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Zander Blom



### Here be monsters

This interview begins as Zander Blom conceptualises his exhibition *Paintings and Posters* (Stevenson Cape Town, March 2018) and resumes once the show has opened. After spending more than a decade submerged monastically in abstract painting, Blom talks about figuration as a strategy towards humour and lightness – an aesthetic return to childhood wonder. In the walkabout for this exhibition he admits, ‘One of my favourite things to do as a kid was try to come up with the best monster ... let’s say lion’s teeth and pterodactyl wings, taking all the best parts of different animals to construct the most badass Frankenstein’s monsters. And when I started doing this, started going into the figurative universe, they started emerging again.’

His studio is strewn with washing lines holding crude drawings on pieces of cut-up canvas. The images depict car tyres, dinosaur appendages and reproductions of works by modernist artists. Dressed in black, covered in paint, Blom appears to be standing at a precipice, stating: ‘I’ve been looking for a way back into figuration after years of abstraction, and the only way I could find a good starting point to build a new alphabet for myself was to go back in time and into myself.’

The words ‘rules’ and ‘principles’ recur in the course of this conversation in a push-pull matrix of dogma and rebellion. Blom has a personal lexicon of marks. He lists modernist painters, art movements and schools of thought liberally. He has vandalised textbook images of Mondrian and drawn Rothko as the Grim Reaper with the assuredness of someone with a role to play in the canonical melodrama. His particular combination of devotion and scrutiny echoes that of a

protagonist in a Künstlerroman. It is without irony that he says, 'The only thing I know for sure is that I want to be an artist and make paintings.'

However, while the Künstlerroman is anchored on the artist's acceptance of his vocation in the moment of certainty, Blom has a self-awareness that leads him to reckon with his positionality and his context. He observes that his former minimalism is better suited to someone living in Munich. In this turn in his practice, the evasions of beauty are insufficient. Six years ago, in an interview with Odili Donald Odita, Blom said, 'Painting has freed me from the need to justify my practice and allows me, on a daily basis, to learn new things about myself and the world.' He now asks, 'Sure enough I'm delving deeper into my own weird brain, but is it enough? Is *this* enough?'

Sinazo Chiya:

**In your newest work, art history makes quite a playful, almost childlike appearance.**

Zander Blom:

You see that thing behind you, that weird green face with the yellow teeth?

**Oh my god! That is wild. Like a goat wizard.**

Right? The goat wizard's head is that famous Picasso sculpture of the bicycle seat. All I've done is given him a weird jungle face with yellow teeth and he's smoking a pipe that's from a self-portrait of Cézanne. The wizard hat is just a wizard hat and the palm tree is made of a Brâncuși structure. The dog hanging from the palm tree is Giacomo Balla's famous Futurist painting of the little dachshund running. In a way the goat wizard is the closest that I've come to doing something very honest. Something that resembles my memory of the murals we made at home. I've been looking for a way back into figuration after years of abstraction, and the only way I could find a good starting point to build a new alphabet for myself was to go back in time and into myself. I've dropped the belief in the transcending power of abstraction, and it feels like I don't have any rules any more. Sure enough I'm delving deeper into my own weird brain, but is it enough? Is *this* enough? [Gestures at new paintings in the studio.]

**Do you think you'd be able to recognise 'enough' if you encountered it?**

I don't know. I think I recognise 'possible' at the moment. But I don't know what to paint really. I find it incredibly difficult to

commit to something. For some reason I can commit to these dinosaur monster things at the moment.

**There's a dinosaur on your website.**

I can commit to that because it reminds me of my childhood and wanting to draw monsters. Like putting scales and claws on everything. To me that's an honest personal thing and maybe it makes sense because it's so universal. I'm cool with drawing a Brâncuși sculpture into a palm tree or whatever, but what can you draw or paint that is really worth painting?

**What keeps you wanting to be an artist?**

It goes back to my mom's desire to be in an environment with things that she made. To create your surroundings, live with what you make and enjoy that thoroughly. The thing that I enjoy is to make a room full of paintings and then have them sent away – have every single painting taken out of the room. Then you remake the environment, and it's so exciting.

