

Toon Leën

—Sarah Bal—

FRED&FERRY GALLERY

06.02.2022———12.03.2022

**AN INTERVIEW WITH SARAH BAL**

by *Eline Verstegen*

*It was through gallerist Frederik Vergaert that I came across the work of artist Toon Leën, and it was through the work of artist Toon Leën that I came across the work of painter Sarah Bal. Invited to write a text coinciding with her exhibition, I reached out to her. She immediately proposed an email interview, supplanting my idea of an informal conversation in person during a studio visit. In her second email, she stated someone else would speak on her behalf.*

**EV** The show at Fred&Ferry Gallery is the first exhibition after you've collaborated on the book *Personally, I'm Most Interested in the Shapes and Colours* with various artists and critics and worked together with Toon Leën on the lecture performance *Student of Colours*. How do you evaluate and relate these projects?

**SB** The book has been a breakthrough. It helped me to clarify some basic ideas. The lecture was a different experience as it was much more interactive, but I truly enjoyed it. For the new exhibition, I prepared a different kind of imagery and I am interested to see how viewers will react to it. Will they remain very serious? Will they laugh? Or maybe they will just ignore these images as irrelevant—put them in between the dashes—and move on with their own lives. Perhaps it will be only later, in a week or in a month's time, that they will recall the experience, contextualise it. The global context is also part of the reality my works exist in and this context has changed significantly, I believe, on 6 January 2021.

**EV** You place great importance on the Capitol insurrection. Has it really played that big a role in the development of your work?

**SB** Let me start with an anecdote. Months ago, I was in my studio, deep into my practice, dead tired, fed up with the pandemic, and convinced that I had reached the outer limits of

what I could artistically achieve. You might remember that the interaction of colours and shapes was my main interest. In fact, it was my only interest. While working, I was completely cut off from the external world. Then, one day, my girlfriend came in and said, in passing, that there was a *coup d'état* underway in the United States. I didn't quite understand what she meant and frankly just ignored it, as I was never interested in politics. But then—when we had lunch outside and I saw images on TV—suddenly it occurred to me that I could have missed out on a very important event. I made this remark to her and, since she is well-versed in literature, she commented: “Chérie, you have put this piece of information between the dashes. People often do that”. This is how the idea for the exhibition came about.

**EV** “Putting something between the dashes”, as you phrase it, can be interpreted in two ways though. One could argue that dashes are a means of separating information that might not be essential. However, on the contrary, one could also think of them as tools to highlight a thought, enable something to be included even though it might not perfectly fit in the ongoing narrative. What is your take on the ‘dash’?

**SB** Your question captures perfectly this uncertainty inherent in a ‘dash’ symbol. Anyone who writes or reads books is aware of the real danger of reading over the information between these two small lines. Dashes connect, but they also separate and disrupt. The ‘dash paradox’ is that they disrupt in order to connect. It is this very same paradox, which I also found inherent to a completely different reality, namely that of *coups d'état*. This has become a new topic of my artistic inquiry.

**EV** Your new subject of interest might seem very far from what you were doing before. However, one similarity might be that in both, abstraction and specificity are alternating forces. As you wrote in an email to me, “a universal principle of our mind is that it moves

instantly between abstract and concrete.” How do you see this in both strands of research?

**SB** The attack on Capitol Hill was a specific event at a specific point in time. Yet, it was not just that. It was, in my view, a manifestation of an abstract concept, an idea of a *coup d'état*. This idea of a violent displacement of a legitimate authority in order to gain control is as old as the social order itself. To understand the mechanics of *coups d'état*, I have read books and watched hours of recorded footage of such events. Hence, I have learnt a great deal about the dynamics of our social and political order. But I also enlarged my perspective on the sometimes violent relationship between shapes and colours. In my previous works, abstraction has been a necessary prerequisite for me to touch on concrete social realities. How can we know the relationship between two realities, for instance actions and emotions, if we do not know the pattern which connects shapes and colours?

**EV** Another similarity might be the tension between the chaotic and the structured, the irrational or intuitive and the rational?

**SB** I realised long ago that what at first sight might appear chaotic actually hides patterns, which operate in a perfectly ordered way. I am definitely a believer that reality is composed of layers, but do not view them all as rational. My adventure in the field of political reality—in particular that of the *coup d'état* phenomenon—can serve as an illustration of the point I am trying to make here. It is fascinating—and terrifying at the same time—to observe that there are myriads of perspectives which come to play when people look at any *coup d'état* unfolding: those who view the storming crowd as the real patriots might feel love for the motherland; those who support the rebellious in achieving their goal might feel joy; those who trust the armed forces might feel calm; those who believe in the sacrosanct principles of law and order might feel angry; those who observe from the sidelines might feel amazed at how easily the *coup* actually happens. Some will talk about the courage it takes to pursue a higher goal, while others will feel saddened that the key tenets of democracy are under attack. This is all due to

the fact that a *coup d'état* is a confusing event. The old order is being undermined. The new order has not yet emerged. Is such a situation permanent? Will it change everything? What does it mean to me personally?

**EV** What does the political mean to you personally, as an artist?

**SB** As I said at the beginning, politics was a blind spot for me. I felt that it was also a gap in my artistic practice. In this exhibition, however, I'm looking at various lines—those on canvas, but also the connecting and dividing lines which exist between art and politics, art and language, the subjective and objective, the personal and impersonal. By scrutinising the narratives and aesthetics of a *coup d'état* in particular, I'm putting the blind spot directly into the spotlight. It allows me to address the 'dash paradox': how can a gap become a bridge?

**EV** You once mentioned before that there were two options for your future practice: either specialising in a particular colour (range), or either letting go of the fascination with colour altogether. Does this exhibition hint at what direction it will take?

**SB** I would like the viewers to draw their own conclusions on that matter. I think it will not be difficult to predict. I am an intuitive artist and hence I invite my viewers to adopt an intuitive approach to this exhibition, and to open up to the possibility that a gap that they see can be a bridge to something that they do not expect.

Sarah Bal (b. 1986) lives and works in Geneva—according to Toon Leën— She studied interior architecture at the Geneva University of Art and Design before taking up painting.

For this interview, Sarah Bal was represented by Michał Gołębek, a writer based in Poland. He was unable to confirm this information.

Eline Verstegen (b. 1991) is a curator and writer based in Antwerp.