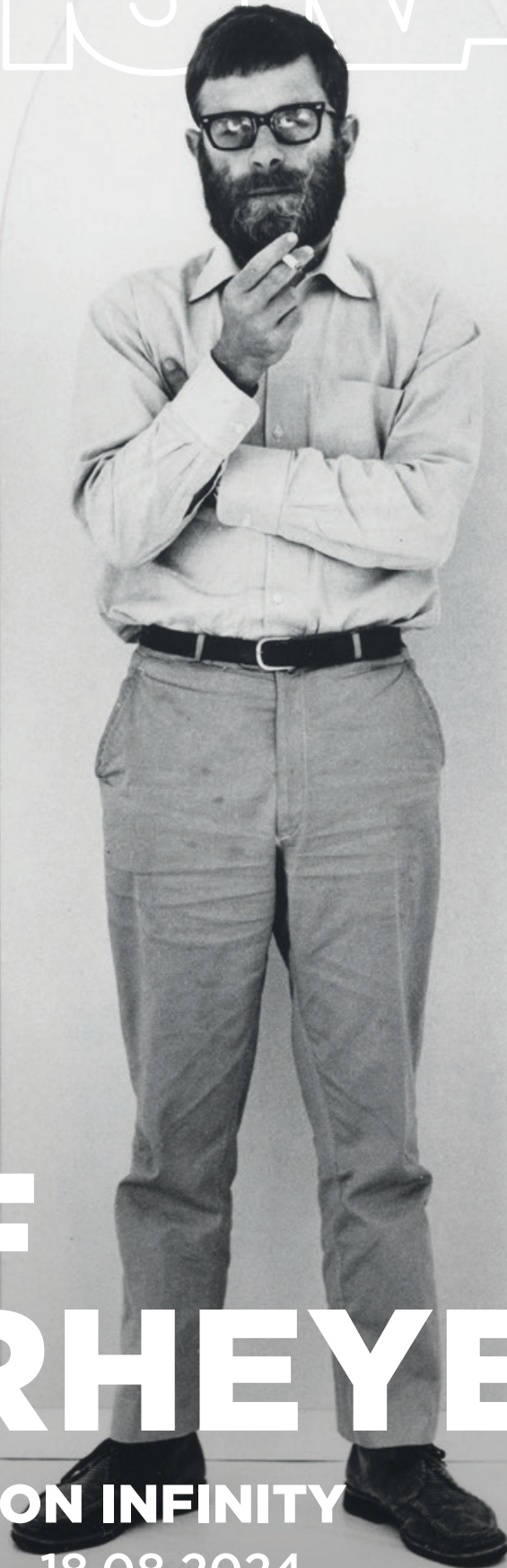


MMSWA

in cooperation with

M HKA



JEF VERHEYEN

WINDOW ON INFINITY

23.03.2024 - 18.08.2024

Filip Tas, Jef Verheyen in front of his work 'Lichtkathedralen', 1967, Collection FOMU Antwerpen. © SABAM Belgium 2024.

JEF VERHEYEN

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So important to the European art world and yet relatively unknown in Belgium: Flemish artist Jef Verheyen (1932-1984) returns to Antwerp. Forty years after his death, the KMSKA presents the first museum solo exhibition of this illustrious modern master in his hometown. A first.

Jef Verheyen. Window on Infinity closely traces the evolution of this modern master. We see how he makes the move from experiments in ceramics to painting, ever expanding the medium. In light and dark, in form and colour. New archive research reveals how Verheyen bridges the gap between tradition and innovation, between painting and conceptualisation, between present and future. In search of the essence, ad infinitum.

A quest that remains relevant today. Therefore we don't just place Verheyen's works in dialogue or confrontation with his predecessors and contemporaries, but also with contemporary artists. Prestigious loans from the Yves Klein Foundation, the Uecker Archiv and the Fondazione Lucio Fontana, among others, will enhance the exhibition and place Verheyen in an international context.



Jef Verheyen holding *Le Vide (The Void)*, Collection FOMU Antwerpen
© SABAM Belgium 2024, photo Gerald Dauphin

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Time and again, Jef Verheyen explores the boundaries out of his need to find the essence of painting. In thin layers of paint, he pushes his painting medium to the limit. Verheyen masters his technique to perfection. It is hard to figure out how he is able, using brushes, to paint those (semi)transparent layers without traces of brushstrokes.

