

The central element of Jef Geys' (b. 1934) second solo exhibition at Galerie Max Mayer consists of eleven paintings from the workshop of the Belgian painter Martin Douven (1989 – 1973).

In the late 1920s, the self-taught artist Douven began to sell pictures he painted himself to furniture shops in his area. After the Second World War, the business from Leopoldsborg grew to 200 employees and produced up to 6000 paintings a week on the production line. These were exported worldwide and sold at comparably low prices according to the subject, dimensions, and quality of the execution, and also sold to retail chains such as Woolworth. Even the frames were independently produced. Jef Geys first came into contact with Martin Douven's work while he was at school with one of Douven's sons in Leopoldsborg. As the son started to work at the family painting factory, Geys was beginning his studies at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp. Even back then, he was already interested in the fundamental workings of images: what makes them attractive? And for whom? What role do factors, such as composition and color, grounding and framing, play, as well as the signature and the context in which it is presented? By initially overpainting them with black, he began an artistic and analytical study of pre-existing paintings, trying to expose their gravitational centers of attention. The paintings in the exhibition were also painted over by Geys. This time, however, he has added an image of a sculpture by Claes Oldenburg into these paintings in a similarly serial fashion. Whilst Oldenburg's mass market products from the consumer world, in this case a simple garden spade, are aesthetically transposed into the supposedly separate world of art—and not without a very specific form of added value—Geys brings Oldenburg's sculptures into Douven's works, which in turn are mass market products from the consumer world, but are also works of art. In this way, he shows the lack of definition of categorization and evaluation systems within social communities.

In the exhibition ten of Douven's paintings are shown, each before a variety of generic contemporary wallpapers, as well as with a bolted down chair. These wallpapers are analogies for aesthetic mass production, which in its commodity form and exchangeability is used to construct private, supposedly unique living spaces. The fabrication of the individual, this readymade character in the construction of private space, also depicts the fragility of drawing a clear border between this and public space. The question ultimately arises as to what extent our own subjectivity is also tailored by the manufacturing conditions of our society. The chairs also cross between categories in the same way: while these are initially mass market products, through the artist's vivid red, blue, and yellow markings they become works of art in the context of the installation. This type of marking, which works as a kind of seal, is also used in the artist's bubble paintings, which include the eleventh painting in the exhibition from Douven's workshop. These works are enclosed in bubble wrap and thus made into containers, which not only carry earlier works within them, but also

bear traces of their own transportation, exhibition, and storage. As a result, the question of the work's essence is directed outwards: for the essence lies neither in the painted picture nor in its packaging, nor in its own history, nor solely in the context of its exhibition. Rather, the work is constituted at exactly the place where all these aspects, each originating from different spheres, come together in a moment of overlap.

Roy Huschenbeth

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