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# SABATO

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A look inside the new  
artist's studio and  
Art Advisory\_Services  
showroom of  
JAN DE COCK





**‘I WANT  
BRUGES TO  
RELIVE A  
RENAISSANCE’**





Since 'tradition is the only way to innovation'  
Jan De Cock established his artist's studio, art-advisory  
office and art school in the heart of Bruges. In his  
bourgeois mansion along the canals he is reliving a  
renaissance. Sabato visited the 'master sculptor' who  
likes to call himself 'the last Flemish primitive'.  
'I am the greatest image maker of my time.'

TEXT: Thijs Demeulemeester PHOTO: Alexander D.Hiet

**A**re you coming by train? Take the free shuttle at the station. It stops at the place with my teacher's Statue, Jan Van Eyck. "From there, my Bruges Art Institute is within walking distance. The Spinolarei is still peaceful early in the morning. Two Japanese tourists are just making a selfie along one of the most beautiful parts of Bruges when we ring the doorbell of Jan De Cock. Or better: with 'master sculptor Jan De Cock', as he likes to call himself. Because nobody seems to answer immediately, we peek through the high windows. The window sill inside looks like a shop window covered with a book about the Flemish primitives and a lot of catalogues about the Brussels artist Constantin Meunier. Next to a 19th-century group of wooden sculptures of three women from Bruges are colourful skulls from Mexico. A wink to 'Bruges-la-Morte', the name of Bruges since Georges Rodenbach's novella from 1892?

#### BAUHAUS SPIRIT

Jan De Cock (43) still seems to negotiate with a client upstairs, an art collector from Loppem. His artist's studio in Bruges also serves as a gallery showroom and office for art advice. That is why Roel Vandermeeren is answering the door. He is the first pupil at the Bruges Art Institute, a training during which 'master De Cock' is taking artists - for the time being free of charge - under his wings. 'Jan gives me feedback on my work. He wants to share his knowledge and experience. But he also takes me to meetings with collectors which allows me to get also acquainted with that part of the art scene.' There are no classic school desks in the Bruges Art Institute: De Cock would rather like to go back to the old master-apprentice relationship.

Also back to tradition and craftsmanship, because he thinks they might become lost.

Roel is his first apprentice, but he soon would like to have a group of twelve around him. No longer 312, as in his Brussels Art Institute.

This multidisciplinary art training in Bauhaus-spirit began in 2013, but the collaboration with the non-profit association Sint-Lukas Brussel failed completely. "Everybody thought I was personally in need of money, but this is not true. Sint-Lukas decided to become a domain school with nursery and primary education, causing my elitist avant-garde institute to lose its value. The culture interested in making strong images did not exist any longer. I even got complaints from parents because the Venus of Milo in the drawing class did not have any clothes on.

I decided to get rid of my former paper factory of 3000 square meters, purchased in 1995. The studio was sold for 1.45 million euros, followed by three other buildings. An adieu to Brussels, but with a nice piggy bank to reinvest.'

#### THE FACTORY

De Cock has been working in all serenity on his visual oeuvre over the past few years. He did this from the cities Bruges and Ivrea, north of Turin. There, in Piedmont, he found a former Marxer-Olivetti factory, a brutalist pearl by the architect Ernesto Gomez Gallardi. A few kilometres further on, he moved into a 19th-century Palladian villa, where he also established an Art Institute 'Studio Torino', an exhibition room and a studio. 'I chose Bruges for its history and beauty. And because the city is close to Knokke. Mike D'Hooge, a real estate agent from Heist, recommended this building to me', says De Cock while descending ➞

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A great many interiors in magazines are completely staged. But this is who I am," says Jan De Cock. Every book, work of art and piece of furniture in this house has its fixed place and specific meaning for my oeuvre.





**'I am signing my new work with my full name for the first time: Jan Frederik De Cock. My mother will be pleased about it.'**





**‘In the art market there is an ever-increasing group of buyers with more money than ever before. But unfortunately, also with little or no taste.’**

**‘I want to get away from the suffocating capitalist system of galleries and auctions that ruined the art world.’**

the stairs to welcome us. ‘This is where a new hotel was originally supposed to come. Renovation and restoration had already been started, but then the permit was revoked. Mike, who is now in charge of the general management and is responsible for the sale, knew I was looking for such a building.’

