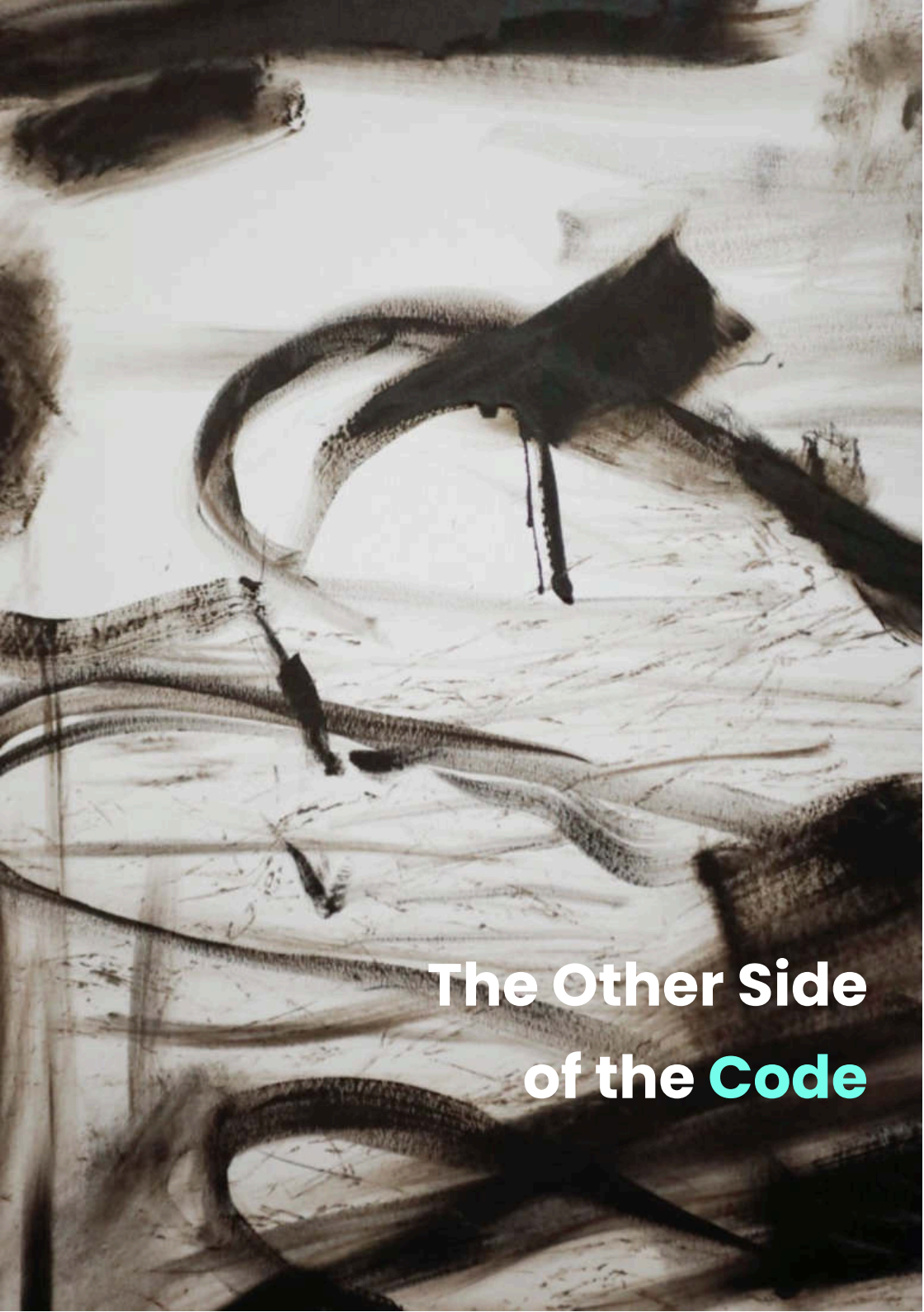




The Other Side of the **Code**

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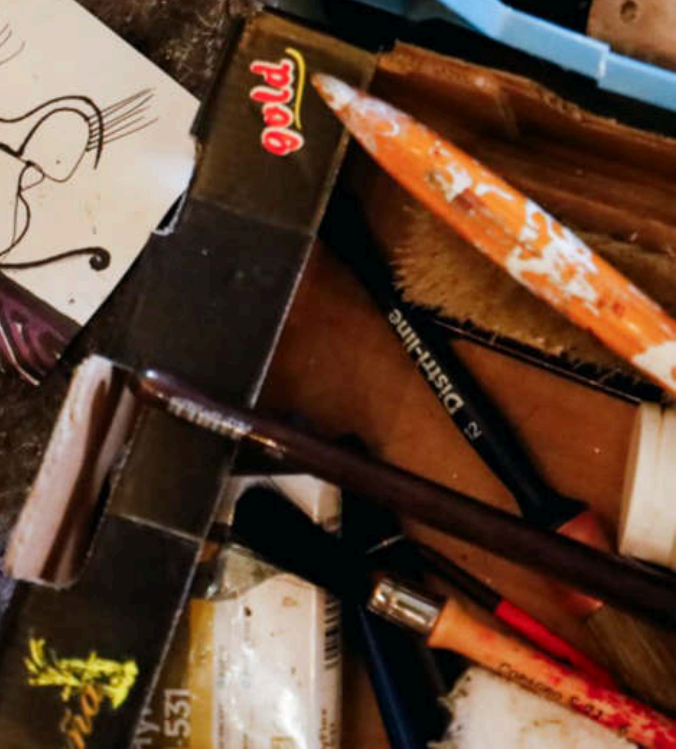
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In the spring of 2026, artist Frank Ryckeboer painted several large works for Dimitri Gielis's house of the future.