Inspired by the first images of the universe, he creates his own limitless cosmic spaces, that are never completely black. He lets the light break across his canvas in a rainbow of hues. And sometimes he plays a game with the void, framing it. Literally, in the field. It is a thread that runs through his career: directing windows on the infinite, on space. Anything to make us look differently, and see more. And let that be the very motto of the KMSKA.

Jef Verheyen has other ties to the museum. In 1979, he curated the *ZERO Internationaal Antwerpen* exhibition at the KMSKA. In the following years, the museum acquires several works by members of the ZERO movement, often from the artists themselves, including Verheyen. This ensemble is the last that as a whole was given a place in the museum's collection. At the same time, this ZERO collection includes the largest number of international names, such as Lucio Fontana and Günther Uecker, Verheyen's friends.

The Jef Verheyen Archief found its home at the Centrum Kunstarchieven Vlaanderen (CKV) in the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA). From the letters, diaries, essays, manifestos, Verheyen clearly emerges as a bridge builder. Someone who embraced the (Flemish) art tradition to lead it into a new era of a more conceptual art. With great love for the craft of, for example, Jan van Eyck, of whom the KMSKA owns two works. At the same time, the painter considers the idea more important than the execution. *Jef Verheyen. Window on Infinity* shows the usually underexposed conceptual aspects of Verheyen's art, through which he acts as a linking figure between the KMSKA and the M HKA, between past and innovation.



Jef Verheyen in his studio with the work *Metaponte*,
photo Lothar Wolleh © Lothar Wolleh Estate

Jef Verheyen. Window on Infinity

is a collaboration of two Antwerp partner museums, Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA) and Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA).

This exhibition is the result of extensive research by M HKA in collaboration with the Jef Verheyen Archief.

Curators:

Adriaan Gonnissen (KMSKA) &
Annelien De Troij (M HKA)

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Jef Verheyen, *Untitled (Dish)*, 1955, collection Jef Verheyen Archief © SABAM Belgium 2024, photo Jan Liégeois

CERAMICS

Anyone who has already seen work by Jef Verheyen will remember large surfaces in black, red or very light hues. Verheyen took the step towards abstraction via less obvious paths. The artist enjoyed classical training in all the fine arts at the Antwerp Academy and the HISK. But it was in the ceramics studio of sculptor and academy tutor Olivier Strebelle (1927-2017) that Verheyen realises which art path is to become his own. His later wife Dani Franque too sees the artistic potential of ceramics. Together they head to Vallauris, the ceramics centre par excellence at the time, in 1953. The ceramic work of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), among others, leaves a lasting impression on Verheyen, while he is also able to exhibit his own work there. The artisanal aspect of ceramics enchants the young artist as an alternative to the soulless mass production that boomed in the 1950s. *Jef Verheyen. Window on Infinity* opens with these lesser-known origin stories in ceramics, by both Verheyen himself and Franque.

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Jef Verheyen, *Untitled*, 1958. S.M.A.K. © SABAM Belgium 2024, collection S.M.A.K., long-term loan Collection Flemish Community, photo: Dirk Pauwels

A WORLD MAP OF INFLUENCES

China opens a new portal for Jef Verheyen. Especially in the Guimet Asian museum in Paris in 1953, he discovers monochrome painting and ceramics from various dynasties. For the exhibition, some of these pieces will travel to the KMSKA. The artists of these works deliberately did not add colour and left parts unpainted. The absence of colour leaves room for contemplation. Verheyen also finds this way of thinking in Taoism and Zen Buddhism. Emptiness, and the monochrome, thus gently seep into his work.

Verheyen's ceramic studio is full of clippings and photographs that read like a world map of influences. In addition to his fascination with China and the East, photos show traditional rock drawings and masks from Central and West Africa. Looking beyond cultural traditions in search of archetypal forms is a crucial point of departure for Verheyen. At first, Verheyen translates these interests into his ceramics. From 1957, we first see circles, rings, crescents, and spheres in his early paintings. As a source of inspiration, we may as well count young American painting with its abstract expressionism. Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) is also inspired by the Eastern tradition of painting while standing, with the support on the ground, as if creating calligraphic marks.