**You start all over again?**

Yeah, I make a whole bunch of new paintings and the room feels completely different. I think the craziness of the work in the studio at the moment unhinges me a little, because it doesn't have any gravity. I feel a bit dishevelled, because this painting is like a disorganised desk. At the moment I want to make things that move me and dishevel me and make me feel quite crazy.

**So you're prepared to be a bit dishevelled now?**

I have to be. I can work on these new paintings very casually. I can sit and have a beer and make some drawings. I don't have to be intensely focused on making that perfect line in the corner, and stand on the ladder and bend halfway over to get the right scope. I'm buying myself a little bit of freedom; I'm allowed to be a bit dishevelled and to make a new context where the rules are looser. I'm hoping that I can build more and more things like that weird little creature [gestures to a piece of canvas] – it's almost like a cat witch.

**That's amazing. Why the animals?**

Animals are disarming. When it's humans we ask all sorts of questions that I'm not interested in.

**Then it becomes a trap of signification.**

You will remember that Okwui Enwezor took people like Candice Breitz to task for representing other people's bodies, other people's stories, other people's pain. That made a big impact on me, because as a teenager I made portraits of all different kinds of people: friends, family, strangers I met on the street, guys who worked at the scrapyard, people on a train or a bus, a barber giving someone a shave, etc. I photographed them, some with consent, some without, and then made etchings and woodcuts and paintings. Suddenly that felt so completely wrong. These people's lives were none of my business, their likeness not mine to reproduce, their stories not mine to tell. So I figured it's better to stay off that battlefield. Shortly after that I got out of figuration altogether for a very long time.

**There's safety in rats, hahaha.**

You can have spotted rats, purple and blue rats, dead rats, zombie rats. No one cares. But if you want to be in the world of people, the world of faces and identities, then you really have to know what you are doing and why you are doing it. You have to take responsibility for how you represent your subject. You enter into a contract.

### **Are you saying your abstraction is a political choice?**

One of the things I was saying to myself about the perfectly clean work I was making a while ago was that I was lying to myself about the world I live in. It would make perfect sense if I was a German artist living in Munich, but it makes no sense to be making that kind of work as a South African. But I can't make overtly political work either. On paper I'm an Afrikaans white male from Pretoria, so you have to ask yourself what you want to see from that demographic, and what you don't want to see. What picture would I choose from the newspaper to paint, and with what picture would I juxtapose it, and what would I be saying with the juxtaposition of those two images? What right would I have to say anything like that? Zanele Muholi is a perfect example of someone who ...

### **Who can say things?**

Who is who she is. Who speaks her truth. She doesn't speak someone else's truth. She doesn't say something for some opportunist reason. She is what she is and that's amazing, and the work that she's doing is amazing and necessary. There's a lot of stuff like that, but to think that everything has to be in that political realm ...

### **I feel like I understand what you mean.**

I don't even know who I'm supposed to be or what I want to do. I really don't like being an Afrikaans white male South African, but that's the position I was given. When I was younger it was easier to dismiss it, because it was the older people who were arseholes. And now it's like no, no, no, you're still the arsehole, you're not a kid anymore. Now you are just a white male arsehole. When I was younger I thought I had escaped that. Because of your position, who are you? The only thing I know for sure is that I want to be an artist and make paintings.

### **Is this an attempt at reinvention?**

Yeah. I look at Picasso and I look at Matisse and either they are painting nudes, figures holding hands, a woman and another woman, or a weird monster. So it's either figures or still lifes, or a landscape here and there, but that's it. Do I want to paint a figure? No. Do I want to paint a still life? Maybe, but not really. What would I paint a still life of? If I paint a figure what would I paint, a picture of my wife, Dom? I don't know. Do I really want to make a painting of my wife? Do I want to make a self-portrait? Who the fuck wants to see my self-portrait?

### **Take me through your process.**

I've been wanting to do work like this for a while, but the language developed through the Mondrian drawings I was doing. Only after 400-odd drawings of that sort did I develop a language that I could start bringing into painting; a way to bring that smaller scale to a bigger scale where it makes sense. You can't make the same marks with a brush and have them look convincingly awkward and crude and childlike. I'm using oil bars because they're basically big crayons. If you try and do it with the wrong medium it's not going to work, and if you

overthink it it's not going to work. Like the wing of this weird bat thing – it was a painting that I cut up because I wanted to use part of it ... Then there are three different types of canvas. One is cotton duck, one is a fine weave of Belgian linen and one is a course weave of Belgian linen. They are all primed with universal primer on one side. I work on both the primed sides and the raw sides.