‘The Other Side of the Code’ is an impression in words and images of this remarkable project.



Kurt Gooris

Kurt Gooris (1976) is an interior architect and responsible for the design and interior of the house. From 2019 onwards, he and Dimitri were in almost weekly contact about the progress of the build, and that initial working relationship gradually grew into a friendship built on mutual respect, trust and shared interests.

For Kurt, good is never quite good enough, and very good can always be better. That is probably what makes Dimitri and him recognise and appreciate each other. Kurt is also the one who approached artist Frank Ryckeboer to create the large work that now hangs in the living room.

No Small References

Kurt Gooris: Dimitri wanted to build a house that had never been built before. It had to be a house with personality, in the broadest sense of the word, both in appearance and in functionality. Seven years ago, he already knew exactly why he was building this house. Tens of kilometres of cable run through the ceilings. The house of the future already stands today in Heverlee, and it is well ahead of the technical developments of this moment. It is literally a laboratory for Dimitri's ideas.

The design of the house is inspired by two iconic architectural styles. On one hand, the futurism of the nineteen-sixties. A villa that could feature in a James Bond film. The architecture of the sixties has since proven it can withstand the test of time; that crisp modernity still crackles through those designs. Alongside that, we had the house from the film Iron Man in mind. It's also why Iron Man welcomes visitors at the front door. I admit, James Bond, Iron Man and sixties futurism are no small references, but a person is still allowed to cherish his dreams. Looking at what it eventually became, we can be enormously proud of that. A large and idiosyncratic work of art belonged there, as the icing on the cake.

Superior Nonchalance

To optimise the sound, we wanted to hang an acoustic panel measuring three by three metres in the living room. That could, of course, be supplied in plain white or another colour, and a print was also an option. But a stag in front of a forest edge, or the sun setting over a lake on the savannah, was not what we had in mind. I had already been

toying with the idea of sketching something myself when, by chance, my good friends Rick and Maartje dropped by with a few pen drawings by Frank Ryckeboer.

Frank turned out to be from their village, and the simplicity and power of his work appealed to me immediately. And mind you, these were drawings on the back of a beer coaster. If he could make that same drawing, with the same superior nonchalance, on a three-by-three acoustic panel, it would fit this project perfectly. Something with character and guts had to go up there. That's how it started, that simply.

Bang! Wham!

The first time I met Frank Ryckeboer in the flesh, doubt hit me. Based on Rick and Maartje's stories, and on the drawings I'd seen of his work, I expected to meet a rough, forceful man, an artist who faced the world with confidence and a healthy dose of arrogance. But nothing could have been further from the truth: Frank turned out to be a quiet, calm, timid man, at times even somewhat shy. I was afraid that with this commission we would be dragging him rudely out of his comfort zone.

That feeling kept nagging at me until, a few days later, a picture came through on WhatsApp of a sketch Frank had quickly made of roughly what he had in mind. Bang! Wham! It hit the nail right on the head. Goosebumps! I remember exactly where I was: at the traffic light by Wijnegem Shopping Center. Not the most inspiring place in the world, but I will never forget it. I parked the car and called Frank straight away. 'Yes, I've been thinking about my visit to



Dimitri,' he said modestly, 'and I saw that artificial tree behind the house, and the birds that came to it. Those were rose-ringed parakeets, a kind of parrot. Parrots are beautiful birds that can talk. But they don't really talk, they mimic sounds. You can make them say whatever you want. They're not all that different, really, from those modern AI chat modules.'

On the Right Track

I was dumbfounded. Frank was a forest ranger, someone who was happiest out in the woods among the badgers, the foxes and the deer. A person could hardly be further removed from the digital domain. He wanted to hang a few taxidermied parrots in the light fixtures, and had already asked his friend Robbie Robben to look out for some specimens. Robbie Robben, the taxidermist who made a name for himself with the chickens he mounted for artist Koen Vanmechelen. 'And I immediately asked Robbie whether he could mount an owl too,' Frank added, as if it were obvious. 'That owl stands for true wisdom, for calm and reflection. Even though owls don't exactly have that reputation these days. But I actually rather like that ambivalence.'

The depth of his associations, the layeredness of his work, the ease with which he connected apparent contradictions. I was genuinely impressed. This seemed like a different person from the Frank I thought I had met. My doubts vanished on the spot. After that phone call I sat in the car for a long time, and called everyone involved in this project: 'We're on the right track, this is going to be good, this is going to be really good.'

