



The Art Institution

This Is Us

This Is Us

This Is Us combines works from the four largest museums for contemporary art in Flanders: M HKA, S.M.A.K., Mu.ZEE and M Leuven. Guest curator Fabian Flückiger sees these art collections as seismographs of the times, re-evaluated with each presentation.

In ***This Is Us***, Flückiger spread the work of fifty artists over three chapters: The Art Institution, Living Spaces, and Telling Stories. These chapters explore the art institution from various perspectives, questioning the power dynamics at play and the issue of representation in art. They also address our current organic and social living environments and inspire us to think about how history influences our perception of art and the world as a whole. New works created specifically for this exhibition deepen the dialogue between the present and the past.

This transforms the exhibition into an ‘artistic learning environment’ in which perspectives are questioned and shifted, sharpened and aligned.

This exhibition emerged from a unique collaboration between Flanders’ leading museums for contemporary art, Z33, and the commissioned artists.

Chapter 1

The Art Institution

The first chapter explores the history of the art institution as an inclusive entity. More than 130 years ago, an early attempt was made at creating more inclusive art institutions. During his 1889 lecture 'The Museums of the Future' at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, the controversial George Brown Goode proposed targeting women as a specific group of visitors, although it would take many decades for works by female artists to be adequately represented in museums. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the art institution has undergone a continuous evolution that has been closely linked with the struggle for equality and social justice in wider society – a process that has gained considerable traction in recent years. That transformation served as inspiration for this chapter. The artworks in these rooms explore the art institution as a political space and a social platform, where new forms of representation emerge that reflect a society in constant motion.

Art institutions and their collections are often seen as places where meaning is preserved, while in fact they only preserve artworks, not their meanings. With each new presentation, they offer a link to the past while simultaneously creating space for new interpretations. In this way, the works and their meanings remain alive. This allows them to meet the ever-changing demands of the dynamic social space that is the contemporary art institution.

In this chapter, a direct link is created between the selected works and the art institution. Themes such as the struggle for equal rights, uniformity, roots, heritage, perspective, power, repair, inclusion and representation are all addressed. The dialogue between works from different time periods and the perspectives of visitors leads to a diverse and fluid interpretation of the art institution.

At the entrance to the long, gently sloping room is a work by **Anna Zacharoff** entitled **National Museum**. It was inspired by the renovation of the Swedish National Museum in Stockholm. Part painting and part installation, it offers a contemporary take on the art institution. Hidden behind the Renaissance-style facade are burgundy and canary-yellow walls that hint at the museum's history as a salon for the upper classes. By adhering to the aspect ratio of a standard piece of A4 paper, Zacharoff addresses two topical themes in art institutions: maximum accessibility and the risk of homogenization of art.



Hana Miletić, *Materials* (platinum mercerised cotton, gun metal grey cottolin, yellow mercerised cotton, yellow cottolin, light grey conductive yarn), collection Mu.ZEE Ostend, photo: Mu.ZEE

The large curtain in **Hana Miletić's *Materials*** is a nod to a bourgeois past that is increasingly unravelling. Miletić photographs street scenes, mainly in Brussels, that reveal a process of change, decay and improvised stabilisation. Through a complex and artisanal weaving process, she translates these photos into textile collages. Her work is both concrete and abstract, referencing specific cityscapes that capture a fragile moment between coherence, change and decay. In relation to the chapter 'The Art Institution', the work may be read as a commentary on the notion of art as a patchwork of political claims, urban environments, resources and individual perspectives.

Anna Zacharoff, *National Museum*, 2019, Cera-collection / M Leuven, photo: Miles Fischler



Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled*, 1999, collection M HKA / collection Flemish Community, photo: M HKA

Opposite Miletic's curtain, **Kerry James Marshall's** 15-metre-long woodcut depicts a social scene. In a cinematic manner, the eye is drawn from the outdoor space to the living room and into the bedroom of a brick apartment. The motif reflects the intention of the art institution to present exhibitions that offer a perspective on reality in which art and life converge. Six black people engage in a peaceful conversation. It is in the presence of these six protagonists the central meaning of the work is revealed. Since the 1980s, Marshall has sought to correct the underrepresentation of the black community in art and art institutions.