**“Both in the ceramics and in my paintings,
I tried to achieve a kind of ‘essence’ beyond the formal.”**

Jef Verheyen

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THE LAST MODERNIST

The KMSKA presents Jef Verheyen as one of the last modernists. As with many major crises, World War II represents a turning point for the arts. Verheyen and other artists of his generation ponder the question: what is the essence of art? They think conceptually about art history. A desire grows to drive art forward, without necessarily rejecting the past. It is about breaking down the partitions between disciplines. Many of his contemporaries left painting while Verheyen persisted in painting. He feels akin to the pursuit of the conceptual, but at the same time cherishes a great love of craft. Yet Verheyen is a child of his time. The idea of what painting can be has changed fundamentally. Verheyen evolves through monochromy into artless art. By painting without brushstrokes in vaporous layers, he deliberately directs the viewer's gaze beyond his paint to the light, to infinity. You have to look past the flat surface, actually look through it. Into the void. Into transcendent space. Through the surface as a window to infinity, Verheyen conceptualises painting, and space.

“I paint in order to see.”

Jef Verheyen

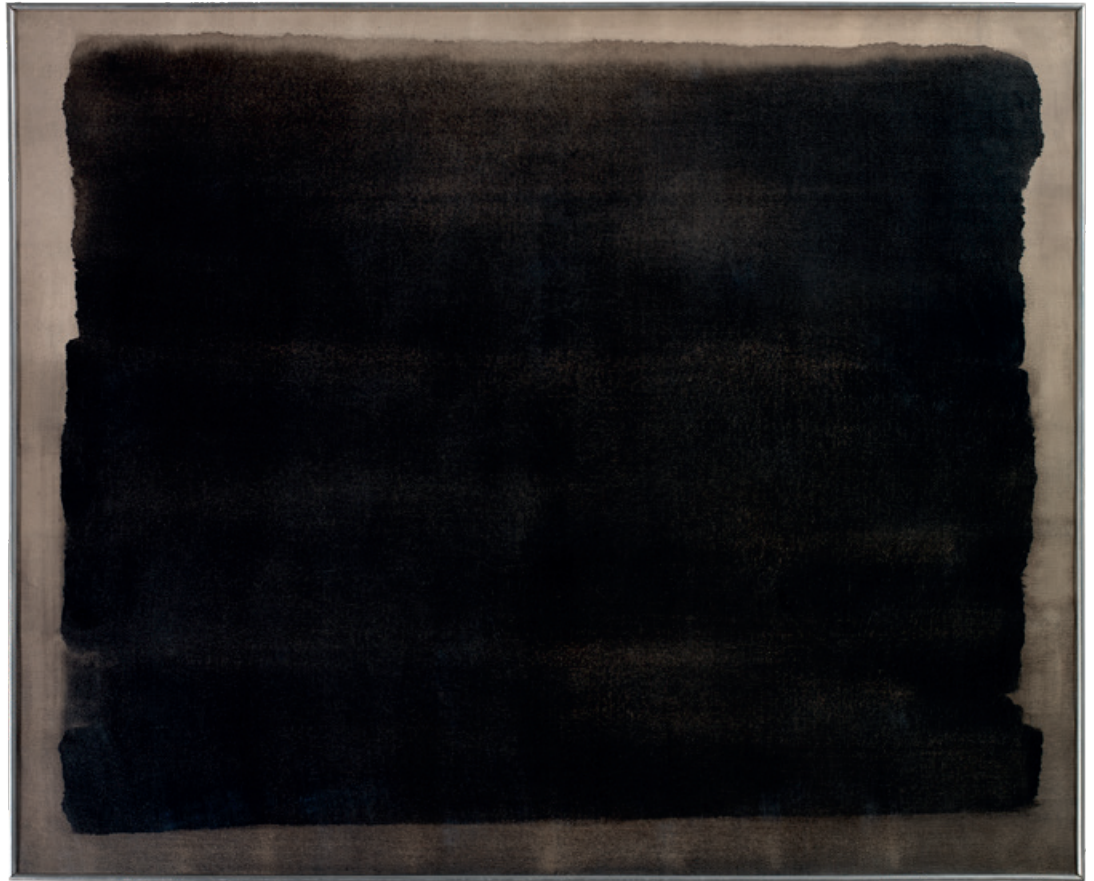
MONOCHROMY AND IDENTITY

Nineteen fifty-seven is the year of the big watershed. Verheyen travels to Milan, where he meets Lucio Fontana (1899-1968), the Argentinian-Italian painter, sculptor and theoretician. Verheyen finds in Fontana and his *Concetto Spaziale* a soulmate in the exploration of the spatial aspect of art. As early as 1946, in *Manifesto Blanco*, Fontana advocates a different way of dealing with time and space. Fontana is a lot older than Verheyen, but the two share the same wavelength, according to the letters they write to each other. In Milan, Verheyen also forges links with artists Roberto Crippa (1921-1972) and Piero Manzoni (1933-1963). The impact of Manzoni's achromatic art on Verheyen's own work is not long in coming. His labyrinthian, cosmic paintings give way to pure monochromes, painted with one colour, a new kind of essence. The black monochrome painting *Le Voile du Mystère* (The Veil of Mystery; 1958-1959) is a key work in that development.

