

**Leen Voet**

*April 07 – September 10, 2023*

*Curated by Eva Wittocx*

*M Leuven*

*Leopold Vanderkelenstraat 28*

*3000 Leuven*

*Belgium*

**First comprehensive retrospective of Belgian artist Leen Voet.**

**Published in conjunction with this exhibition is the first monograph (Dutch/English) on the work of Leen Voet, entitled 'For all the Cats in the World'. The book, published by Ludion and M Leuven, is extensively illustrated, with an essay by Martin Germann, a conversation between the artist and Eva Wittocx and texts by Valerie Verhack.**

Leen Voet creates series of paintings that she brings together in spatial installations. At M, she is displaying several of these groups of works for the first time. The impetus and starting point for each of the series is the specific interest of the artist in both cultural practices and elements found in her own environment. Her subjects, which include family, autonomy, religion or education, provoke reflection on power relations, social structures and artishood. Each series starts from its own logic, rules, or precepts which in turn lead to new variations and decisions. Her works challenge us to consider our affective connection with the things that surround us. How does context and expectation guide our gaze? How do we look at images? What can a painting be?

Leen Voet's paintings hover between figuration and abstraction, bringing together vibrant colours and geometric shapes in a balanced composition. Each painting stands on its own, yet takes on additional meanings through its place in the series. Throughout each series, Leen Voet explores variations and other painting styles, or plays with multiplicity, duplication and uniqueness. The spatial arrangement and the way the works relate to each other reinforce both their connection and singularity. In this exhibition, several series are brought together in a sequence of rooms, and complemented with drawings. In the tower room, the last room in the exhibition, new work is displayed.

## ROOM 1.J

### 'Alda & Armand', 2018-2019

The 'Alda & Armand' series consists of twelve large paintings, nine of which are shown here. They depict enlarged patterns of four kitchen towels. One canvas, for instance, depicts flowers with strawberries, another a corn plant with two cobs, while the third and fourth feature a hanging flower plant in two different types of colour combinations. Leen Voet made three painted versions of each of the four kitchen towels, each time a different style variation on the same motif. The first version is a faithful copy of the original towel, a reproduction that reiterates the original motifs as exactly as possible. In the second version, Leen Voet adopted a personal, characteristic style: the drawing is composed in a geometric manner and filled in with simple colour fields. The last version is painted in thick, pasty paint and features more blurred outlines, deliberately reminiscent of a more amateurish style.

Leen Voet's mother Alda was given the four towels for free at a food fair, where she was prospecting for the grocery shop she ran. In 2012, Armand, Leen Voet's father, gave the towels to his daughter as a gift, on the condition that she would make paintings of them. Which made this an informal version of the usually more formal transaction between client and painter. Although 'Alda & Armand' starts from an autobiographical transaction, none of Leen Voet's works are directly about herself. She draws on personal events to address broader themes, such as artishood, amateurism or the artist as genius. The works not only reflect on the client's role within the artistic creation process, but also raise questions about the originality or uniqueness of a painting. They also offer an overview of the stylistic possibilities of painting.

### 'Je fais ce que je veux', 2019-2021

The 'Je fais ce que je veux' series consists of six free-standing canvases, spread across the space, each in duo with a smaller work presented on the wall. The series derived from an excerpt of 'Rendez-vous avec...', a French TV programme of the 1960s. In the programme, Jacqueline Joubert, one of the first female presenters on French national television, would invite a well-known guest every week. On 9 December 1961, her guest was the then very popular comic actor and singer Bourvil. He performs, among other things, the song 'Je fais ce que tu veux'; a playful, slightly ironic song about marriage. The text reflects an extremely traditional image of marriage and family life, with all the correspondent systems, norms and expectations that accompany them and that have lasted for centuries. In the television performance, Bourvil dances humorously and theatrically throughout the set, around the presenter's chair. Joubert, on the other hand, is hardly an image of emancipation at the beginning of the song: she sits at the ready with pen and paper to jot down Bourvil's words of wisdom. Towards the end of the song, she has disappeared from the scene altogether. The decor consists of six panel doors, each decorated with its own abstract pattern. The open setting prompts reflection. Is Bourvil singing about his relationship with one partner, or with as many partners as there are doors? Or is it a direct reference to the door comedy: a light-hearted play in which the protagonists get entangled in intrigue, usually exacerbated by the various doors in the set through which characters can enter or disappear from the scene at will?

