

The Utopia Collection

In his series composed of watercolour-on-paper works titled 'The Utopia Collection', the Belgian artist Berghe poses questions on the role architecture plays in the parallel narrative of civilisation and barbarism via themes such as modernism, utopia, capitalism, colonialism and ecology: Is architecture - in its widest sense, the creation of a life-environment – only about the construction of a form in space? Does a building contain, apart from its visible image, a further message or meaning? Is it possible to overlook the element of crime covered up by the well-designed, smooth spaces of modern architecture? The lifespan of a building, once considered to be hundreds, and even thousands of years, is today estimated to have almost dropped to double-digit values –could this change be related to post-Fordist production methods? So- is architecture restricted to the activity of creating a form, or perhaps the activity of lending form to a process?

Berghe, who has a background in performance art, began his **Utopia Collection** series in 2007, and has continued to add to it in an experimental, disciplined and passionate spirit. The artist adds roughly a painting a day to the series, treating the process almost like a performance. Constantly preoccupied in his mind, **Berghe** refuses to shut out the pain caused by social contradictions shuttling back and forth in his imagination, constantly reminding him of their presence; instead, he doggedly goes after them in order to decipher them. The awareness he displays in his relationship with archival material captures the viewer with a perspective that flows between past, present and future. In front of these swiftly executed small paintings, we are immediately captured by precisely the sentiment **Berghe** seeks to evoke: a sense of the real, loaded with violence, and equally striking... Born in the aftermath of World War II, **Berghe** witnessed the destruction caused by the war, and it is possible to trace the transformation of the pre-war paradigm into the post-war paradigm in his works.

In his swiftly executed paintings that display no unitary approach, Berghe seems to be skipping from one thought to the next. His choice of materials and techniques also support his agile approach. Loosely completing his impatiently painted watercolours, his mind has already begun the next work in the series. This is perhaps why each painting seems to resist an ultimate form, and appears as a piece within a greater picture. Like photographic series in which the meaning is multiplied and enhanced by the sheer number of shots, Berghe's Utopia Collection is composed of small paintings that need each other, and make each other greater. The artist does not seek a single, unitary and large painting, but aims to produce hundreds of paintings and pluralistic meanings, leaving the narrative inconclusive, and enabling constant development. This structure is also related to the narrative formality of the cartoon and the graphic novel. This relationship is clearly legible in the '**Flintstones Modernism**' series the artist created with inspiration from The Flintstones, the animated series created in 1960 by **Hanna-Barbera Productions**. In a manner reminiscent of the situationists, the artist combines themes of architecture and play. **Berghe** counters the rational and formal approach of modernism with the playful narrative of the graphic novel, and displays a childlike and humorous character in addition to his radical political stance.

Questioning on the one hand the contemporary heritage of modern architecture that set out at the turn of the century with utopian dreams, on the other hand **Berghe** forms his own personal utopia. The manifestation of the utopian way of thought in art has a multilayered nature, and begins, as Berghe does, with the questioning of existing conditions. The utopian character of Berghe's works is revealed through the relationship between the work of art, its utopian character, and the effort to create a better world. In the **Flintstones Modernism** series, by forming a relationship on the level of images with furniture designed by **Alexandre Noll**, the famous modernist designer of the 1950s, Berghe proposes a new route for the revitalization of modern architecture with moral values. In consideration of the fact that the technology we use today is quite backward, cumbersome and expensive compared to the cheaper technology that could be introduced with the knowledge we have, Berghe cynically returns to the simplicity and plainness of *The Flintstones* where an elephant's trunk is used instead of the tap and a pelican instead of a trashcan. In place of the clumsy buildings that helplessly collapse on top of each other during an earthquake, he reminds us of the natural formation of the *Fairy Chimneys*.

Adolf Loos once stated that, "There are designers who make interiors not so that people can live well in them, but so that they look good on photographs." (*Von der Sparsamkeit Regarding Economy*, Adolf Loos, translated by Francis R. Jones, p.175 in *Raumplan versus Plan Libre*, Adolf Loos/Le Corbusier, edited by Max Risselada, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 2008.) Even during early times when digital editing techniques had not yet been developed, it is known that **Le Corbusier** touched up photographs to improve their appearance, even removing, for instance, a natural slope, or elements such as trees from photographs of buildings. According to **Beatriz Colomina**, the distance or depth in these photographs no longer represents space by separating one object from the other, as it does in the real world; rather distance is transformed into the representation of the rupture between the object and its image. Considering the fact that **Berghe** works from archive photographs, we could say that in his watercolours, he conceptualizes, through his interventions, architectural images that appear like

'advertisement photographs'. As in ad photos and posters of the period, the car and the home are depicted together in Berghe's works too. In these paintings where there are no human figures, the empty armchair, the chair or the bed seem to describe the kind of human being that might relate to these spaces. In 'The Man Without Qualities', Robert Musil's novel that seeks to narrate all the contradictions of a society and individual caught up in the process of modernism, the protagonist **Ulrich** complains of a slogan he comes across in art magazines: 'tell me where you live, and I will tell you who you are.' Although **Adolf Loos** believes that the home grows along with those who live in it, his contemporary Josef Hoffmann believes that the individual cannot leave his own traces in the home, because the home is in harmony with an aspect of his character that does not belong to him: the form of social convention.

