

New York's Flemish master

Marc Van Cauwenbergh has found success in a tough market of critics and buyers

Leo Cendrowicz

It seems apt that Marc Van Cauwenbergh's apartment in downtown Manhattan overlooks Flanders Square. No matter that this small corner of City Hall Plaza is named after forgotten broadcaster Steve Flanders, it is now home to perhaps the most famous Flemish New Yorker today.

Van Cauwenbergh has lived in New York for two decades, and in that time his abstract paintings of figurative forms dancing over multiple intricate layers have earned him a cult reputation amongst the city's art cognoscenti. Although his recent exhibition in Ghent was a rare return to his home region, he enjoys regular shows across America, including one currently running at the Pratt Manhattan Gallery.

At this moment, however, he is simply enjoying New York's balmy summer. Sporting a white T-shirt and denim shorts, he beams as he welcomes me into his apartment. "There is something about the spectacle of New York that I really like," he says, gesturing out of the window to the view of the crowds thronging through the park below.

Van Cauwenbergh's studio, part of his apartment, is littered with his works in progress, their forms and colours at once alien and familiar. Splashes, smears, drips and veils of paint half evoke figures and actions, yet remain deliberately evasive.

"They are inspired by my experience of life in general," he says. "I'm affected by my surroundings. The mood in a work will evolve, like how life evolves and changes. They explore the darker spaces within relationships, how troubled or joyful you can be, and that might be reflected in chaotic structures."

The dancing painter

The 58-year-old's journey to Manhattan from his hometown of Ninove, East Flanders, has taken many turns. He focused on art at school, while also taking dance classes, before earning a degree from Ghent's Saint-

Luc fine arts school, where he excelled in woodcuts. (A remnant from that era is a small woodcut on his desk featuring an explicit sexual act.)

But work was scarce after graduation, so Van Cauwenbergh auditioned for the opera-ballet in Ghent, where he danced for two years on a programme covering opera and operetta, jazz, modern styles and tap. As for his painting: "I just kept working," he says. "It was tricky because there was not much spare time."

As he built his portfolio, he also reached out beyond Flanders, eventually moving to New York in 1987, where he completed a Master of Fine Arts at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. He briefly returned to Europe – three years in Brussels – before making New York his permanent home in 1994.

It was then that the abstract took hold. Van Cauwenbergh began exploring cascading colours and jostling forms. "I was probing more inside the psyche in Ghent and Brussels. Here, it is busier and more aggressive, with the influences of New York's chaos and energy," he says.

Layering in wait

Each element, though, still represents an organic being – "a sculptural presence of a form," he says. "There was always a silhouette sitting or standing on a neutral background."

Indeed, the movement of the forms, their delicate balance and rhythm seems sometimes to recall his own dance heritage. As for colours, Van Cauwenbergh uses the weave, texture and absorbency of the canvas linen



Cauwenbergh often has many canvases on the go at the same time. "I let things rest as I freeze the motion, but it's not always practical," he says. "It does not have to be completely dry,



Marc Van Cauwenbergh's "The Eclipse" (top); the artist in his Manhattan studio

one that he relishes as he continues to explore the interaction of form and colour.

▶ www.marcvancauwenbergh.net

"They explore the darker spaces within relationships"

– adding washes of oil paint directly onto the canvas – creating more subdued, less vibrant tones that mix intriguingly with his signature green-yellows and Venetian reds.

The layering of translucent paints can be time consuming, and Van

but I need to balance the movement. I want to let it sink in enough so that the paint sticks to the previous layers, and then I can work on it again."

It is a relentless process, notes the artist, surveying the unfinished canvases spread around his studio, but

Festival memories at Rock Werchter X

The festival Rock Werchter may take place only four days in July, but now you can experience its positive vibes all year long at the exhibition Rock Werchter X set up at the cultural centre Jack-Op in Werchter, which is a district of Rotselaar. This former brewery site once housed the festival administration.

"Rock Werchter X is not a museum exhibition," assures Maria Lauwers of the Rotselaar tourism office. "It's an experience centre for those who want to relive their time at the festival – and for those who haven't experienced that atmosphere yet."

Starting in 1975 as a small festival of the local Chiro youth movement, Rock Werchter has grown to be Flanders' biggest music festival but also one of



the biggest music festivals in the world. This evolution is shown through photos, clippings, posters and memorabilia such as tickets, caps and wristbands.

On a jukebox, you can choose your favourite song played at Werchter. Movies filmed backstage and interviews with employees of the festival offer a view behind the scenes. You can have your picture taken with stars such as Nick Cave and Chris Martin – or at least with their cardboard cut-outs.

Key moments in the festival's nearly four decades are highlighted, such as the transition from black-and-white to colour posters. (That decision, you'll discover, was taken after director Herman Schueremans, on holiday in Italy, took a closer look at what he thought was a poster of his own festival

hanging on a wall. It turned out to be a death notice.)

Rock Werchter X also displays the collective memory of festival visitors, brought together in the "anecdotes forest", where everyone can reminisce about their Werchter adventures. The collection includes a small note from Maria Verbist, mother of Schueremans, who describes how she used to light candles to pray for good weather on the crucial days.

The exhibition is open from Wednesday to Sunday until 30 September and then permanently on Sundays only. Visitors receive a free Jack-Op beer and a poster from the early days of Rock Werchter.

Andy Furniere

▶ www.rockwerchterx.be

WEEK IN ARTS & CULTURE

Legendary Italian film composer **Ennio Morricone** will make a personal appearance in Antwerp's Sportpaleis on 22 December to conduct a tribute to his many celebrated scores. The 81-year-old is best known for his work on the films of Sergio Leone, such as *A Fistful of Dollars* and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. He will conduct the Il Novecento orchestra and a choir of 100 singers.

Works on the digging of a storm basin by the Vaartkom in Leuven were interrupted last week when workers came upon the **remains of part of a river wall** dating back to the 15th or 16th century. Samples of the wall will be taken before work goes ahead.

The **Antwerp-born actress Maité Nahyr** has died in Marseilles at the age of 64 after a long illness. She had roles in films starting in the 1970s to the year 2000, including Roman Polanski's *The Tenant* and Federico Fellini's *City of Women*.

Radio stations **Nostalgie**, **MNM and Radio 1** all saw increased listener numbers in the months from April to June, according to the Centre for Information on the Media. Nostalgie saw its share go up from 6.5% to 7.7% for its classics playlist. MNM went up 1.3 points to 9.5%, while Radio 1 rose only 0.6 points to 8%. The latter two stations are broadcast by the public broadcaster VRT.

Geert Noppe, keyboard player with the **Flemish pop group Yevgueni**, will stand for election in October as a candidate for the Groen-SPA coalition in Beveren, East Flanders. The musician said his platform would include better cycle paths, car-free streets around schools and a ban on heavy goods traffic in the town centre.

A 15th-century triptych painted by a follower of Rogier Van der Weyden has been returned to its place in Sint-Pieters Church in Leuven. It was removed in 2007 for restoration and then formed part of the opening exhibition in the city's Museum M. **The Edelheere Triptych** was painted for the family of the same name in 1443 and is a copy of Van der Weyden's "The Descent From the Cross".

Brothers **Stijn and Steven Kolacny**, founders and directors of the choir Scala, were last week made honorary citizens of the choir's home town of Aarschot in Flemish Brabant. Since its creation in 1996 the all-female choir that covers pop and rock songs has gone on to become an international sensation. Receiving the honour, Steven Kolacny announced a new concert series in December.

▶ www.scalachoir.com