Representation in art is closely linked to political power dynamics. This issue is addressed in ***Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*** by **Andrea Fraser**. In this film, Fraser leads a tour of the Philadelphia Museum of Art in the guise of a fictional docent named Jane Castleton. With an air of ironic seriousness, she discusses the museum as a place for people with cultivated tastes who do not have the economic means to acquire such art themselves. She also refers to the museum as a big-city draw and a tourist attraction. In a gallery dedicated to Flemish art, she shifts her attention to the adjacent toilets, suggesting that a single wall is all that separates the sublime from the ordinary.



Andrea Fraser, *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, 1989, collection M HKA / collection Flemish Community, photo: M HKA

The commissioned work by **Clare Noonan**, displayed at a height of ten meters, can only be seen from a panoramic vantage point on the first floor. Her black mirror was inspired by the Claude glass: a small, convex mirror with black-tinted glass that was used as a pre-photographic lens by eighteenth-century landscape painters and travellers. The painterly quality of the landscape in the reflected image became an aesthetic ideal that ultimately influenced landscape painting, garden design and even – as legend has it – the English industrial revolution. Within the context of this exhibition, Noonan's work questions the sometimes dubious aesthetic paradigms of art institutions and the resulting underrepresentation of women and underrepresented communities.

Clare Noonan, from *Pilgrim Tourist*, 2007, foto: Jeremy Booth.



Colophon

Curator

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Tekst

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Graphic design

Stúdio de Ronners, Antwerpen

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Artists

Andrea Fraser

Kerry James Marshall

Hana Miletić

Clare Noonan

Anna Zacharoff

House for Contemporary
Art, Design & Architecture





Living Spaces

This Is Us

Chapter 2

Living Spaces

The second chapter continues with the theme of representation introduced in the first chapter, exploring it through the lens of organisms and the demands they place on their habitats. Here, art and life merge into one. There is a tension between nature and culture and the spaces they occupy. Different organisms encounter each other in nature and artificial environments, rising the need to reflect on the balance between climate, biodiversity and the democratic society. The bodies on display have been automated, hybridised, exploited, categorised, transformed and threatened, or are simply the embodiment of different powers. Their habitats follow overlapping cycles and traditions, each vulnerable in their own way, whether they are made from soil, plants, water, snow, wood or bricks. The works of art in this chapter raise different questions about identity, power and the need for protection.

It starts by juxtaposing two works that question the physical and social aspects of the body. The dancing **Humonid** by **Jean Katambayi Mukendi** engages in a dialogue with four reclining figures in photos by **Ria Pacquéé**. The outsourcing of human skills to robots stands in stark contrast with the bodies marked by physical labour. The resting bodies on the street and the cardboard Humonid raise questions about the relationship and power dynamics between labour and the body in our technological society.

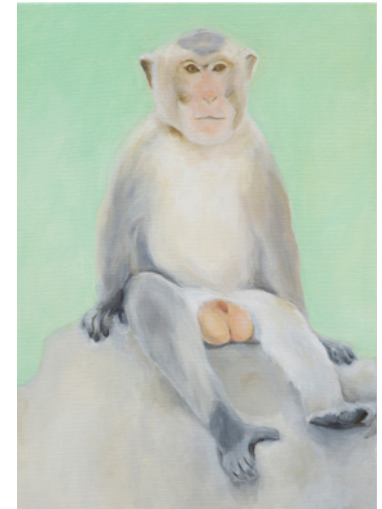
Continuing the theme of the physical state of the body, other works explore how the body has become uniform through culture and politics. Artists draw comparisons to the animal kingdom to speak more freely about bodies, body parts and gender. These analogies also create space to untether the body from the binary restrictions imposed by society. Social discourse is particularly important here, as it defines bodies beyond their biological characteristics. Bodies do not exist in isolation from their cultural contexts but are defined by social constructs as well. These, in turn, are influenced by political power dynamics, resulting in different levels of protection for different bodies.