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Jef Verheyen, *Le Voile du Mystère (The Veil of Mystery)*, 1958-1959 © SABAM Belgium 2024, foto Dries Van Den Brande...Jef Verheyen Archief

In the eyes of his Milanese friends, Verheyen is a 'real Flemish artist'. That international élan of the Flemish art tradition is a revelation for Verheyen. He already adopted the glacis technique from Jan van Eyck (1390-1441). With the slogan *Does universality lie in tradition?* Verheyen and Englebert Van Anderlecht (1918-1961) even establish the New Flemish School in 1960. In doing so, Verheyen tries to make Antwerp a kind of hotspot of the international avant-garde. On the other hand, he starts to give his paintings titles like *Vlaamse Aarde* (Flemish Earth) or *Espace Flamand* (Flemish Space), with which Verheyen seems to find a way to deal with his identity as a Flemish painter. Again, these are more about an idea of Flanders, as he finds it in landscapes by Constant Permeke (1886-1952) for instance, rather than being observations of a particular place.

“Black has always seemed more material to me than white. Black is thus matter itself. White is un-matter separate from matter. Matter-free. Complete space. Black is a dead colour.”

Jef Verheyen, 1959

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Jef Verheyen, *The Morning of the Magicians*, 1979, collection Jef Verheyen Archief
© SABAM Belgium 2024, photo Jan Liégeois

MOTION AND COLOUR

Monochrome painters believe that pigments by themselves can suggest movement. Pollock has to sway his brush to obtain movement. Verheyen, Yves Klein (1928-1962) and co take a different approach to 'movement'. Standing in front of a work by Verheyen, it seems as if particles, like clouds, seem to slide gently by. It is a kind of static movement, generated by paint and technique. Verheyen recognises an echo of this in the *colour fields* of Mark Rothko (1903-1970).

From the early 1960s, Verheyen integrates more colour and light. Let a prism refract the light and you will see a spectrum of colours. The artist believes that you don't necessarily have to paint that whole spectrum to create the illusion that those missing colours are present after all. Panchromy, as it is called. All the colours between black and white appear in elusive arcs of light and sun, rain and moon arcs, sometimes in diamond shapes, sometimes in a composite composition. In crystalline colours, Verheyen paints homages to Claude Monet (1840-1926) and Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), two kindred seekers of light. Verheyen's light is again more of an idea, a sensibility, than the light he sees from his studio window, which makes him an abstract artist. He refers to James Ensor (1860-1940), who in a late phase of his life made drawings and paintings in very light pastel tones.

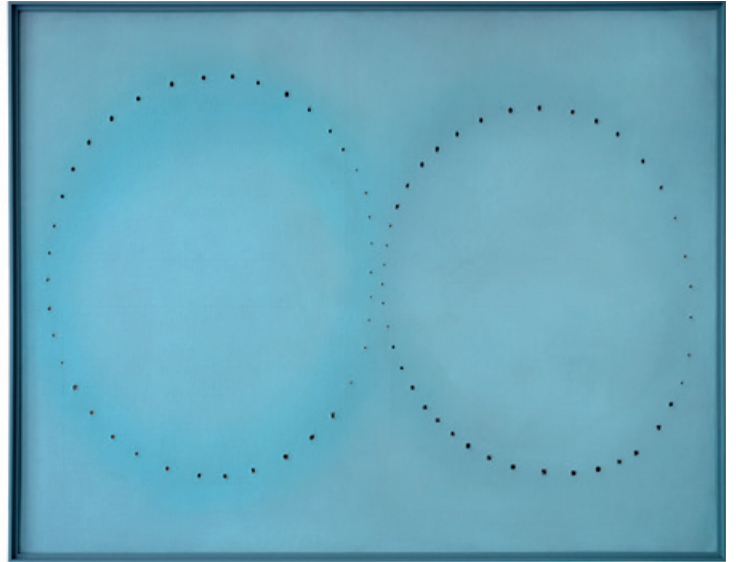
**“The impressionists see light first, then they feel;
I feel first, then I see. I believe Monet identified
himself with pure colour.”**