A Lovely Couple

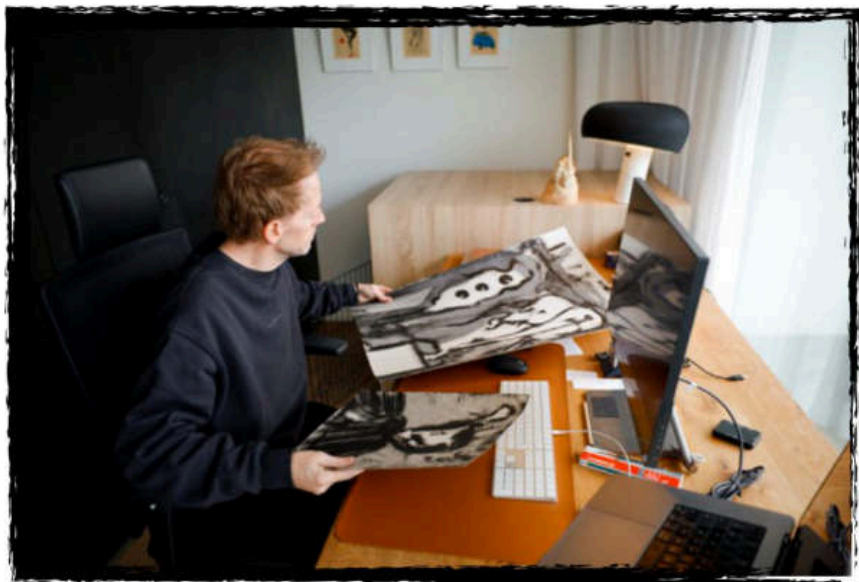
What I find so beautiful about Frank is that he wanted rose-ringed parakeets mounted to hang in the light fixture. But Robbie could only get hold of them if he had them shot, and Frank didn't want that. 'I'm not going to kill animals for my art.' Now parrots are coming instead, and that actually makes the story, and the thinking behind it, even stronger. Yes, the richness of his ideas and the flexibility of his mind keep surprising me.

When I talk to people about Dimitri, they often use the word visionary. He sees the future in a fluid way. In fragments, in pieces, in puzzle pieces that sometimes only fall into place years later. And he manages to shape his ideas out of those ingredients, which is something very few people are given. And then, suddenly, along comes Frank Ryckeboer, someone who has nothing to do with technology. Who speaks an entirely different language. He listens to Dimitri in an associative way and translates what he hears into images that are, again, fragments. In his work we can see what was said between them without words. Dimitri and Frank have a bond, a connection without language. They'd really make a lovely couple.

Joking About the Silliest Things

The studio where Frank made these life-size works is a barn. Or no, it's more of a tall, open passage with a roof. In early March it was cold, unpleasant, freezing. But when I walked in there, something happened. The work embraced me. It sounds very esoteric, and that's not usually my thing, but I felt a sense of shelter that I don't often experience with art. It consumed me completely; that was a very special moment.

Frank's work has the same layeredness that he has himself. If you run into him at a café, one evening he might be a fine drinking companion you can joke around with about the silliest things, but the next evening you can philosophise with him about human inadequacy and the meaning of existence. All those lines come together in his art: his view of the world, his modesty, his zest for life, his surroundings and his place within them. And that down-to-earth way of living fits Dimitri's work remarkably well. I didn't know that when we started this, but I'm glad and grateful that we did it this way. It couldn't have gone any other way, it had to be like this.





Frank Ryckeboer

As a boy, Frank Ryckeboer (1966) visited his grandmother in Berlin with his parents a few times a year. For a boy from Lubbeek, Berlin was a completely different, magical world. The Kurfürstendamm, the Siegessäule, the Reichstag, Checkpoint Charlie, the Brandenburg Gate, the Berlin Wall. History was written on every façade there.

From the age of fifteen, he also visited the many museums there and was struck by the raw expressive power of the so-called neo-expressionists. This group of young German artists, who called themselves the 'Neue Wilde', included people like Anselm Kiefer, Markus Lüpertz and Georg Baselitz. From that moment on, young Frank wanted to paint the way they did.

Messing Around with Glue and Paint

Frank Ryckeboer: In the early eighties, the Antwerp Academy of Fine Arts had enough students in the painting programme to form two classes. I was placed in the class of Mr Wolters Van der Weij, a teacher who was close to retirement. He had been teaching there for a very long time, and had been teaching the same lesson for a very long time. There was absolutely no room in his class for creativity or the expression of personal feelings. Six weeks working on a still life, a strict assessment, and off you go to the next still life.

It was absolutely nothing like what I expected from the academy, and completely the opposite of what I wanted deep down. Instead of a fierce New Wild artist, they wanted to turn me into an Old-Fashioned Good Boy. And all while the other class had a young, enthusiastic teacher. There they were allowed to make collages, mess about with glue and paint, and crumple up paper. I begged to be allowed to switch classes, but no, the academy wouldn't budge.

A Great Fire

In the meantime, in Antwerp's nightlife, I had run into Fred Bervoets. He was already a well-known artist at the time, and I looked up to him enormously. He made the kind of art I wanted to make myself. With nails, rope, paint, canvas, wood, all sorts of things, and preferably all mixed together. Fred often exhibited at De Zwarte Panter, at the time the best gallery in Antwerp. A bunch of young artists had a group exhibition there back then: Christian Vanbeveren, Marc Kennes, Freddy De Vierman, Bruno Sluydts; 'the wild painters'. Fred was their mentor, and I felt at home among those guys. They were a

few years older than me, but in my eyes they had already carved out a place for themselves in the world. And just like me, they looked up to Fred.

Fred Bervoets was a wonderful storyteller and a heavy drinker. I learned far more from what he told me at the bar at night, and from what he drew on the back of a beer coaster, than from anything they taught me at the academy during the day. He was also incredibly productive; when he wasn't at the café, he was in his studio. He let me come and paint there. Canvases, paint, ink, oil pastels, I could take whatever I needed. As a young guy, I needed that freedom so badly. There was a great fire burning inside me, and he saw that.

A Thousand Kilos Lighter

'You shouldn't stay here at the academy,' he kept telling me. 'They'll snuff you out here. They'll break you here. You need to go to Ghent.'

Although I loved life in Antwerp and Fred's adventurous lessons, I followed his advice.