Berghe avoids identification in his works; he prefers to reduce the object he wants to represent to its ordinary and simplest existence. If we were to compare the objects he chooses to the words of a language, he is in a sense distorting the grammar of a language; he tampers with the secret meanings hidden behind the objects and reverses the manifesto of symbols with a Foucaultesque gesture. In spaces decorated in a purist manner with pieces of furniture designed by the famous designers of the period, the bathtub, the floor or the armchair are covered in blood. Berghe's works often remind us of Walter Benjamin's thesis on civilisation and barbarism. Berghe uses the metaphor of blood as if to recall the oppression and exploitation the bourgeoisie has instated over the lower layers of society in order to sit comfortably in its armchair and sustain its privilege and security. *Spacelessness* is a term often used to define modernism, and Berghe almost vaporizes space by thinning the paint with water. The artist's technique, fluid, transparent, swift, dynamic, flexible and complex, uses the language of modern architecture itself to force it into a corner.

According to **Walter Benjamin**, architecture is tactile rather than optical, and is related to habits and adjustment. Regarding the home as the extension of the mother's womb, **Benjamin** sees in the home a search for protection and a protective case. He states that the 19th century imagined the home as a box, and that it crammed the individual, along with all his belongings, into this box. In Berghe's paintings we see the cry of the subject rebelling against this box-space and the objects that fill it. In addition to his highly advanced watercolour technique, **Berghe** adds signs of street culture such as graffiti to his work, thus displaying a hybrid structure. Writing seems to complement the painting; in the same manner that words do not suffice to describe in a literary sense, in the act of painting the figure requires writing. His rapid technique and his use of writing are also extensions of his political and interventionist identity.

In his '**Ghost Town**' series, **Berghe** draws a wide and horizontal frame to paint the big picture, taking up a variety of topics including Venice, which is in danger of being completely immersed under water by the year 2100, the Prypiat Amusement Park that opened a day after the Chernobyl disaster as if nothing had happened, the town of Kangbashi in China which was built for a million people but only hosts a few thousand today and the controversial TOKI housing estates that are sprouting across all corners of Turkey. In his work on the container ship *Ital Florida* that was caught up in a storm in the Indian Ocean, damaged containers piled upon each other remind us of scenes from earthquake sites, but also serve as a metaphor for European Union countries that have become a burden to one another. A triangular pediment, an architectural component inherited from Ancient Greece, becomes a symbol of the fall of western civilisation when depicted on the pavement where it has fallen in front of abandoned homes in Detroit, the once-prosperous capital of the American automobile industry that has today lost more than half of its population due to economic contraction. The *Lee Plaza Hotel* in Detroit, a luxurious hotel until the 1990s, or the now abandoned Olympic Complex in Berlin, built in 1934, are architectural symbols of an economic system on the verge of collapse.

Berghe's work titled '**Ins Leere Gesprochen/Spoken Into the Void**' is about a 'cooking utensil' an archaeological find excavated in Brazil in 1887. The utensil is human-shaped, but empty. In his famous article titled 'Ins Leere Gesprochen/Spoken Into the Void', **Adolf Loos**, a prominent architect and thinker of the early period of modern architecture, mentions a conversation between an architect and a rich man who wants the architect 'to design for him a perfect home'. When the structure is complete, the customer has everything, yet since he has nothing else left to ask for, he no longer desires to live. The empty food plate depicted by Berghe gains further significance when we think of the hundreds of millions of people who live below the hunger threshold and the indifference displayed by the global economy regarding this fact. The human being needs, first and foremost, food and a 'home' to take shelter; yet the system continues to produce spaces of spectacle and consumption. In his performance titled '**Occupy ...**', Berghe dons the mask of V from the graphic novel by Alan Moore titled 'V for Vendetta' that was also made into a film and begins to read excerpts from Karl Marx's 'Communist Manifesto'. Exchanging the letter 'S' in the name Gallery MARS with an 'X', he adds the word 're-regardism' to the gallery floor. The time to re-read Marx is long overdue.

The desire to approach architecture and art as tools of communication and the will towards a new meaning and integrity in life itself are what bring the **Architectural Research Exhibitions** and **Luk Berghe** together.

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