

# BULLETT



## Koen van den Broek on His Own Brand of Street Art

For Koen van den Broek, it all begins on the streets. I don't mean that in the figurative sense—the Belgian artist is not fascinated by prototypical gangsters peddling crack. I mean quite literally, the streets, as in pavement—the sturdy grey mass below our feet we rarely tilt our head downwards to notice. Gathered from his travels across the globe, Van den Broek's images of the streets serve as the reference point for his paintings, which take the mundane – cracks in the pavement, shadows cast by road signs, a simple painted curb – and transforms them into something abstract.

For his upcoming exhibition, *Apex*, which opens at Friedman Benda today, the artist turned his attention to something more personal. Fascinated by artists and filmmakers who reference the history of their medium, Van den Broek referenced his personal history to produce his latest works. Once again, the artist turns to something real, this time his own paintings, and renders it abstract. We sat down with Van den Broek over double espressos (he had just arrived from Belgium but

Shiffman, Allyson. "Koen van den Broek on His Own Brand of Street Art," *Bullett*. April 25, 2013.

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had already managed to spend the morning at The Met, fantasizing about having a drink with his favorite deceased contemporary artists) to discuss the exhibit, his travels, and self-reference.

**Your work references things people generally overlook, like cracks in the sidewalk or the shadow of a building. What is it about these things that you find fascinating?**

I started as an architect, and the first architectural element is the streets, you build something out of that. I also like travelling and the movement of travelling. You have time when you're travelling to think and to focus on subjects—the non-places, the empty spots. If you've seen the movie *The Cotton Club*, when the first scene starts, the camera goes down and you just see sidewalk and the gutter and the pebbles and the reflection. It's almost like a black and white image—totally abstract—and that says a lot about the movie and the atmosphere.

**Tell me about finding inspiration through your travels.**

When I was traveling to Japan I didn't really find very inspiring images. I found really nice places, like Naoshima, the island where there is a lot of art, but Japan was a bit of a disappointment. I felt like I was in France but with Japanese people. I was probably also disappointed because of the bright sun. My first time in America, after growing up on the media and on film and television, I was in San Francisco and everything felt very familiar. I'm playing with it. Is it important to travel or not? I can't really make a painting of a picture I take at home in Belgium because I need the exotic thing of distance; taking the pictures and coming back home. When I'm home, they look like pictures that are disconnected from reality. I did one painting, it's called *Eighth Avenue*, and it's just like a black triangle, a shadow. It's totally abstract but calling it *Eighth Avenue* is something realistic in New York. I'm pulling it back to the reality.

**You just moved into a new studio space. Is your home base as important to you as your travels?**

Yes, but my private house looks a lot like a house in Los Angeles. It's like I want to be in California but I'm still in grey old cloudy Belgium. The architecture of my studio is very important. It's more like a factory. It feels very comfortable to be able to rely on people and also to have a good atmosphere, to have the possibilities to make bigger paintings, to have good light. It's a good environment.

**Speaking of LA, your work is very cinematic. What filmmakers are you drawn to?**

I'm a product of the '90s because I'm almost 40 years old. I'm a big fan of David

Lynch: *Mulholland Drive*, *Blue Velvet*. Also Quentin Tarantino, mainly his earlier works, but I'm also very interested in how Tarantino is developing. He's very much into film history. I like art for art. John Baldessari is from Los Angeles, he's a good friend. He's always playing with art history and Quentin Tarantino is always playing with film history. I like this kind of reference.

**In this exhibit you play with that idea of reference by referencing your own work.**

I took a step back from photography. I did this really nice trip in September, we had an exhibition in Chicago and first we flew to Denver where there's a new Clyfford Still museum. In the art centre in Denver I discovered a big [Robert] Motherwell series called *Open*, and those paintings are all based on one painting that I've been based on, *Porte-Fenetre a Collioure* by Matisse. This game of playing with art history inspired me to look at my own paintings. I scanned them into the computer—a lot quicker than fifty years ago of course—and did a lot of new compositions.

**How does it feel to examine your past work in this way?**

It gave me the opportunity to make new work. You have a lot of artists who do a lot of different things all the time, like Mike Kelley, but then you also have Robert Ryman who does the white square over and over again for like 50 years. That would drive me crazy. I believe to move forward you need a frame. If you have a frame you can go deeper and deeper and deeper. Otherwise it will all be superficial.

**Ages ago I read an article in *Frieze* called *Echo Chamber* that argued if art becomes too self-referential it alienates a large audience of people who don't get the reference. What are your thoughts on that?**

We do have photography, we do have realistic art, but art shouldn't be used just to represent reality. We don't have to do portraits of popes or rich men; it's more about the medium of painting itself. Even a Jackson Pollock is self-referential and it's world famous. Talking about Piet Mondrian, that's really art about art. I think at the moment there's too much art that tries to be political or sociological. That's not the job of the artist, there are other people that do those things better. But if you have a nice Josef Albers everyone would like it, my grandma would like it. I don't see a real problem. There's a beauty, there's a visual experience.