For my entrance exam in Ghent, I had to make a few drawings as well as an oil painting. The examiner came by now and then to take a look, silently, hands behind his back. It made me a bit nervous; that kind of piercing gaze over your shoulder wasn't exactly reassuring.

When time was up, the discussion of my work followed. That examiner turned out to be Marc Maet, who would become my teacher in my first year. A very good painter and a wonderful teacher; beneath his feigned arrogance he was a gentle and inspiring man. He called over a colleague, Karel Dierickx, another painter of a very high calibre. 'Come and take a look, Karel,' he said, 'can you believe they failed this boy in Antwerp?'

A heavy weight fell from my shoulders, as if I'd suddenly become a thousand kilos lighter. I could have cried with happiness.

Well Spotted

The freedom Marc Maet gave me was exactly what I needed. He came round often to look, but never said anything. Only if you asked for advice would he be willing to offer a suggestion here or there. He wanted you, as an artist, to learn to work your way through the difficult stretches of the process too. Painting can be a struggle, a fight with the canvas, with the paint, with reality, with your fears, with your longings, a fight with yourself. 'You have to stew in it to get to the heart of a work,' he would say. And that's exactly how it is.

I worked at the academy with such enthusiasm. The intoxication of painting can be addictive. I enrolled in evening classes too. After class I'd quickly eat a sandwich and shut myself back in the studio. As long as the light was on, the caretaker knew there were still students around. I often put in fourteen-hour days, and even then I'd feel like I had only just started. Those four years at the academy in Ghent were a wonderful time for me. Fred had seen that clearly.

A Promising Career

During my final year, someone came knocking who wanted to start a gallery. He was the son of a wealthy industrialist and had bought a beautiful building. He had seen my work and wanted to work with me. I didn't really feel the need for it, but I agreed. So we hung the work in that beautiful space and it looked stunning. Properly professional. And then the trouble started.





The works I had selected were all the same size, but the prices I wanted to ask for them were different. That turned out to be a big problem for the man.

'That's not possible,' he said.

'It is possible,' I replied.

'And why is that?'

'Because I think one piece is better than the other.'

'No, that's not possible.'

'Why not?'

'As an artist, you have to think they're all equally good.'

'No, I can't do that.'

Anyway, I took those paintings off the wall and walked away without saying a word. I was twenty-five years old, and a promising career was already behind me.

Socially Maladjusted

Back at the academy, we'd once been asked in class how we saw our futures. Many of my classmates had raised their hands when asked who wanted to become a teacher after graduating. They got their diplomas without any further trouble. I couldn't bear the thought of standing in front of a class; I wanted to be an artist. But after that clash with the gallery owner, I was suddenly no longer so sure.

In the eighties, the relationship between the artist and commerce was very different from today. The artist, really, didn't concern himself with sales. Vincent van Gogh's way of life was much closer to the artistic ideal back then than it is today. A painter was ideally a socially maladjusted genius who scraped by on the margins of existence, lived on thin air, and bent over backwards to wheedle advances out of his wealthy admirers. Unfortunately, I wasn't cut out for that, so I found a job and worked double shifts at a bakery. That felt more honest to me.

Pride

In the meantime I had started a relationship, and together we had moved to Limburg, where, with her parents' help, she opened a curtain-fabric shop. That wasn't exactly my dream, but I

rented a garage where I could paint, and got to know Dirk Claesen, who turned out to live further down the street. I had already met him a few times at the academy; a fascinating guy who had specialised in making replicas of wild animals. Elephants, lions, tigers, orcas; you couldn't think of anything too crazy for him to make, at full scale. I started painting those replicas to make them look lifelike. It was also through Dirk that I got to know Robbie Robben.

We had some crazy adventures with Dirk. How do you transport twenty dead sharks from the French coast to Limburg in an uncooled truck, on a hot summer night? Whatever you do, not the way we did it. What a disaster that was. Or the time we had to make Neanderthals for the Gallo-Roman Museum in Tongeren, and a friend of ours, an artist, agreed to model for us. We made a cast of his head. He had to sit for an hour with hot silicone on his shaved head, breathing through a straw. His head was burned red afterwards; he must have been in absolute agony. 'Sit still,' we kept shouting at him. Now he's proud of it, but boy, did he curse us at the time.

Like a Bolt of Lightning

After my divorce, I moved to Heks and became a forest ranger at the castle. The count who lives there has a large estate around the castle, with a lot of woodland and a lot of animals, wild or otherwise. I've been mad about animals my whole life. I got that from my father, who could tell you the Latin name of any animal. I was always outside, through the fields, into the woods. We also had lots of animals at home, that was always



allowed. I'd come home with mice and rats. I bred those rats until my father would carefully come and tell me there really were rather a lot of them now. Then some of them had to go. So that work as a forest ranger suited me well. Lots of freedom, something different to do every day, and always outdoors. Chasing off poachers with the jeep at night, feeding the livestock during the day, pruning trees or rescuing a calf from the stream. Looking after the horses, fixing the fence. As a forest ranger, you have to be able to do a bit of everything.

As luck would have it, one day my back went out and I had to stay flat on my back for six weeks. Over the years in between, I had painted and drawn a great deal, but every so often I would throw it all in a heap and set fire to it. No, that wasn't very sensible, but even back at the academy I never got attached to my work. I only had one real argument with Marc Maet, when he asked me what had happened to the painting I'd been working on the day before. I hadn't been able to find a new canvas quickly enough, so I'd whitewashed that painting and started a new work over it. 'But that was a beautiful painting,' he'd exclaimed angrily. But for me, the painting itself was what mattered, not having painted it. The satisfaction, for me, was in the action. Bang! The paint on the canvas, Bam! Done, and on to the next one. Like a bolt of lightning, which also only lasts a fraction of a second. That force of the moment, that charge.

