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CHRISTOPHE COPPENS

WORKS ON PAPER

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Stephane Simoens is pleased to present the first solo exhibition by Christophe Coppens at the gallery.

Three years ago Christophe Coppens decided to end his career in fashion to become a full-time artist. Three years is not much. His most recent *Works On Paper* seems to be the result of a much longer process. These works consist of layers: paper, glue, acrylic paint, ink, water and a lot of Californian sun that make the artist appear and disappear behind his works.

In his one-man-studio Christophe Coppens works – mostly outdoors – as a director of the elements:

“I don't consider myself a painter. I use paint, yes, but more to add color to the distressed paper, and then I wash it out again as if it doesn't belong there, or to let the sun burn the colors away. I had to remove a lot of layers to reach the core of things. In the process I also had to learn how to avoid to end up in an aesthetic routine to make everything look beautiful, a habit that I picked up over the years and took me a while to get rid off. These *Works On Paper* are very raw, pure energy. No frills, no frames. They're layed flat against the wall with no consideration on how to conserve them. Maybe you just roll them up and unroll them now and then to take a look at them.”

And yet. Once you recognize the artist-as-director in these *Works On Paper* it is easy to see the resemblance with the work that came before. Go back to his first exhibition as an artist in 2013. Think of the ceramic sculptures combined with paper, textile, wood in what became *Landscape #1* in the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam. Think of all the memories and experiences that were processed in the work: accessories made by the artist-as-designer; clothes from his personal closet; paperwork he collected as a businessman. It was all there: elements of a past, signs of a future. Old and new combined. Circles, cycles, recycled.

Works On Paper forms a new landscape. It covers the walls of the gallery and wraps visitors as if they enter the head of the artist. This all sounds very recognizable for those who've seen his first landscape at Boijmans. Or even more for those who saw his *Dollhouse Trilogy*: a series of exhibitions at the turn of the millennium in which Christophe Coppens reworked and recycled childhood memories, a broken love story and materials going from gold to chocolate. These *Dollhouses*, mysterious closets on elegant high legs, were already presented as some kind of landscape in the exhibition spaces.

But the main difference with Coppens' previous works is that *Works On Paper* is much lighter than anything he has ever done before. There are no sculptures, no soccles and no closets in a room: not even frames but just paper on the wall. The third dimension in this presentation comes from the emotions, the energy of the moment that is transferred from the wall into the room. This work that looks older than it actually is, at the same time looks barely finished. As if the process only starts once you enter the room.

The work of American painter Forrest Bess (1911-1977) was an eye opener two years ago. More inspiration comes from old *tantric paintings*, a technique that goes back to 6th century Indian Hindu traditions. *Tantric paintings* are typically made of small pieces of discarded paper, show abstract figures and are used for meditation. The flaws in the paper lead to unpredictable forms. Their timeless aesthetics make them resemble works of modernist painters as Malevich or Klee. Or as Craig Olson writes in *The*

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Brooklyn Rail: "It is an evocation of the image as a threshold leading to new dimensions of meaning, a revelatory understanding that some images are more than mere data; they are instead vital seeds, living carriers of possibility."

In Sanskrit, the meaning of *tantra* goes back to *looming, weaving, treatment*. As if his previous life as a fashion designer works on through these *Works On Paper* in his new life as an artist. They also call it *egoless art*: a game of (dis)appearances. As if this newborn artist reassembles himself in the elements that surround him.