Jef Verheyen

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Jef Verheyen & Lucio Fontana, *The Dream of Möbius*, 1962, collection Archive Jef Verheyen
© SABAM Belgium 2024, photo: Jan Liégeois

ZERO AND COLLABORATION

With his exploration of the phenomenon of 'light', Jef Verheyen connects with the ZERO movement in Italy, Germany, Switzerland, France and the Netherlands. Verheyen in the field of painting, while ZERO artists work with lamps, reflectors and mirrors.

Despite the difference in artistic practice, Verheyen finds companions in the movement to collaborate with in multimedia. He reveals himself as a curator and engages his international network for total concepts in which craft, science, art and architecture merge. Jef Verheyen helps put post-war Antwerp on the map as a European avant-garde centre, alongside Milan, Paris, Düsseldorf and Amsterdam.

Fontana, Van Anderlecht and Hermann Goepfert (1926-1982) are the ideal partners who put their shoulders to the hybrid art forms. Within the group of ZERO artists, it is mainly with Günther Uecker (°1930) that Verheyen builds a close friendship. Fraternally, they organise the open-air exhibition *Vlaamse Landschappen* (Flemish Landscapes) in the countryside in Mullem in 1967. The duo places a large window frame in the landscape to direct the gaze to the sky, as a tangible window to infinity. It is the complete dematerialisation of art, and one of the most conceptual interventions of Verheyen's career. It does not end with this performance. The artist also creates small versions with titles like *Le Vide* (*The Void*) and *Le Plein* (*The Full*), and integrates the "delimitation of nothingness" into his painting.

**“A window placed in the right way can hold
more mystery today than a thousand candles
and two statues of Christ.”**

Jef Verheyen

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Jef Verheyen, *Diamond I Floating Space*, 1984, collection Jef Verheyen Archief
© SABAM Belgium 2024, photo: Axel Vervoordt Gallery

CATHEDRALS OF LIGHT AND GEOMETRY

In these fertile 1960s, after experimenting with archetypes, colour and light, Verheyen refocuses his gaze on shapes. He introduces tondos, round paintings, which in Italian art history are mounted higher than classical paintings. At the same time, the circle is an infinite form, which also has symbolic value in the East. With a triptych like *Lichtkathedralen* (Cathedrals of Light), Verheyen unites his research into colour, light and (the Gothic) form.

'Decreasing light is increasing darkness', and vice versa. For Verheyen, day and night are like the respiration of the world, which he wants to represent. Natural phenomena and the basic elements earth, air, fire and light become his alpha and omega. From these basic elements, he even distils an experimental film, an early artist film, *Essentieel* (Essentially) which has a place in the expo. Meanwhile, Verheyen continues to search for the light that changes everywhere. It leads him away from the Flemish landscape to Brazil, Mexico, Spain, Italy. Finally, in 1974, he moves from Antwerp to Provence.

In mathematics and Greek philosophy, Verheyen again finds a basis for harmony and the ideal space, Basic geometric shapes or perspective lines are the foundations of Verheyen's later paintings. Between 1980 and 1984, he transformed, among other things, diamond-shaped mirrors into trompe l'oeils. The shapes seem to float in an unlimited space, like a window on infinity. And so, everything comes full circle.

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A LEGACY FOR THE PRESENT

Verheyen explored a different way of experiencing art that seems obvious today. But is it? How do artists today deal with the infinite, light or colour? Ann Veronica Janssens, Kimsooja, Pieter Vermeersch and the duo Carla Arocha-Stéphane Schraenen take up the challenge with dynamic light installations or mirror paintings. Like Verheyen, they break through the boundaries of painting to stimulate the visitor's visual amazement.

PROGRAMME

KMSKA is organising a range of activities as part of *Jef Verheyen. Window on Infinity*. During several late-night openings of KMSKA LAAT on Thursday, musicians will engage with the music Verheyen loved. Creative minds can get to work during various workshops for adults. During guided tours without reservation, you and a museum guide will discover the expo as a captivating play of light and dark, shape and colour. On 13 April, we invite everyone to take a slower approach to Verheyen's art during *Slow Art Day*.

For dates and details: www.kmska.be

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