Close to My Heart

Because of that bed rest, I suddenly had weeks of time to draw; there was nothing else I could do, and besides, I couldn't get up to throw the drawings in the bin. At the village café I always used to draw on the back of beer coasters. Maartje Elants, Rick's partner, is

a very good painter herself, and she'd asked me a few times if she could see some of my work. But I didn't have any, of course, because I always burned everything.

So I showed her the drawings I'd made during my bed rest. Long story short, the selection she made from them was exhibited in the gallery of Gerda Steegmans, Dirk Claesen's former wife. Almost all my drawings sold during that exhibition. And the best part, for me, was that it was a joint exhibition with an artist who is close to my heart. Indeed, it was an exhibition together with Fred Bervoets.

After thirty-five years, I have finally become the artist I feared I would never be again. And believe me, that feels good. Really good.







Robbie Robben

As a young boy, Robbie Robben (1980) wanted, more than anything, to become a biologist. Those were the golden years of David Attenborough and Jacques Cousteau, who seemed to be on television day and night, out among the apes and the dolphins. That's how he dreamed his future: full of adventure, friendship, and a harmonious bond between people and nature.

That dream shattered during his career aptitude test. 'As a biologist, you work in a laboratory behind a desk,' they told him, 'you'd have to do things you'll never be able to learn.' His romantic idea was crushed, and back then he wasn't yet resilient enough to respond with a heartfelt 'fuck you'.

Thirty Years or More

Robbie Robben: A cousin of my dad's was a taxidermist. A village taxidermist, and I don't mean that as an insult. For the local hunters, he'd occasionally mount a pheasant or a fox, or a squirrel for grandma's cabinet. He made the kind of animals you sometimes still come across at flea markets, the ones that stare back at you unhappily while sitting crooked and anatomically wrong on a tree stump. That wasn't really his fault, mind you. My uncle didn't have the materials we use now; he stuffed his animals with mattress filling. On rubbish-collection days, I'd walk the streets for him looking for mattresses. Back then, a mattress often stayed on a bed for thirty years or more, and only ended up on the street once grandma died. The hygiene wasn't exactly guaranteed a hundred per cent, to put it with a certain sense of understatement.

My uncle had a small workshop. There was an old wood stove in it, which struggled hard in winter to keep the cold at bay. The worktable was covered in newspaper to work on. On top of that lay the pruning shears and the big knives. For the more delicate work he used razor blades; he didn't own a scalpel. In the corner lay a pile of rusted wire and a stack of root wood: fallen trees from which he'd sawn the branches and roots to mount the animals on.

My First Assignment

I loved going there, often on Sundays in my smart little suit. One day my uncle threw a dead stone marten on the table and said I could stuff it. My first assignment! I was proud as a peacock. At home I helped my father slaughter the rabbits and pigs, so I already knew how to remove an animal's skin.

But that was about the meat; this was about the skin. That took a bit of a mental switch.

I still have that mounted marten. Anatomically it might not be perfect, but you couldn't destroy it in a hundred years. That animal was treated with arsenical soap. Extremely toxic. Any moths that happen to land on it drop dead the moment they touch down. That stuff has since been banned, and rightly so. Many colleagues from the old days were felled by it. Those men barely knew anything about the product. They'd coat the animals with it in the morning and sit down for their sandwiches at noon. Washing their hands was the exception rather than the rule.

The Turning Point

The artist Dirk Claesen lived in our village. When I met him, it felt as though the gates of heaven had opened for me. In his studio stood a mighty collection: an enormous elephant, a rhinoceros, a turtle, a hippopotamus, a shark, a piece of whale. I can't remember everything, but there was a lot, a huge amount. And although Dirk wasn't a taxidermist, I felt completely at home in his workshop.

He took me to Liège, to the largest animal taxidermy supplier in Belgium: African game, South American wildlife, hunting trophies. Hundreds of mannequins stood waiting there, thousands of antlers, stacks of tanned hides. This was quite something else compared to my uncle's little stove and his table covered in newspaper. I was hooked instantly. Not long after, I started an internship with a taxidermist in Namur. On weekends, unpaid. No problem. I was eager and wanted to learn everything.



A Choice

For ten years, really, I juggled three jobs at once. I worked full-time at the plastics factory, renovated my workshop with my own hands, and mounted animals full-time on top of that. Stubbornly, I ignored every signal from my body until I could no longer sleep and my heart was beating every rhythm except the right one. The gauges were well into the red, and the cardiologist urgently advised me to make a choice while that option still existed. Looking back, that was the turning point.

I went to work at the factory for one more day, just to be sure, but after my shift I told the personnel manager he could prepare my papers. When I closed the factory door behind me, a whole world opened up for me.

A Great Stroke of Luck

The first few weeks felt fantastic: the freedom to do exactly what I loved most. When you're your own boss, you're the best staff member you could ever wish for. Until, three months later, the first social security bill landed on the doormat, and the paperwork started piling up. I hadn't even sent an invoice yet, and the bills kept coming thick and fast. That's when I had the great fortune of the artist Koen Vanmechelen ringing my doorbell. He was looking for someone who could mount his chickens. I have never said 'yes' faster than I did then.