The title of Leen Voet's series 'Je fais ce que je veux' is a deliberate twist on the title of Bourvil's song. She reworked the patterns of the doors into colourful, abstract paintings. The door paintings are arranged freely within the space, as if they were active characters. Painted on the back of the doors are the long titles of the works, each one a different stanza from the song. Each door painting forms a duo with a smaller canvas presented on the wall, reflecting the classic gender roles of the married couple: a free-standing door and the figures as secondary objects on the wall. The six smaller canvases are schematic representations of Joubert and Bourvil: Joubert sitting on her chair, Bourvil moving in an expressive manner. In this way, Leen Voet seems to turn the tables: in this case, it is the people who form the backdrop, and the doors that dance through the space.

#### 'Sculpture, Wood, Anonymous' (2017)

Several series of drawings are displayed together in this room, including the series 'Sculpture, Wood, Anonymous'.

In 2017, Leen Voet started working on the series 'Sculpture, Wood, Anonymous', an open series of line drawings in watercolour on paper, sketched from observation. They represent unpainted wooden sculptures by anonymous artists or craftsmen, which Leen Voet has collected over the years. The primary colours used to paint the watercolours evoke associations with colour theories. The titles of the individual works always include the words 'wood' and 'anonymous', but each time in a different order, along with a description of what is depicted.

#### ROOM 1.K

##### 'Bert Vandael', 2016-today

Sixty watercolours are hung in a rhythmic sequence in this large, two-part exhibition space. A number of larger, colourful canvases interrupt their rhythm. With this series of paintings, Leen Voet returns to her own experiences in the traditional arts education system of the late 1980s in Belgium. She does this by means of 60 watercolours on paper that she painted at the time, as a teenager. As a pupil at an art secondary school, she took painting lessons from Bert Vandael in the fifth and sixth years. Every week, he tasked his students with painting a landscape in watercolour. With the exception of two watercolours, Leen Voet only painted natural landscapes. The two exceptions were views of factories, which were undetectable in the local landscape at the time, and which she copied from photographs. While she believed that, in doing so, she was rebelling against Bert Vandael, he responded equally positively to the more industrialised landscapes as to the natural scenes. Bert Vandael always initialled the submitted watercolours on the front or back to grade the work. She made sixty small works in total, and carefully preserved them over the years.

In this series of paintings, she adopts a systematic approach, according to a system she devised herself, translating the compositions of the watercolours into pattern drawings. She then paints them in with random colours, without any regard for aesthetics or logic. Finally, she overpaints the works with grids.

The 'Bert Vandael' series is still ongoing. In between working on other series, Leen Voet continues to work on it, with the intention of eventually placing a new work to accompany each watercolour, thus creating 60 duos. It is an immersive work, set within a frame of self-imposed rules and systems; a straitjacket that Leen Voet has put on herself.

In this series, Leen Voet reflects on the art of painting itself, the role of the patron in art, and the relationship between teacher and pupil. In addition, she raises the question of what can be considered art: is it just the recent works, made from her position as an artist? Or can these schoolworks, initially not meant to be shown, also be considered art?

## ROOM 1.L

### 'Sint-Rita', 2012-2013

The title of the installation 'Sint Rita' (Saint rita) (2012-2013) refers to the patron saint of hopeless cases and the impossible. At the same time, Sint-Rita refers to an eponymous brutalist parish church in the Flemish town of Harelbeke. In addition to this church, Leen Voet painted four other interiors of church buildings, mostly from the mid-20th century. She purposefully went to visit and photograph each of the churches because of their specific architecture. The five large canvases, presented on and nailed to wooden structures, bear as titles the name of the patron saint after whom each of the churches is named. The central feature on the canvases are church interiors. In contrast to, say, a museum, in a church one is presented with a collection of objects and details that hover on the boundary between artwork and functional utensil. Think of a candelabra, which may have historical or artistic value on the one hand, yet is simply used as a candle holder on the other.

Photographs of church interiors taken by Leen Voet formed the basis for a series of five compositions. Leen Voet reworked the photos into line drawings, which she then coloured in with bright colours, disregarding the original perspective and shadow effects in the church interiors. The paintings display both depth and flatness – a tension that is heightened by the spatiality of the installation. Although white is a colour in painting that usually evokes a source of light or refers to the spiritual, the colour does not appear in the five Sint-Rita canvases. The lightest colour Leen Voet utilises in her paintings is canary yellow: the colour that also serves as a background on the museum walls, and which, in this way, ties the works together.

