

## FLEMISHNESS

Jef Geys, W. Rossen, Melle Van Herwaarden, Jan Vercruysse

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When Jan Vercruysse declared in *Flash Art International* in 1989 that he felt like “the last Flemish primitive,” he made not only a provocative statement, but also deliberately situating himself within an art-historical lineage stretching back to the fifteenth century. For Vercruysse, the Flemish Primitives represented the artist’s freedom to continually reinvent his own identity. At a time when Flanders, in the 1980s, was increasingly defined by political boundaries rooted in cultural and linguistic homogeneity, Vercruysse adopted a more open and fluid stance. By creating a poetic space beyond linguistic constraints he developed several bodies of work—*Tombeaux*, *Chambres*, and *Les Paroles*—that resist direct symbolism and sustain a perpetual search for origins. This self-mythologising reveals a paradoxical position: at once connected to the history of Belgian art, yet simultaneously distanced from it. For Vercruysse, art must orbit around truth without ever fully disclosing it—for to reveal truth would be to extinguish it. In this sense, identity was not a matter of geographical belonging, but rather a conceptual condition.

A similar tension within language runs through and shapes the practice of Jef Geys. His work, born of a persistent interrogation of identity narratives, reflects and reconfigures the cultural history of Flanders, using it as a polymorphic tool for a broader understanding of society and its cultural contradictions. In the late 1950s, when Geys was in his early twenties, he met Francis Douven, son of Martin Douven, the owner of the Douven Studio in Leopoldsborg, the artist’s hometown. Martin Douven had begun as a self-taught painter and later developed a technique for the serial production of artworks. Within a few years, the Douven Studio had become Europe’s largest producer of paintings, employing over 120 people and producing thousands of works each week on every imaginable subject. What makes an image “attractive,” and for whom, and in what way? Why does an image “work”? In 1959, Geys responded to these questions with *Black Painting with Swans*, the first in a long series of black paintings in which, through a formal device, he redirected attention from the original image to one of his own making.

This exploration of the relationship between reality and image, form and content, forms —just as it does for Geys— the conceptual bedrock of W. Rossen’s work. A seeker of light, Rossen brings together multiple layers of representation, reflection, and reproduction within a single concentrated image. Just as in Vercruysse’s *Camera Obscura* works—where the image is inverted and doubled through the same device employed by Jan van Eyck—so too do Rossen’s photographic lenses, like the mirror in *The Arnolfini Portrait*, reflect another space, a double, an opening onto a different dimension.

More intimate is the painting of Melle van Herwaarden. In his recent works he turns his gaze to his brother Gijs, depicted working within the Rietveld Academy where the artist once studied. The building’s bare, functional architecture, with its grid of lines that both structure and restrict, becomes the setting for these portraits. Van Herwaarden’s paintings balance intuitive simplicity with formal precision, their restrained compositions and clear spatial order recalling the measured clarity of Vercruysse’s *Paroles*. Subdued tonalities, interrupted sharper accents, heighten the presence of the figures within the otherwise contained atmosphere, suggesting an empathetic approach to portraiture.

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Jef Geys (Leopoldsburg, 1934 – Genk, 2018) was a Belgian artist, educator, and publisher who spent his entire life in Balen, a small town in the province of Antwerp. From the late 1950s, his work served an identity-driven, often local narrative: a vast archive of modern Flemish everyday life that, without hierarchy, spans from seed packets for amateur gardeners to the achievements of cycling champion Eddy Merckx. Fundamental and closely linked to his artistic practice were his teaching activities, which Geys carried out from 1960 to 1989 with students aged 10 to 15, and his editorial work through the publication of the newspaper *Kempens*. Jef Geys represented Belgium at the 53rd Venice Biennale (2009) and his work was included in *Documenta 11* (2002), in *Skulptur Projekte Münster* (1997), and in the *21st São Paulo Biennial* (1991). Major solo exhibitions dedicated to him include: *You don't see what you think you see*, WIELS, Brussels (2024); *Kunsthalle Bern* (2021); *Bergen Kunsthall* (2020); *Kempens Informatieblad*, Künstlerhaus Bremen (2019); Yale Union, Portland (2018); *Quadra Medicinale Singapore*, Centre for Contemporary Art, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (2018); *Le Tour de France 1969 d'Eddy Merckx*, Gare Saint-Sauveur, Lille (2018); CAPC, Bordeaux (2016); S.M.A.K., Ghent (2015); *KOME*, Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels (2012); *As Sombras de Lisboa*, Culturgest, Lisbon (2012); *Martin Douven – Leopoldsburg – Jef Geys*, MuHKA, Antwerp (2011); *Woodward Avenue*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit (2010); *Jef Geys*, Pori Art Museum, Pori (2006); Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (2004); Kunstverein München, Munich (2001); Middelheim Museum, Antwerp (1999); and Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (1992).