A week later, Dirk Claesen was standing at my door with two dead lions in the back of his van. They'd come from the zoo, and could I mount them for him. I had never mounted a lion before, so that was a real challenge. I'd done a few cats before, of course, but a lion is a different matter entirely. Two weeks after that, they called

to bring by a leopard, and a month after that, a polar bear. It was what I'd wanted my whole life, and suddenly it was all happening.

Loving

At a certain point I stopped mounting pets; it only ever leads to trouble. I understand it too. A dog that's been a lonely old lady's best friend for fourteen years is irreplaceable. However well I tried to mount it, the dog I mean, it always ended in disappointment. Because Fifi no longer curls up on the sofa next to her owner in the evening while she watches television, and no longer wags her tail when the fridge opens. No, Fifi just stands stock-still in the corner all day.

My clients are generally enthusiastic, the hunters especially. They never had a loving relationship with the animal they want mounted; at most, they saw it for a few minutes. They're not looking at the loyal gleam in its eyes; they're only interested in the trophy and the story behind the hunt. The bigger the antlers, the happier the hunter.

The Real Work

A taxidermist needs material knowledge: about the fur, about the chemistry, but knowledge of anatomy is ultimately the most important thing. That's the difference between mounting animals in the past and today. Until the sixties, animals here were essentially stuffed. A taxidermist used to be called a 'stuffer'. The animal was opened up from the back, hollowed out, and coated with arsenic. Then sawdust papier-mâché was pushed inside. They stuffed it full like a plush teddy bear, and then kneaded it until the shape more or less matched.

From the early sixties, the Americans started making polyurethane foam mannequins. Nowadays the animal's inner form comes ready-made and perfectly finished. Fitting the skin over it is, honestly, fairly straightforward. It's only at the positioning and finishing stage that the real work begins, and that's when you need to know exactly what you're doing. Chemistry matters, and it doesn't stop at tanning the hide. I often work with polyester, to recreate and cast certain parts of an animal. That's a specialism; not everyone can do it. On top of that, you need to be able to mix colours well, and I'm lucky enough to be a carpenter by trade. And a blacksmith too, because a taxidermist also needs to be able to weld a little. Sculpting is an essential part of it as well. You need to be a jack of many trades to master this work. And without patience, it never works.

Development

I've now been working as a taxidermist for more than twenty-five years, and in that time I've seen an enormous amount of work, my own and my colleagues'. And really, we mostly make more of the same. There's far too little progress or innovation in this trade: a head on the wall, a skull on a little shelf, an owl on a branch. And mind you, that can look beautiful. But it's high time for a bit of change. Interiors change, sofas change, curtains change. Wallpaper, lighting, everything changes. But that little squirrel is still standing on the same branch. Taxidermy is allowed to be more modern, more stylish. It should be allowed to find its place within the interior. That's what I'm working towards.

Hunting is predominantly a man's world, and it's a very straightforward one. They shoot a deer and have me mount the head, they come home with it a few weeks later and want to

hang it proudly on the wall. But quite often, that head ends up in the cellar instead, because the wife doesn't much like it hanging in the living room. And in a way, I understand that too. That's why, in recent years, I've been looking for a more elegant form, turning to other kinds of animals. Because a wild boar will always be a clumsy brute on the wall, and a deer will always be a brown animal with branches on its head. But a colourful duck, or a pheasant, or a parrot, is a different matter. It becomes more artistic, it rises above the merely decorative. For me, that's far more challenging, and a logical next step in my development. And it works: the hunters find it more beautiful, and so do their wives.