Jean Katambayi Mukendi, *GMT*, 2017, collection S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, photo: Fabian Flückiger

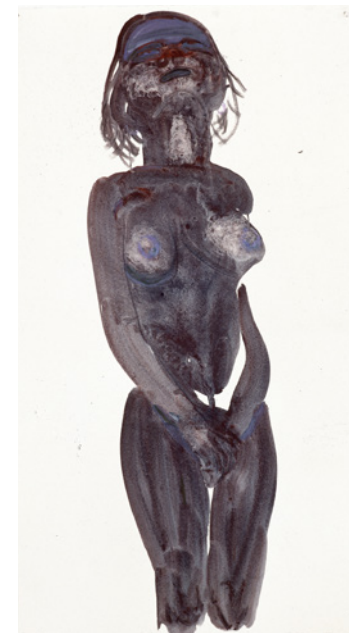


Ria Pacquéé, *Resting*, 2008, Cera-collection / M Leuven, photo: the artist



Monika Stricker, *Not Bothered*, 2022, commission, courtesy of the artist and the gallery Clage, Cologne, photo: Simon Vogel

Marlene Dumas, *Blind Joy*, 1996, collection M HKA / collection Flemish Community, photo: M HKA



In a new work commissioned for this exhibition, **Monika Stricker** compares the genitals of people and primates. This juxtaposition removes all erotic connotations. Instead, the works convey a tender vulnerability. The inclusion of the animal world gives us permission to explore human identity in an unbiased way. Stricker's ape and man motif contrasts with a nude by **Marlene Dumas**. It is one of her many portraits of prostitutes in Amsterdam's Red Light District. Like Stricker, Dumas undermines traditional representations of the nude body in art history. Her watercolour reopens the dialogue about identity and the body in art. The dark figures represent the depths of the human psyche (desire, lust, seduction and mystery), but also consumer goods like 'paid sex', which exist outside this realm as well.

When passing into the next room, **Mona Filleul's** two-part work serves as a vulnerable transition piece that leaves the visitor straddled between concealment and exposure. For this exhibition, Filleul created a bas-relief that brings together characters from Japanese pop culture: Hello Kitty, MyMelodi and Kuromi. They each embody ideal fantasy worlds enacted in separate scenes. The piece is a subversive commentary on gender, sexuality and queerness. Filleul works with protective materials, such as insulation panels, thereby charting the exposure and vulnerability of queer bodies in the public space.



Mona Filleul, *Kuromi & My Melody* (detail), 2023, commission, courtesy the artist, photo: Mona Filleul

Bruce Nauman, *Untitled (Four Small Animals)*, 1989, collection S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, photo: Dirk Pauwels

Robert Devriendt, *Stuffed Birds*, 2000, Cera-collection / M Leuven, photo: Philippe Debeerst



Above and to the right of Filleul's bas-relief hang works by **Bruce Nauman** and **Robert Devriendt**. Devriendt's small-scale oil paintings of birds may seem peaceful at first, but the title, *Stuffed Birds*, brings that feeling with an illusion to an abrupt halt. The series of paintings bears witness to the categorisation and domination of the animal world by humans. It is also a nod to the documentation of bird species that became extinct due to either natural causes or human activity. Nauman's animals above further explore the far-reaching dominance of humans over animals. They were created using rubber moulds taken from animals. The four creatures highlight the endless possibilities of body transformation through genetic modification in the animal kingdom.



Peter Rogiers, *Palm I & II*, 2002, collection S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, photo: Dirk Pauwels

The following rooms shift their focus from the vulnerability of bodies to the vulnerability of habitats. Other works demonstrate how the concept of nature has changed throughout history. **Peter Rogiers's** palm trees, for example, can be interpreted in many ways. They may represent the problematic exotic gaze with which we view distant lands and cultures. Alternatively, they could symbolise the popularity of the south with tourists. Or are the trees a nod to the climate crisis? After all, palm trees are shade-giving plants that are capable of withstanding increasingly warm and dry conditions.

Climate change is also addressed in the work of **N. Dash**, which features a thin layer of soil interlaced with dry cracks. This piece explores the condition of the earth and the tension between the natural world (earth) and the industrial world (textile). The individual components of the work act like powerful tectonic plates that shape landscapes – a natural force which humans can never replicate.