W. Rossen (Zaandijk, 1995) lives and works in Amsterdam. He graduated first from the Gerrit Rietveld Academie (2016–2019) and later from the Städelschule in Frankfurt. Between 2023 and 2024 he attended De Ateliers in Amsterdam. His painting oscillates between optical and psychological perception, everyday fetish and the anthropology of art, playing with the experience of the observer. Recent exhibitions include: *Offspring*, De Ateliers, Amsterdam (2024); *Als Ich Can*, Wschód Gallery, New York (2024); *Ostend*, Wschód Gallery, Warsaw (2023); Royal Painting Prize of the Netherlands, Amsterdam (2022); *Absolventenausstellung*, Frankfurt am Main (2022); *Rundgang*, Städelschule, Frankfurt am Main (2022); *Mit freundlichen Grüßen*, Jo-Anne, Frankfurt am Main (2021); *Titele*, Tilde, Amsterdam (2021); *Rundgang*, Städelschule, Frankfurt am Main (2020); *Graduation Show*, Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam (2019).

Melle Van Herwaarden (Amsterdam, 1995) lives and works in Amsterdam. He graduated in 2020 from the Gerrit Rietveld Academie. His painting, often centered on close and familiar subjects, draws both from the Dutch portrait tradition and from the work of modern and contemporary masters such as Francis Gruber and Luc Tuymans, with an analytical approach and careful attention to composition. His work has been shown in several exhibitions, including: *Aim*, DEPA Archive, Ghent (2024); *In the Sight of a Man*, M+M Gallery, Hong Kong (2025); *I Would Not Think To Touch The Sky With Two Arms*, Paulina Caspari Gallery, Munich (2024); *No Future*, Palazzo Guazzoni Zaccaria, organized by Triangolo Gallery, Cremona (2024); *Portret Biennale*, Loods 6, Amsterdam (2024); *Suzi and Friends*, Loods 6, Amsterdam (2023); *Less Walls, More Bridges*, Indebt Studio, Amsterdam (2022); *If You Catch My Chrysalis*, Galerie Ernst / Suzi Projects, Amsterdam (2022); *Weerkaatsen*, Galerie Bons, Rotterdam (2021); *Troubled Tea and the People Who Spilled It*, Theehuis, Amsterdam (2021); *Graduation Show*, Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam (2020); *Rietveld Uncut*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2019).

Jan Vercruyse (Ostend, 1949 – Bruges, 2018) entered the art world after studying law and pursuing a poetic career, which symbolically ended in 1974, the year he began creating photographic works that combine image and language, often in the form of self-portraits. In a later phase, his work focused primarily on sculpture, developed mainly in series such as *Chambres* and *Tombeaux*: works of pure, non-narrative form, intended solely to express their own existence. His frames, silent musical instruments, and chairs manifest an exclusive space of art, open, spiritual, and partly hidden because it cannot be defined by verbal language. Vercruyse represented Belgium at the *45th Venice Biennale* (1993) and, in 2001, received the prestigious *Flemish Culture Award for Visual Arts*. Major institutional exhibitions include *Avis au lecteur. The Bookworks of Jan Vercruyse*, Herbert Foundation, Ghent (2024); *Jan Vercruyse. Works 1975–2009*, Museum M, Leuven (2009); *Labyrinth and Pleasure Garden*, Kunstmuseum aan Zee, Ostend (2009); *Ventaglio di Pesaro*, Centro Arti Visive Pescheria, Pesaro (2007); *Fontane Luminose*, Luci d'Artista, Piazza Bodoni, Turin (2002); *Portraits of the Artist*, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (1999); *Portraits of the Artist*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (1997); *The Villas*, Museum Haus Esters & Haus Lange, Krefeld (1995); National Gallery – St. Agnes Monastery, Prague (1994); *Tombeaux (Stanza)*, Castello di Rivoli, Turin (1992); *The Power Plant*, Toronto (1992); Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (1990); *Kunsthalle Bern*, Bern (1989); Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (1988); ARC, Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris (1986); Vereniging Aktuele Kunst, Gewad, Ghent (1981); Ghent (1978); Für Elise, ICC, Antwerp (1978).