*‘...I felt a sense of shelter that I don’t
often experience with art...’*

– Kurt

*‘...You have to stew in it to get
to the heart of a work...’*

- Frank





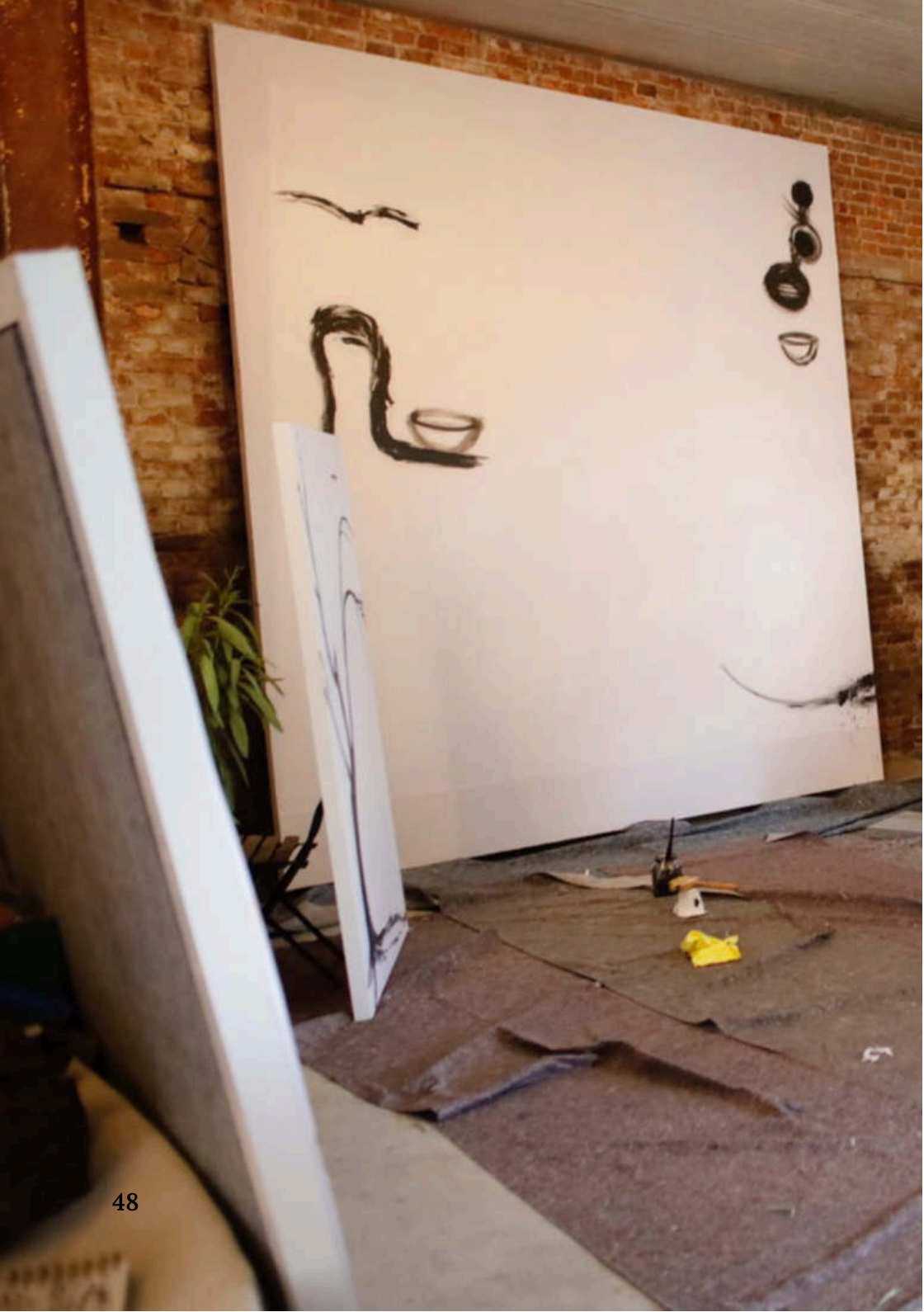


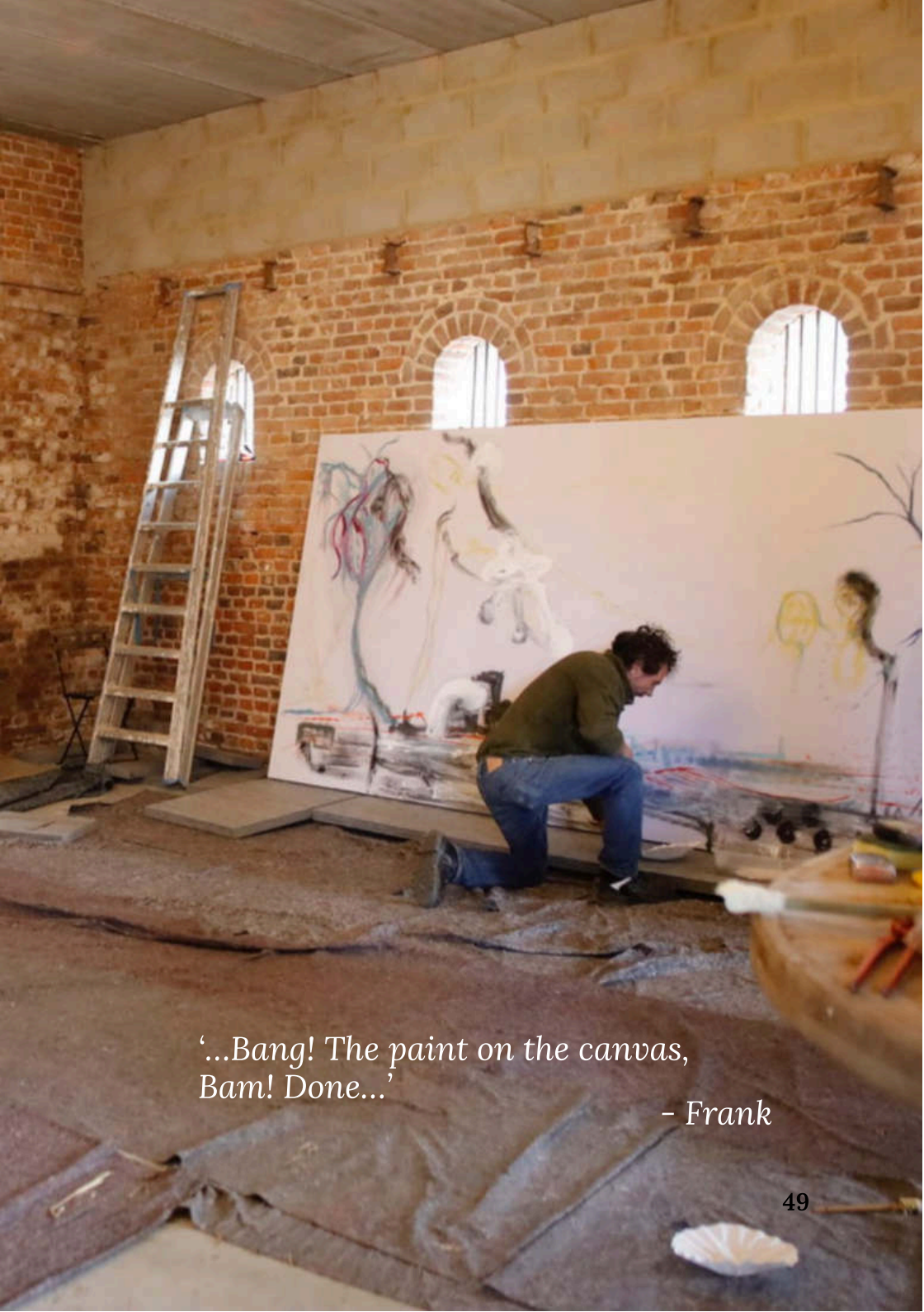
*‘...Instead of a fierce New Wild
artist, they wanted to turn me
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- Frank









