds when they decided to invite a group of teenage boys who hung around their studio at that time to pose for them. With this decision, which resulted in a painting one and a half meters high and nearly four meters wide and entitled 'View', the duo Knikov stole the hearts not only of the boys they painted but also of the City Council. The painting was purchased immediately and hung in a prominent place in City Hall. After five years of working together the Knikov artist-duo had made the definitive breakthrough to a wider public.

When Knikov came into being in 1997, both Philip Knipscheer and Bob Kovel, had already been working separately for many years as artists producing both drawings and paintings.

Philip Knipscheer graduated from the Akademie voor Beeldende Kunsten (Academy of the Visual Arts) in Utrecht in 1985; in the department of monumental design with painting as his secondary subject. Knipscheer has developed his talents not only in the visual arts but also in music (as a percussionist/composer/arranger) and in multi-media (as the producer of short films). His pre-Knikov drawings were poetic portraits of flowers. He always worked in series and in a small format. Knipscheer chose deliberately to present his work in series in order to invite the viewer to mentally link several subjects together: The drawings were assembled to create a larger piece of work that still retained the poetic character of the small format.

Bob Kovel initially studied biology and, concurrently, art history at the University of Buffalo in New York State and only later followed sculpture courses at the Claremont Graduate School in Los Angeles. When he relocated definitively to the Netherlands in 1985 he concentrated mainly on larger pieces although eventually he gained more satisfaction from drawing and painting. His sculptural background could still be seen in his pre-1997 drawings and paintings. The paintings from this period were based on prototypes from his sketchbook which were elaborated into expressive canvases. The drawings often contained areas of color over which the 'handwriting' was added with a pen or chalk. For the past few years Kovel has, in addition to Knikov, also worked as a High School mathematics teacher.

During the past twenty years both artists have been heavily involved in the Amersfoort art world. Bob Kovel was, for example, Chair of the purchasing committee of the Amersfoort art library for many years while Philip Knipscheer was involved, right from its start, with the Startgalerie for young artists and as a member of its Board of Management. My first contacts with both artists date from this time.

My interest in both artists meant that when Knikov came on the scene I was very curious to see how this collaboration would work out. What would this combination of two totally different characters produce? My misgivings were short-lived, because their first show in 1998 in gallery F 17 - a temporary gallery of fellow artist Bert Brouwer - showed very clearly that something special was happening. Working together these two artists were able to produce works of art that they could never have produced alone. That they spurred each other into fruitful production was good, but what was more important was that they inspired each other to create works with a depth they could never have achieved alone. Together they found the key that opened a new world for them: an inexhaustible source of historical, religious, cultural, but also day-to-day, images that in the ensuing years would be the basis and inspiration for hundreds of Knikov works of art. They were also driven, not by the desire to accentuate the individual quality of the two artists, but by exactly the opposite. In Knikov's view not being able to distinguish one hand from the other is good, as long as this means there is unity in the work.

In many ways View is characteristic of Knikov's style and working method. It is a portrait of ten teenage boys from very different backgrounds who are transformed by Knikov into the dignified offspring of wealthy men in an ambiance which is, indeed, half way between the early twentieth-century portrait of the Cort van der Linden Cabinet and Rembrandt's seventeenth-century Staalmeesters. It is the alienation and amazement that immediately sweeps the viewer along and then leaves only questions behind because in this painting time appears to have been truly mixed up. While the setting itself is from the distant past, the boys most definitely are not. They look cultured, self-assured and very much like 'young conservative' politicians who could quite easily soon be running the country. Then that image is put back into perspective, or at least shifted to the background by heavy chalk lines through the painting that, like window panes, divide the composition into three. As an observer you don't really belong there. When I talked to Knikov about this painting I learned that initially Kovel laid-down the division into three using large areas of color. The image of the Van der Hem painting was then projected onto this background and the heads of the Cabinet members replaced by projected photographs of the youths. Knipscheer then toiled like a monk for several months to complete the work in the fine details. At which point Kovel finally used chalk to pull back the original colored areas. This is the way it happens in many of the other works using projected images in which new objects or settings are constantly painted, or rather drawn, over the top of each other.

That is Knikov's aim: to sketch a world that is always different to what we think since not one single Knikov painting is unambiguous, or has just one meaning. The existence of multiple meanings is also reflected by the artists' working method in which the existing layer is constantly overlaid with something new. That this also results in a high degree of aesthetic quality is by no means pure chance, because Knikov apparently believes that in the final analysis the eye also wants something.

