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The history of painting abounds with anecdotes that illuminate not only artistic skill but the deeper enigmas of creation itself: from the illusionary contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius to Giotto's legendary freehand circle. Among these, the story of Juan de Pareja stands out: Velázquez's enslaved assistant, who, though forbidden to paint, secretly taught himself the craft and ultimately gained his freedom when King Philip IV, during a visit to the master's studio, asked to turn around a canvas and discovered Pareja's hidden work.

It is this act of reversal (the revealing of the concealed) that resonates within Tom Poelmans's exhibition *A Spirit in Painting*, in which the Antwerp-based artist presents the reverse sides of sixty-two of his own canvases. A graduate of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp (2010), Poelmans has developed a distinctive painterly voice that has evolved from a tactile, texture-based abstraction to a figurative visual language, marked by rich iconographic references and painterly wit. With *A Spirit in Painting*, he turns his practice inside out, inviting viewers to look where they rarely do: at the back of the painting.

Collectors of his work know this well: when you buy a painting by Tom Poelmans, you rarely acquire just one image. The back of each canvas often reveals a second, hidden world: extra drawings, handwritten notes, fragments of text, stickers from past exhibitions or galleries, arrows indicating orientation, and of course, the artist's signature and dates. Together, these traces form a parallel narrative: the private life of the painting, the record of its making, its travels, and its transformations.

By displaying these unseen sides, Poelmans opens a window onto the entire ecosystem of painting: its materials, its economy, its evolution. A modest, recycled wooden stretcher stands beside a gleaming aluminium frame; a double-sided, worn-out canvas from his early years hangs next to a pristine linen from the present. *A Spirit in Painting* becomes a portrait of an artist's studio over time, revealing not just surfaces but histories, habits, and growth.

This gesture also resonates with Poelmans's deep sense of playfulness, both intellectual and painterly. His studio is filled with an extraordinary collection of toys gathered over many years: objects of all materials, origins, and periods, spanning from antique heroes to medieval knights to contemporary pop figures. This collection reflects a curiosity unbounded by time or hierarchy, and a joy in connecting past and present through imagination. It is the same spirit of play that led Poelmans to embrace the invitation to show the backs of his paintings.

For the first time, *A Spirit in Painting* also highlights Poelmans's literary activity. Beyond the spirited, often humorous titles of his paintings, which reveal not only his moods but also his critical distance toward artistic trends, Poelmans writes short texts and poems. Sometimes created through collage, these writings echo the associative logic of his visual work. The accompanying publication by MER reveals this lesser-known dimension, expanding the exhibition into a dialogue between image and word, intuition and reflection.

Poelmans belongs to that distinctive breed of painters unafraid to look back. His work is filled with echoes of his predecessors; not as nostalgic references, but as heartfelt homages. It's no coincidence that he's often seen wearing a cap emblazoned with the name of a deceased painter: Van Eyck, Rubens, Ensor, Magritte, Swennen, or Giotto, Botticelli, van Gogh, Victor Brauner, Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini, Georgia O'Keeffe, Hockney...all artists who have shaped his personal and painterly genealogy.

The title *A Spirit in Painting* also gestures toward art history. It revisits the legendary 1981 exhibition *A New Spirit in Painting* at the Royal Academy in London: a show that, whether praised or criticized, reignited global debate about painting's vitality. Poelmans's response is both playful and reflective: his "spirit" is not about revivalism or fashion, but about the enduring, restless life of painting itself. An art form that refuses to die, even when turned to the wall.



KIOSK

STELT TENTOON
Tom Poelmans
A Spirit in Painting
18.10.2025 – 21.12.2025

Two weeks before the exhibition closes, on December 6, all the works will be turned around, revealing their front sides to the public for the first time. That same day marks the launch of Poelmans's new monograph published by MER. The book features front and back views of a wide selection of works, along with drawings, poems, and texts by people close to the artist, extending the exhibition's dialogue between visibility and intimacy.

Simon Delobel



Tom Poelmans (°1984) lives and works in Antwerp. His works have not been shown in the major exhibition *Painting after Painting* at S.M.A.K. Ghent in 2025 but have been exhibited at Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels, Belgium; Anna Zorina Gallery, New York, NY USA; Plus-One Projects, Antwerp BE; Andrea Festa Fine Art, Rome, Italy; Ballroom Project, Antwerp, Belgium; Jack Barrett Gallery, East Hampton, New York, NY USA; the White Whale Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium; The Cabin, Los Angeles, CA USA; SecondRoom, Antwerp, Belgium; Garage, Mechelen, Belgium; DMW-Artspace, Antwerp, Belgium; Base-Alpha Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium; SVA, New York, NY USA; and Be-Part, Waregem, Belgium.

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