N. Dash, *Untitled*, 2017, collection S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, photo: Peter Cox – courtesy Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp





Wolfgang Laib, *Blütenstaub von Haselnuss (Hazel Pollen)*, 1987, collection M HKA / collection Flemish Community, photo: M HKA

Meret Oppenheim, *Sommergestirn*, 1963-1965, collection S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, photo: Dirk Pauwels



The raw power of nature also plays a role in the two works by **Meret Oppenheim** and **Wolfgang Laib**, which offer a retrospective on the way these two artists perceived nature in the 1960s and 1980s. Oppenheim's abstract celestial body *Sommergestirn* reflects the elemental power of the cosmos and sparks a dialogue about natural phenomena such as cycles, metamorphoses and coincidence. Laib's work, made from hazelnut pollen, takes a spiritual approach to nature that has since faded to the background, replaced instead by concerns about the fragility of ecosystems, advancing urbanisation and the associated decline in biodiversity.

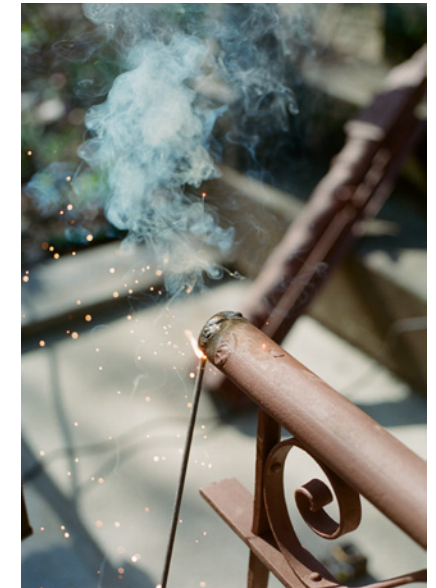


Aglai Konrad, *Shaping Stones*, 2023, commission, courtesy the artist and the gallery Nadja Vilenne, photo: the artist

Avery Preesman, *Zonder titel*, 1994, collection S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, photo: Fabian Flückiger

Felix Kindermann, *That Wants It Down*, 2023, commission, courtesy the artist, photo: the artist

The last room in this chapter brings together three perspectives on building culture, urbanism and the conditions in which communication thrives. In her *Shaping Stones*, **Aglai Konrad** explores the emergence and development of cultural spaces, using stones to symbolise this process. Her work focuses on the architectural history of the past millennia. **Avery Preesman** shifts his focus to the end of the twentieth century and observes the structural changes in urban space during that period, particularly in and around Chicago. He then translates his observations into spatial paintings. **Felix Kindermann** takes the social rather than the material as his inspiration, with a focus on interpersonal relationships. Increasing urbanisation is continuously blurring the boundaries between public and private space. Kindermann's commissioned works explore spatial planning and the concept of social space, which he represents with fences.



The small rooms featuring works by **Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, Jura Shust, Anne Daems, Richard Artschwager** and **Konrad Lueg** are devoted to the domestic, to role models in the private sphere, to interior design, and to everyday family life.



Anne Daems, *Stoel Gustave Serrurier-Bovy bedekt met kledingstukken 8*, 2019, Cera-collection / M Leuven, courtesy the artist and galerie Micheline Szwejcer, photo: Vildana Memic

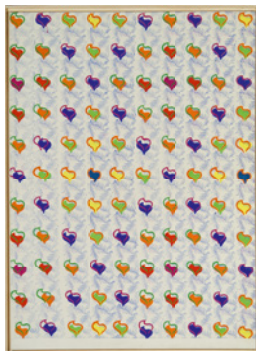
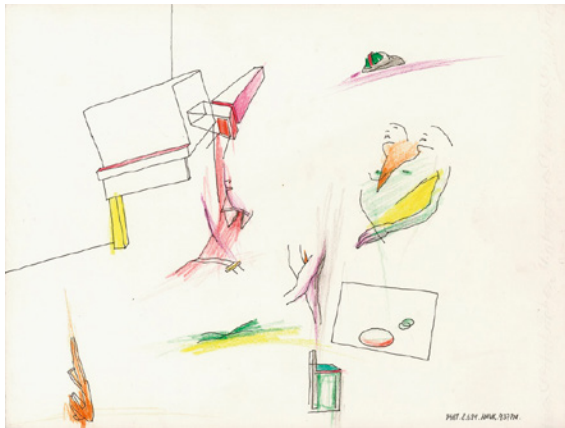


Jura Shust, *Faint Young Sun*, 2015, collection S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, photo: Dirk Pauwels

Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, *Untitled*, 1994, collection M HKA / collection Flemish Community, photo: M HKA

Konrad Lueg, *Tischdecke*, 1965, collection S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, photo: Dirk Pauwels

Richard Artschwager, *Splatter Table*, 1992, collection S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, photo: Dirk Pauwels



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Richard Artschwager

Audrey Cottin

Anne Daems

N. Dash

Robert Devriendt

Marlene Dumas

Mona Filleul

Joris Ghekiere

Ann Veronica Janssens

Jean Katambayi Mukendi

Felix Kindermann

Aglaia Konrad

Wolfgang Laib

Konrad Lueg

Dyan Marie

Bruce Nauman

Otobong Nkanga

Meret Oppenheim

Ria Pacquée

Marina Pinsky

Avery Preesman

Emmanuelle Quertain

Peter Rogiers

Jura Shust

Monika Stricker

Keith Tyson

Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven

Jan Van de Kerckhove

Maarten Vanden Eynde

House for Contemporary
Art, Design & Architecture





Telling Stories

This Is Us

Chapter 3

Telling Stories

Clare Noonan, from *Pilgrim Tourist*, 2007, photo: Jeremy Booth.



A special window, designed by architect Francesca Torzo, is used in *This Is Us* to link the first and third chapters through the work commissioned by artist **Clare Noonan**. It highlights the connectedness of the three chapters, which reflect on the institutional collection and exhibition of art.

In the third chapter, the stories from the previous two chapters are explored in more detail. How does print media, social media, television, artificial intelligence and written history shape our perception and our understanding of the world? How do they influence daily life? In addition to media reports, this chapter focuses on historical events in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, their impact on art discourses and the degree to which historical interest influences aesthetic judgments. For example, it questions how archaeology can influence imagination and how it can inspire a more critical approach to history.



Cady Noland, Willem Oorebeek and **John Baldessari** examine the influence of print media on our understanding of the images, texts and political leanings of different publishers. **Press Czar** by Cady Noland is a portrait of American publisher William Randolph Hearst. A man of many titles, Hearst is mainly known as the father of yellow journalism and one of the most influential journalists in the United States. Sensationalist journalism, media-driven opinion, truth and the dark side of the American dream are all addressed in this work.



Michael Van den Abeele, *Dinosaur* #07, 2014, Cera-collection / M Leuven, photo: Isabelle Arthuis

Stories and images are something construed, omitting certain things or creating a focus. **Dinosaur #07** by **Michael van den Abeele** was inspired by the birth of an idea. Palaeontology, the study of ancient life based on fossils, is a relatively young discipline that originated in the nineteenth century. What we think dinosaurs looked like was heavily influenced by the discoveries made in this discipline, which were subsequently translated into visual representations by illustrators and artists. Van den Abeele thus delves into the methodology of image production and links it to genres and motives in art history.



Cady Noland, *Press Czar* – telling the story of Randolph Hearst, 1990, collection S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, photo: Dirk Pauwels

Willem Oorebeek, *Pages, met zonder KOP*, 2005–2021, collection of the Flemish Community / M Leuven, photo: the artist

John Baldessari, *Arms & Legs (Specif. Elbows & Knees), etc.: Arm and Plaid Jacket*, 2007, Private collection, Belgium / long-term loan to S.M.A.K., Ghent, photo: Dirk Pauwels





The work of **Karin Hanssen** and **Dara Birnbaum** deals with the influence of television and film as mass media that shape reality and fiction. Birnbaum uses the television series *Wonder Woman* to explore positive yet stereotypical portrayals of women in film. Feminism also plays a central role in **Natasja Mabeesoone's** extensive series ***Bernice Bobs Her Hair***. Here, the three works from this series are presented alongside three mural interventions. 'Bernice Bobs Her Hair' is a novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald about social norms and imagery in American society, which is fractured into rural and urban, black and white communities.