### **You start by cutting the canvas shapes?**

Yes, I'll go into that room and cut random sizes of canvas off the rolls, knowing that I need to do some small ones, medium ones and big ones. Sometimes I'll have an idea of what I'm going to paint and that will help determine some of the sizes and choices, but a lot of it is random, and about having a nice variety. Most things are done with the oil sticks. I also use regular oil pastels for more delicate lines.

### **What are those piles on the table?**

I have a folder for general art history, a folder for animals, a folder for South African art history. And then I have printed-out notes of basic ideas, and long lists of things to paint. I also make PDFs that are filled with reference images from the internet that I print out and work from.

### **So you wanted your work to be more cerebral?**

More selfish. I wanted to spend less time consumed by process, and more time reading. With my previous work I just followed where the process led me. I had set up certain parameters from the outset, but the process drove itself. I didn't have to go look for new ideas in books or elsewhere, I just had to be open and

receptive to the paint and the canvas. If you pay attention to the mixing and the smearing and the scraping and the dripping and the throwing, the process will tell you what to do, where to go. It seemed to take its own road, solve its own problems. With the new work the process is no longer in the driver's seat; instead the ideas and references lead the way.

### **Are the compositions randomly arranged?**

To a large degree. The dry unstretched paintings are all over the studio in piles. I'll pick some and arrange them on a big stretched canvas on the floor. I'll move them around until it feels right and then I'll stick them down. The end result isn't really a painting in the same sense that it used to be. Now it's an arrangement of paintings on a painting. A bunch of small paintings inside a painting.

### **Quotes perhaps?**

The Pollock-like elements are not copies of specific works, but they are using his method. On the other hand, the Ellsworth Kelly and Mondrian panels are direct reproductions, but done in a method or technique quite opposite to theirs. I don't know if it would be technically correct to call these things quotes.

### **How do you find working with the canvas on the floor as opposed to upright?**

It's a bit like making pottery, where there's always an 'aha' moment at the end when you open up the kiln. With an upright painting you always see the image because our eyes are trained to understand the painting as a whole, but when it's flat on the floor I can sense that the composition works but you don't truly

see it until it's up. This stops me from being overly pedantic while I'm working on it. I'm more inclined to just fill the space with stuff until the canvas is full. It's a bit like playing Tetris.

### **So you don't miss the spills? The oil halos?**

One of the things that I wanted really badly was to make flat paintings. And halos are generally a result of thick impasto.

### **Flat how?**

Flat in the sense that it doesn't have this protruding oil paint and dripping linseed oil. It's a totally different challenge. For years I couldn't pull off a flat painting. It just never worked. What really worked was thick chunky stuff. It started to frustrate me that I wasn't able to figure out a way to make a flat painting that was compelling.

### **How do you decide when it's done and how do you decide when to start again?**

If the pieces all just fit, and there are enough elements to make it worth looking at, then I glue them all down. Sometimes once it's upright you can see that it needs something extra. In the exhibition there was a large painting where, when I finished gluing all the elements on the floor, it looked great for a day or two. But then it became clear that it needed something more. Eventually I added the flowers.

### **I know you helped paint murals and made jewellery and things in your parents' house. Are you going back to your childhood?**

I've been listening to a lot of podcasts about the illusion of agency, the illusion of free will. You are born into certain circumstances with certain genes and what you end up doing with your life is like the inevitable result of all that. You can't be other than what you're going to be. My situation was a mom who was an artist, craftsperson, jeweller, potter, painter, all of that. The way I bonded with her was through art. My parents had a small semidetached house in Strand when we were kids, and we'd repaint the outside every couple of years. My mom would paint a pot on the wall with plants coming out of it, and then a lion and birds. There was an underwater scene at the back of the house with fishes. Every room was painted a different colour; we had gold stars spray-painted on the ceilings, stuff like that. Living in that kind of environment made me realise how much you can transform your environment.