De Cock may have moved from the national capital to a provincial capital, but he certainly has not lost his ambition and grandiloquence: ‘Bruges is a city of art in hibernation, a city I would like to revive anew. I can, because I am one of the greatest image makers of my generation. Andy Warhol founded his Factory in 1962 in a deprived area of New York. I am determined to stimulate the art scene in Bruges. Bruges ‘European Capital of Culture’ approved the ‘Concertgebouw’ in 2002, but since then the city has been stuck in a long hibernation’.

#### TATE MODERN AND MoMA

The Cock forces us - in his known bossy way - to enter the vaulted 13th-century cellars under his 18th-century building. ‘This is my Art Cave: an open depot with my studies and models, but also with older works of art, for example from the period when I exhibited in Tate Modern (2005) in London or MoMA in New York (2008). Among the sculptures we also discern Renaissance furniture, 16th-century Spanish chairs and folk carvings from the Black Forest. ‘Before I became a master sculptor, I had already been a master woodworker. Did you know? I can carpenter staircases and bookcases. I have those skills. With that technical know-how I started to make installations in chipboard at the time. Tradition is the only way to innovation,’ explains the artist.

‘Nothing is just randomly located in the basement here, because chaos is always orchestrated. The question now is: is this an interior because there are chairs and tables? Or is it still a total installation by Jan De Cock? Where does the work of art begin and where does the interior design end? This basement must become a space for experiment and research. I am still carpentering a bar with the aim to organize lectures and concerts here as well. It will be an underground place in Bruges, which I will call ‘The Resistance’. The Resistance starts here.’

#### NEW TRADITION

The question is: what does he want to oppose to? To the Belgian capitalist gallery circuit from which he withdrew? And is it not inappropriate to preach avant-garde from a bourgeois mansion in one of the most idyllic places in Europe? I have been making monumental sculptures for twenty years, but those ‘Denkmäler’ have largely been demolished. I have been a communist street artist for six years, who simply gave his sculptures away. Today, I am making art in a house-room format for eternity. Yes, I have

become a bourgeois who likes to play golf. But by moving to Bruges, my oeuvre has also changed dramatically. My spaces here are more compact, so I am reducing the scale of my work. I can no longer make two-ton sculptures here, they would sink through the parquet. Here, I have a studio for smaller collages and drawings. There is also a framing room where I create my own frames. Furthermore, there is a studio where I paint nature and mountains in Turner’s style. And a smoking room where I only listen to music, smoke cigars and write manifests’.

He has only lived here for a year and a half, but Bruges and its heavy art history are already seeping in. Even more so: Without apparent shame or embarrassment De Cock lately likes to call himself ‘the last Flemish primitive’. Strange, because how is being the last an avant-garde move? Who wants the work of an epigone? ‘When you are the last, you are always at the beginning of something new. I still have the craftsmanship of the Flemish primitives, but I am with both feet firmly standing in a new era,’ explains De Cock. I want to go back to the roots of form and colour. Let me start a new tradition: back to drawing, modelling, painting and photographing. I find myself in a phase of my life where I want to bring back to life everything that was thought to be dead. Including the old, middle-century Bruges’, he says.

#### JAN FREDERIK

De Cock is effectively returning to techniques from the ‘Flemish Primitives’ era. He recently started experimenting with frescoes. He frames his abstract landscapes as classical triptychs à la Van Eyck. And he also observed the way how Joachim Patinir (1480-1524) compiled his landscapes based on various sceneries from his many travels. ‘He did paint to reality, but his landscapes are an illusion and a pure construction of time and space. In doing so, he laid the foundation for the media

such as photography, collage and film. Rogier van der Weyden (1400-1464) was also such an innovator in that field. He sometimes combined different phases of Christ’s life in one painting or multi-panel. In my work that idea of the passage of time, sequence and framing is also crucial. In my triptychs, for example, I incorporate different views of the same mountain, always painted at different times of the day.

The fact that De Cock suddenly started making almost abstract mountain landscapes has everything to do with the proximity of the Alps in his studio in Piedmont. ‘A recent series of paintings I call ‘Jan Frederik De Cock passing the Alps’. For the first time, I am signing them with my full name. My mother will be pleased about it.”