Karin Hanssen, *The Approach (Donald Duck)*, 2007–2008, collection S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, photo: Dirk Pauwels

Dara Birnbaum, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978, collection S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, photo: Dirk Pauwels



Natasja Mabeesoone, *Le ruban au cou d'O*, 2021, collection M HKA / collection Flemish Community, photo: M HKA



Emmanuel Van der Auwera, *VideoSculpture XXVI (Over-the-Horizon)*, 2023, commission, courtesy the artist and Harlan Levey Projects, photo: Adriaan Hauwaert

Emmanuel Van der Auwera's work is devoted to the latest technologies in image production, such as artificial intelligence and the associated information and image databases used to create so-called 'deepfakes'. He explores a new kind of 'dream factory' that will replace Hollywood and usher in a new, post-truth era.

The last room in this chapter is devoted to the media's representation of historical events from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the front of the room is **Fort Pattill**, an installation by **Sophie Nys**, inspired by a photo from 1915. The photo was taken during the construction of the Wall Street subway station in New York City and includes an old water pipe lying on the ground as if unearthed by an archaeologist. Nys' installation consists of a ceramic pipe mounted onto two Emeco Navy chairs, which were developed by the U.S. Navy during the Second World War. To the pipe the artist added the sad, blue eyes of Walt Disney's Dumbo. With these props, Nys makes reference to the persecution and genocide of the indigenous population throughout the United States' first centuries. The pipe symbolises the absence of historical and archaeological heritage that may have improved our understanding of the country. The military-imperialist and colonial structures referred to in this work are still being reproduced today, including in the American film industry.

Sophie Nys, *Fort Pattill*, 2015, collection S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, photo: Dirk Pauwels



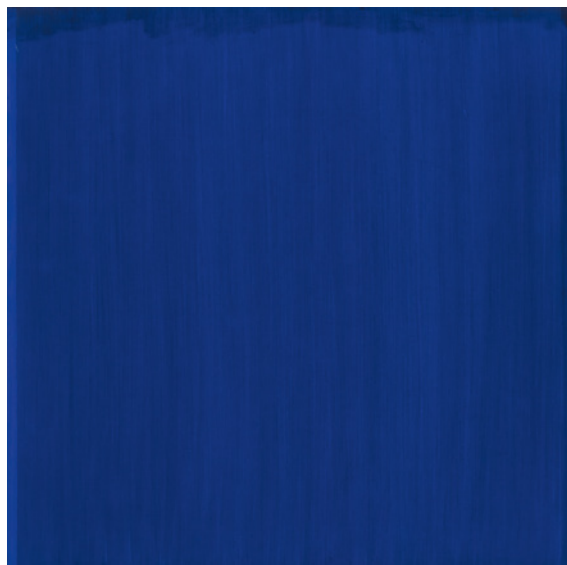
Sammy Baloji, *Lakafu*, 1898. *The Lakafu Station. Morning roll call.* François Michel. *Lofoi*, 2010. *The Lofoi Station called 'Bon Gain' or 'Good Profit' by the Belgians and 'Mbonge' by the local population.*, 2010, collection Mu.ZEE Ostend, photo: Fabian Flückiger

Ana Torfs, *[...] STAIN [...]*, 2012, collection Mu.ZEE Ostend, photo: the artist



European history is no less destructive. In fact, it served as a breeding ground for the history of America written by European immigrants. The photographs by **Sammy Baloji** show how states were colonised by European countries such as Belgium through claims of power and the promise of economic gains. Political and ideological motives are often closely intertwined with economic and aesthetic ones, as **Ana Torfs' [...]** **STAIN [...]** reveals. In the mid-nineteenth century, the production of dyes flourished. A chance discovery by an English chemistry student named William Henry Perkin led to the production of the first synthetic dye: mauve. A discovery that paved the way for the economic boom of chemical companies. The forward march of science took a dark turn when German chemical companies such as BASF, Bayer, Agfa and Hoechst merged to create IG Farben, which became a central cog in Hitler's war machine during the Second World War.

Colour is also an important theme in the work of **Heimo Zobernig**. With their monochrome palette, his paintings are reminiscent of minimalism of the 1960s and 1970s. Artists of this movement sought to deny authorship with their monochromatic works and questioned the meaning of objects and colour. Zobernig wants to re-examine this era through a different lens. Today, we know there are no neutral objects and that authorship cannot be escaped. The austere artistic objects in minimal art symbolise the infiltration of industrial standards, machine production and capitalism into society and art.



Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled (blue)*, 1995, collection S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, photo: Dirk Pauwels

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