### **Do you feel like you were doomed to be an artist?**

Pretty much. So many people start doing something by getting recognition from their parents. You tell a joke at the table and your parents laugh and then you become a comedian. Also, I was bad at everything else.

### **You mentioned your mother. Tell me about your dad.**

My father came from quite bad poverty. His parents were both blind, and they had five blind children. They are from Ventersdorp, which is an archconservative little town in the middle of nowhere. His father was a piano tuner. For someone from that kind of background it was unimaginable to let your kids study art. They have to do something useful.



### Something practical.

Yeah. The compromise was that I was allowed to study design, but two years into the course I realised I did not aspire to drive an Audi and have a nice flat in Killarney. I would rather be broke and do what I want to do. I dropped out and moved to Brixton because I had a school friend whose parents bought him a house there. I rented a room in his house and just started making stuff. I organised group shows at the house with friends.

### Where did art history come in?

I think I've always felt that I needed to prove something because I didn't have a university degree. I grew up looking at Mondrian and Picasso and all that stuff because of my mom. The only thing that really interested me was art, so in the end I ended up making art about art. As I was working, I more and more wanted to get rid of the image. And obviously the more you try to get rid of the image, the more you end up with abstraction. It really made sense for me then to delve into what abstraction meant in art history, and what I can get from that history, but I also realised I could use abstraction as an alibi to escape having to be political, to escape identity politics or the body and memory and all that stuff.

### So what is next?

Maybe at some point dealing with my own time, because that's something I've really struggled with. I mean, there's a pizza in one of the drawings, and maybe a microwave or a computer screen ... I think maybe that's the way forward for me.

### A leap through time?

Yeah. Just to get with my own time and not be such a weirdo.

### **It's as if you've reached a point where pure abstraction is boring. Is the only thing available now figuration?**

That's true, and I wonder if figuration is just a rebound or if I'm actually slowly working towards a deeper figuration. Something that is deeper and more raw. I started being more interested in people like Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, Basquiat, Philip Guston, Anne Ward and Rose Wylie. Yet the simplicity of that Rothko ...

### **The transcendent power?**

Yeah, and you can find that transcendent power in a scribble. You can make something ugly, but because it's painted with a certain type of paint with a certain technique on a certain surface, and installed in a certain way, it can have that same kind of transcendent power and more.

### **Maybe because I studied art history, I still believe in resonance. As in feeling some kind of weird affinity to an image, almost physically.**

Do you mean that the object needs to be compelling? It might be a bad painting, but it has to be a good bad painting?

### **Yes, in a sense. For me that is still a guiding principle when I look at paintings. I adore Barnett Newman to this day – those lines, and that surface, and that thing beyond words. That unspeakable thing.**

I think you can't let go of beauty. Some of the perfect references for me are late Picassos, where he really doesn't care anymore.



It's some of the ugliest stuff you've ever seen, but now it's one of the biggest influences on a lot of contemporary painting. I also still believe in the idea that a painting should be completely handmade. I believe you need to limit yourself in order to do something. Because if everything is possible, nothing is possible.

**With your last show I know you were circling around the question of whether to go deeper, to refine a specific mode, or to continue the reinvention of the pathway.**

For a while my rules were 'no verticals, just horizontals', and I wanted to see if I could do that. There was a peacefulness that came with that. Then I focused on the textured blocks that I was making. But at some point I got bored of that. I kept looking at the work and saying this is cool but it's not enough. I'd have this conversation with Dom all the time. She'd say, 'oh that's beautiful', and I'd respond, 'yeah, it is beautiful, but it's not enough, is it?', and she'd say, 'yeah, it's not enough'. To be a serious artist in the time we live in, it's not enough to make a couple of blocks with a beautiful texture. The texture is just a trick.

### **End of an era?**

It's about time. I would be an asshole if I stopped here, if you know what I mean. Straight up abstract painting is not enough, and it's not really that interesting to me anymore. I have to go deeper into my own weird brain and who I am at my core. I don't think anyone really knows who they are. I mean, I'd love to have a position, to argue that I believe in this and this, and I come from this hectic place and I can tell a story. I could make that, but none of it is interesting to me. The best I can do is just delve deep into my own weirdness, and see where that can go. And I suppose that starts with doodling.