*'...Bang! The paint on the canvas,
Bam! Done...'*

- Frank

series 1





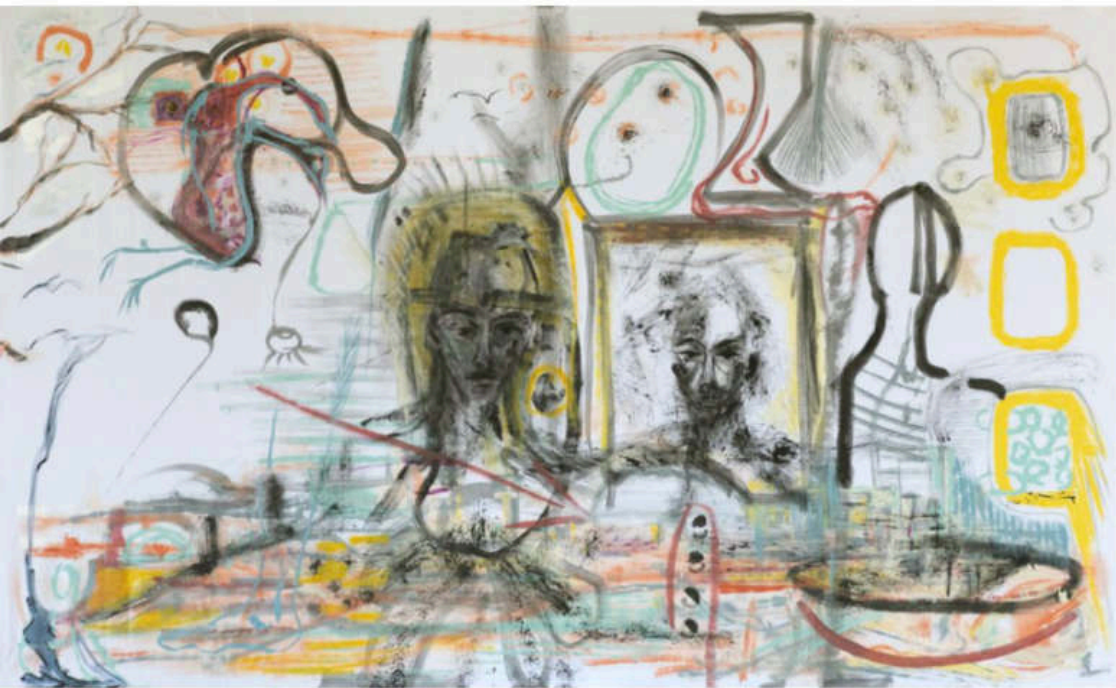




series 2





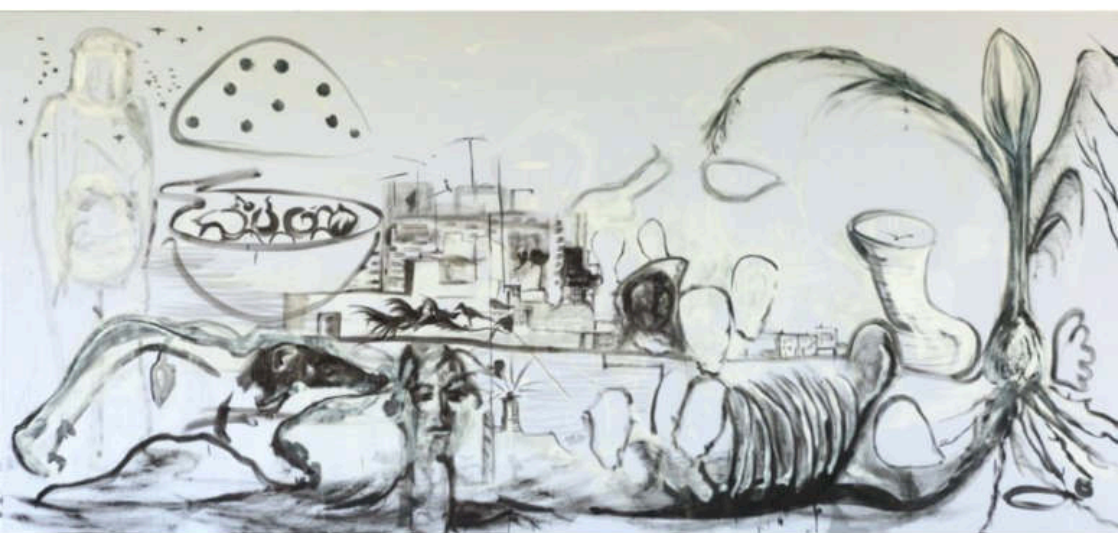




series 3











In a house where technology explores the future, an unexpected dialogue emerges. An artist, far removed from the world of algorithms and artificial intelligence, looks at the same questions from a radically different angle. His painting translates a technological ambition into image, intuition and imagination. And so, on the other side of the code, a new way of looking at intelligence is born.