

27 Minutes with Sybren Renema By Ranti Tjan

“ ... the exhibition will definitely include the really large neon, a number of ceramics, some screen printed works and, perhaps, a few collages. That remains to be seen. The exhibition’s overarching theme is Goethe and it will be an odd combination of Goethe, pseudoscience and the Faustian desire for transformation. These things are all interconnected. Goethe knew about everything and that makes him a great framework to hang many different interests from. Goethe is someone you can be a complete fanboy of, and who you can blame for all sorts of things. Every Dutch person remembers that [the author] Boudewijn Buch made Goethe the centre of the universe. Thanks to Goethe a whole movement developed in Western, Northern-European culture. The cliché of the Romantic Artist is something that deeply interests me. Goethe is the Romantic cliché of the artist personified: a clichéd person is incredibly funny.

Radek Szlaga from Brussels challenged me to make an exhibition about Goethe. If there’s an artist I am shamelessly jealous of then it’s Radek. He is a Polish painter who has mastered all the Eastern Bloc painting techniques. His works measure 2 by 3 metres and deal with subjects such as the Belgian Congo with King Leopold holding a whip, Joseph Conrad, Charles Darwin and African porn stars; all sorts of things jumbled together. Fabulous. Painted so well it makes me sick. Only after years of Eastern European whipping can you do this. Radek and I are each other’s biggest fans. Three years ago, Radek asked whether I could do Goethe.

I was working on Byron and Shelley at the time, as well as on Frankenstein, in Geneva. Byron is also amazing, he was also everything, mainly horrible, but that doesn’t matter. I had already made the Average Romantic’s death mask by then. At the time it was being exhibited between a Goya and a Gericault, and there was a room full of portraits of Lord Byron; I thought that was brilliant.

Goethe did not have a death mask, he abhorred them. He also published a complex aphorism about them. However, the fountain I made is basically his life mask. Incidentally, I am not a fan of Goethe as a person. I have always held more personal appreciation for Coleridge. I think that Goethe is too inaccessible to be viewed as sympathetic. What I do is toy with a phenomenon a little. And because Goethe is ‘everything’, an artist can do anything with him; I can blame him for all sorts of things.

In German literature, you can also see this with Thomas Mann, who I also adore. However, Thomas Mann’s oeuvre is tragic because he knew he would never be Number one, so he did his utmost to be Number 2. The screen prints from Banff are therefore called Zauberberg, 1 to 4; a Bildungs book that is basically about nothing, which makes it really beautiful.

Five years back I was intensely fascinated by polar explorers, another kind of dilettante. They have to do all sorts of things, but are actually good at nothing, except travelling. At the time, I also made a radio show about them and that was rebroadcast recently in the Netherlands.

I think as a whole my oeuvre more or less reads like a collection of my reading habits. That’s apparent in this show too. By the way, there’s also a video in it, of Leonard Bernstein repeating the word Faust for a minute. Check it out on YouTube, Young Peoples concert, super fun, Bernstein explaining intensely complex classical music concepts to children. For example: “Who was Gustav Mahler” or “Congratulations with your birthday Shostakovich” or “What is a symphony?” All major questions and subjects. And he performs List’s Faust symphony to a room full of ten-year olds. And then he explains it. Bernstein is also a pedantic man, erudite, intelligent and charming. He takes the ten-year olds seriously. It is possible that artists are capable of mincing conceptually heavy subjects down to art so they become palatable and perhaps even a sublime morsel.

Goethe’s Farbenlehre is – scientifically speaking – a pile of rubbish. However it did mean he saw himself as on par with

Newton. He says that Newton was wrong and that he is right, and then Goethe describes some experiment with prisms. One of the things he also developed, together with Schiller, was Die Temperamentenrose. A colour wheel which links different colours to various personality types. There are 12, like the poets, heroes and tyrants. And they are all a particular colour. It also includes the pedantic. Makes me think of Goethe himself.

Polar exploration, palaeontology, archaeology, ethnography; I had a really fun grandad who gave me educational 1960s books about explorers that had been written off by the library he worked at. I was passionate about Boys Adventure Books. Travel. Radio. Polar exploration. For years, I stood standby as a crew member to head to Antarctica. Ultimately that never happened. I only made it as far as the Falklands, which was quite an adventure I can tell you. I really get a kick out of giving my friends' children the most bizarre presents from faraway countries: nuggets of gold from Mongolia, volcanic rock from Chile. As a child that was the best thing ever: adults that took you seriously and gave you something like a dinosaur fossil. Goethe also had an interest in geology, he owned some 16,000 fossils and minerals. He also devised complex theories including designating granite as the first rock, from which all others developed. Reminiscent of Frankenstein, of Prometheus, of making something from nothing. My ceramic fossils are about geometry, geology, but also about technology and development. Subjects suitable for the homo universalis.

Boudewijn Buch ... he died when I was around 12-years old, so I never met him. I did however read all his books. Three years ago I took a road trip to visit all the American Civil War battlefields. Well, this is something Buch also might have done. There's the arm of Thomas 'Stonewall' Jackson, the famous southern general for example. It was shot to bits by his own troops in 1863. The arm has its own grave and I scoured Virginia to find it. Found! Turns out a type of stations-of-the-cross pilgrimage has developed surrounding the arm. The place where Jackson was hit in the arm is marked, the place where it was amputated, where it was buried, where the arm was ...well, reburied. Incidentally, the general died 10 days after the amputation, and you can also visit that grave.

How do you define a good show? I think that if I can really express my interests in it - without making it about me - it could be a good show. The Romantic landscape, nature, travel, wandering the world. Really fun to set up and then subsequently reveal the interconnections. There are individual works that are great as they are. However, together they become truly interesting as you can see the ties, the relationships. I think that I think more in terms of exhibitions, than of individual artworks.

I also often envisage a whole show in a flash. That's what you do it for, afterwards all you have to do is detail things. That does take a couple of years though! That process is all about nuance and detail and budgets. The travel there, for example, the trip to Banff to screen print ... or to EKWC for the ceramics ... that's what it's all about for me...."

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Ranti Tjan (1964) is director of Sundaymorning@ekwc, the European Ceramic Workcentre. He worked at the ICA Amsterdam, Centraal Museum, Utrecht and at Museum Gouda. He chaired various innovative art institutes like Noordkaap, Casco, Steim, Impakt Festival and Dans Brabant. Tjan curated solo-and group exhibitions in the field of contemporary art and acted as publisher of several prize winning books.