#### TAVERN TABLE AS STAGE

The change of name is perhaps symbolic of the

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The artist's studio of Jan De Cock is located in the Spinolarei in Bruges. 'This place was originally meant for a new hotel.'





creative renaissance De Cock has ended up in since he left Brussels. 'It has been a very intense period. Whereas everyone thought I was beaten, I continued to work very hard,' says the artist.

His studio is indeed full of new work, which hardly anyone has seen before. 'Currently, I am also working on the catalogue of my first mid-career retrospective exhibition, together with Professor Jae Emerling of the University of North Carolina in the US,' he claims. 'In Europe, we are aiming for the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.'

If we browse through the dummy catalogue, we mainly see work from the past difficult transit years. In four chapters he collected no less than 832 new works: many photos, sculptures and paintings, but also posters for fictitious auctions at Christie's or Lempertz. 'My reaction to the problems of the capitalist art circuit,' he says. It causes artists to come under enormous pressure. There are also less and less good artists. On the art market there is an ever-growing group of buyers with more money than ever before. But unfortunately, also with little or no taste.'

De Cock clearly continued to sculpt as well, although no longer with chipboard as in his early years. Fragments of those early architectural installations can still be found in his basement. In his house, the material still appears in self-designed libraries, pedestals and lampshades here and there. And it is also incorporated in this sculpture,' says De Cock. 'The pedestal is an antique 16th-century inn table. I made a model of an illusory landscape on it. With organic forms that refer to archetypes like the cave or cavern. And with geometric elements in chipboard.

The house is not decorated, but directed. The works of art and interior objects are an overall installation, full of references to the artist himself. 'You are walking here in my person,' Jan De Cock.





Between the arcades, columns and other architectural references I incorporated a sculpted head of Saint Sebastian in unbaked clay: a new element in my oeuvre too. The sculpture is like a theatre on a stage.'

The fact that a painting by Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) is hanging in the same room is no coincidence: the Italian combined - as in De Cock's sculpture - realistic architectural elements with an odd theatrical setting. The portrait of Jean-Luc Godard on the same wall was also well-chosen. In his montages, the French director plays with time and space in such a way that you can feel the film maker's hand at all times. 'You are not watching a film, but a Godard,' says De Cock. And we get the same idea when we are walking around in De Cock's interior: this place is not decorated, it is directed. The artworks and interior objects are an overall installation, full of references to Jan De Cock himself. This interior is a self-portrait in colours, art, furniture and ideas. This is me. You are walking here in my person, Jan De Cock. I am my home, I do not pretend,' he says. 'Many magazine-interiors are completely staged. But this is who I am. No, I did not get any flowers for the photo: they are here because I am working on flower still lifes. And I did not have a quick drive to Tasschen Bookstore to buy 10 meters of arty books to fill my library. Every book, every work of art, every piece of

furniture has its place and its meaning for my oeuvre. Everything is interlinked. The house is a pedestal for my life and work: the two coincide here.'

#### CARPET FULL OF STAINS

He calls it a 'self-portrait', but both the medieval cellar and the house itself are also an exhibition room and showroom, where De Cock puts his work for sale. 'The gallery of the future is the authentic artist's home', he believes. 'I started Jan De Cock Art Advisory Services here, together with the architects Katrien Cammers and Sofie Delaere. There is a need for people like us who have different views on reality and beauty. I am looking beyond the ravages of time. We do indeed sell works of art, but we also guide people who are in pursuit of a bookcase, table or pedestal by Jan De Cock. This morning a lady was here who was interested in my Tate Carpets. Those carpets are actually 2D versions of the monumental sculptures I made in Tate Modern. That series of carpets is lying in this house, but they are full of paint splashes from the many masterpieces that I have already painted here. I tried to explain to her that those carpets full of stains are much more valuable,' says De Cock. 'I am also selling my own work directly here for reasonable prices, because there is no mediation

of a Belgian gallery anymore. I want to get away from the suffocating capitalist system of galleries and auctions that ruined the art world. For the first time after 25 years. I have got to the point where I have reached my mastery. I can manage. From now on I will do it my way.' S



Jan De Cock does no longer create monumental 'Denkmäler', but art in living-room format 'Yes, I have become a bourgeois.'