



MICHAËL BORREMANS *The Son*, 2013, 36 x 30 cm, oil on canvas

MICHAËL BORREMANS:

Portrait of a Self-Taught Belgian Painter

by ANGELA DANSBY

When Michaël Borremans turned from drawing and photography to painting, he was an instant success—a dream few artists realize. That was about 20 years ago. Today, Borremans is one of Belgium's most famous living painters, with works in major museums and art fairs around the world.

Ironically, the self-taught painter went to art school for drawing and graphic design, as he viewed painting as "too far-fetched and difficult." When he had an epiphany and became a painter at age 35, the "momentum was there" for both him and the art world.

Borremans often combines his talents by taking photos of models to inspire his paintings. For example, his daughter posed in a golden morphsuit for *The Promise*. Famous Belgian model and actress Hannelore Knuts is *The Angel*, but she's literally masked in the painting.

"I make sceneries with models and I do a lot of tryouts with photographs on light, color, and composition," Borremans says. "In a way, the photos are my studies. It's kind of a misuse of photography because it serves the painting."

Borremans' imagery is alluring yet challenging, and highly original. For

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example, the beams of light shooting out from the eyes of *The Son* represent a connection between contemporary and medieval worlds with analogies to video games and weapons as well as the Immaculate Conception. *The Ear (II)* is something that came by chance, Borremans says, when he was "very drunk" and took pictures of a girl with big ears. In *The Hovering Wood* he tried to create an illusion with a wooden plank wrapped in black satin fabric. But it has no meaning, according to Borremans.

"For me, partly it's a game that I play with familiar elements, references in our visual culture and in our art history," he says, "and the way I combine them and the context I use them in, which is a bit alienating."

The results are arresting, and, in fact, Borremans is often credited with restoring figurativism to modern art. His "signature" is in his quick, forceful brushstrokes and custom oil paint colors that he blends himself. These colors are always made from natural pigments because they look more natural and subtle.

"The energy, the movement that I put in the brushstrokes is very personal—it's very hard to copy," Borremans says. "It's like handwriting. I don't like a flat style of painting because it shows no personality and no power."

MICHAËL BORREMANS *The Hovering Wood*, 2011, 200 x 300 cm, oil on canvas



To maximize his rhythm and energy, Borremans always paints standing up. He is strictly a studio painter, and prefers natural indoor light.

"Daylight is vibrant and alive," he notes. "It changes all the time in intensity, in luminosity—it moves and your painting has to adapt to that. Artificial light is always the same, so it's very blunt in a way. Natural light is more like an organism, something you can taste almost."

Belgium—where it rains a lot, and where Borremans "cannot predict how the light in half an hour will be"—is therefore perfect for him. He has three studios there.

Ironically, Borremans plans to open another studio in Los Angeles in spite of its predictable sunshine. The United States is currently his biggest market and he believes Americans are much more open and less conservative than Europeans when it comes to art.

"In Europe, in the museums, you need to be in art history books before they want to buy something, so they're always, like, 40 years—or 20 years at least—behind," he quips. "When I'm an old man, I will be very celebrated in Europe."

Borremans is, of course, already highly acclaimed around the world. His work speaks for itself.

"It's as if you've read a very good poem," Borremans says of his art. "There's no use in trying to explain it." ▲



MICHAËL BORREMANS *The Angel*, 2013, 300 x 200 cm, oil on canvas

Photographer RON ANSTUTZ / Courtesy of ZENO X GALLERY, ANTWERP and DAVID ZWISNER, NEW YORK/LONDON

Photographer PETER COX / Courtesy of ZENO X GALLERY, ANTWERP



MICHAËL BORREMANS *The Ear (II)*, 2011, 105 x 80 cm, oil on canvas