The eye does in fact want a lot from Knikov. When I talk about paintings I should, in fact be talking about drawings because that is what they are; pastel drawings on paper to be precise. But the game of playing with techniques that Knikov so enjoys playing

means the drawings look like paintings. Illusion and reality are also combined formally, due to the technique, in the painting. What is, in fact, reality and what is perception? We see a painting, but it is a drawing.

Knikov presents this dilemma very clearly in the artistic concept of the work of art and thus it appears to be an issue confined within the periphery of art. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our world is full of illusions that we accept without a second thought. You only have to look at the cosmetics industry and cosmetic surgery to see how people allow their bodies to be manipulated into the 'ideal image' specified by glamour magazines. An ideal image that has been created with the computer and Photoshop. Beauty has thus been exchanged for perception based on economic motives but, because of this, the result is only a make-believe world. And there are numerous other examples in today's society from the creators of TV programs to politicians who depend on perception and spin-doctors.

Do not think that Knikov's interpretations are only incorporated into portraits of others. In the series of paintings *At Aunt Maya's* Knikov portrays himself, or rather themselves, in a burlesque manner ('we like to make ourselves look ridiculous'). The name Maya is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Sanskrit in which it means 'veil of illusions'. The artists are portrayed as dwarves clad in far too large seventeenth-century costumes along with other elements from that period, such as the Kooiker (decoy) dog that appears in the paintings of artists such as the Spanish Velazquez. Knikov 'borrowed' this dog for the series and later, in 2003, used it as a starting point for an exhibition project in Museum De Zonnehof in Amersfoort. At the entrance to this exhibition 12 approximately life-sized Kooikerhondjes (decoy dogs) were drawn in pastels on the floor. The exhibition visitor had no choice but to walk over the drawing which, due to all the shoes, gradually faded and disappeared. This symbolized art which appears and then disappears.

Philip Knipscheer and Bob Kovel are constantly seeking new ideas and themes which they incorporate into bizarre associative images reminiscent of the cacophony of sound and images in the famous English TV series *Monty Python's Flying Circus*: sometimes there is just nothing to grasp on to. Light-heartedness and seriousness go hand in hand. Is it purely coincidental that this satirical program was conceived by a duo? In my opinion Knikov feels more kinship with *Monty Python's John Cleese and Graham Chapman*, and perhaps with musicians *Paul McCartney and John Lennon*, than with the collaborations of other visual artists. But that is another story.

This journey of exploration is, as I said, often visualized in series of drawings with a common theme. One such is *The Woodside* series, a title that borrows the name of a neighborhood in Queens, New York City - the city in which Kovel was born. This series incorporates many portraits which, thanks to the striking colors and somber, sometimes contorted facial expressions seem to depict a vision. Or the series *What Do We Do With Our Heads* in which a reference is made to the Bible story about John the Baptist's head lying on a plate. The constant factor in this series is the head of Bob Kovel. This series is also based on another, earlier series in which *Captain Nemo* - the main character in the 1969 film based on Jules Verne's book '20000 leagues under the sea' written in the second half of the nineteenth century - appears. Nemo is nobody.

Word and image is a recurring theme. Whereas in the series the titles often play a major role in the meaning of the work, in the 'Idiots' series the title is nearly as important as the image itself because it is very emphatically incorporated into the image so that the word becomes image and the image becomes word. This series, produced in 2004/2005 contains over 60 pieces and is the largest series of drawings Knikov has produced to date. At that time Bob Kovel was busy producing texts while Philip Knipscheer was drawing numerous faces. When the word 'Idiot' is combined in many different ways with the numerous faces it engenders oppressive images every one of which is unique. 'Idiot' as an onomatopoeia of the image. In every drawing the word appears to be printed and is always in the same old-fashioned Times New Roman newspaper typeface. It is the best example of Knikov's work in which the endless repetition of the given theme creates a striking total image.

Bearing in mind the large arsenal of images and ideas that Knikov has produced, for me the thought that in the near future the artists would voluntarily sever Knikov is inconceivable. They have propelled Knikov into a world in which at one moment entrancement and turmoil (the creative process) have the upper hand and the next moment control and circumspection (technical control). There is an example from the culture of ancient Greece in which Dionysian and Apollonian thinking and acting were the antithesis of each other. With Knikov this manifests itself in a thrilling interaction that explores the boundaries of the intrinsic and aesthetic quality. So far this interaction has generated hundreds and hundreds of exciting works of art during the past few years. The end is still nowhere in sight.

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