Sint-Rita did not arise from a religious experience. On the contrary, Leen Voet's treatment of the sculptures both sculpturally and as painted objects stands in the way of any religious experience, reducing the interiors to spaces devoid of human presence. In this way, Sint-Rita gauges the power of an institution in relation to the individual.

### 'Marguerite', 2018

The 'Marguerite' series of drawings depicts the interior spaces of a theatre located at the very back of a plot at 72 Avenue de l'Hippodrome in Brussels. The building was designed for dancer,

choreographer and visual artist Akarova, the artist pseudonym of Marguerite Acarin (1904-1999). Since the end of Akarova's dance career in 1957, the theatre has remained inaccessible to the public. Working from that constraint, Leen Voet realised a threedimensional digital reconstruction, based on a description of the interior found in the inventory of the architectural heritage of the Brussels Capital Region, as well as an architectural watercolour drawing of the façade and aerial photos of the plot for parcel proportions.

## ROOM 1.M

'Felix', 2009-2010

The 'Felix' series consists of 774 pencil drawings on paper. For the first time, Leen Voet is presenting the entire series in an all-encompassing scenography. Felix De Boeck (1898-1995) was a Belgian painter and early representative of Modernism. After a successful early career, he isolated himself from the art world to focus on rural life and painting personal, emotive works. His view of art was very traditional, mystical and religious. He also conceived a personal mythologisation of sorts that centred entirely on himself: the isolated, genius artist.

In 2009, Leen Voet asked the FeliXart Museum – the museum which the artist himself had founded – for an inventory of all the works he had bequeathed to the Drogenbos municipality. It turned out to be a list of no less than 774 works. Leen Voet decided to recreate all of these works in pencil on paper; a task that eventually took two years to complete. The artist experienced the systematic process of copying as an experiential and critical reflection on the rigid system used by Felix De Boeck himself: a working method in which circles and intersecting lines were meant to capture the mysticism of life. The central cross in this space, acting as a carrier for the drawings, refers to this working method. However, Leen Voet only copied Felix De Boeck's compositions, not the colours or true dimensions of the works.

In the 'Felix' series, Leen Voet calls into question the idea of the genius (male) artist. The title of the series suggests a familiarity that runs diametrically opposed to the cult De Boeck had created around himself. With her self-portrait Heilig-Graf, portrait #2, the first in a new series of works, Leen Voet also deliberately positions herself in opposition to Felix De Boeck's oeuvre. The starting point was a self-portrait she made at school (Heilig-Graf Instituut [Holy Sepulchre Institute]) 35 years ago. Leen Voet depicts herself frontally and in no way smiling or idealised.

## ROOM 2.A

'Bernard, Paul & Constant', 2022-2023

For the 'Bernard, Paul & Constant' series, Leen Voet drew inspiration from three historical works in the collection of Museum M: 'Model' by Bernard Jos Van Gobbelschroy (1855-1870), 'Het Model' (The Model) by Paul Haesaert (1867) and 'Kunstenaarsatelier' (Artist's Studio) by Constant Dratz (1875-1930). They are typical 19th-century views of artists' studios, which can be viewed as (in)direct self-portraits of the artists. The painters show their studios, and similarly also their mastery as artists, as well as their social achievements. All three works present compositions in which the male painters

are given a leading role, and in which the role of women is mainly secondary, as passive models posing for the artist. In these works, no one is questioning the status of the artists, or their superiority to female models.

Leen Voet, however, does raise questions that pertain to issues such as these. In her versions of the works, she removes the painters from their studios, and schematises the space until only essential elements remain: an easel, paintings on the wall, a chair, the model. Similarly, the colours are reduced to basic colours as well: red, yellow, blue, black and grey. The dimensions of the works are larger than the originals. Leen Voet rivals the self-assured, male artists and their obvious authority. It is no coincidence that in the title of her works, she reduces them to their first names only: Bernard, Paul and Constant. This new series is exhibited in the Tower room of the museum in a way that is reminiscent of works in a traditional studio arrangement. The canvases stand against walls or lie on table-like structures. The three monochrome canvases are exactly the same size as the original canvases in the M collection.

With this new series of works, Leen Voet once again reflects on conventions and relationships in art and society, translating them into paintings that question our relationship with both the act of 'making', and the spectator's gaze as such.