

15  
Feb '17

# Robots with attitude take over Brussels museum of urban art

by Liz Newmark,

**Recent articles:** *Q&A: VUB introduces future teachers to challenges of urban education*, *Brussels temple to urban art brings light to the darkness*, *Pop-up cinema project brings refugees and locals together*

## SUMMARY

*For its second exhibition, the Mima on Brussels' canal is showcasing graffiti legend Boris Tellegen – but with no scribble in sight*

## Childhood memories

**W**ith more than 44,000 visitors under its belt after the first hugely popular show, City Lights, the Millennium Iconoclast Museum of Art (Mima) is presenting Boris Tellegen: A Friendly Takeover. The retrospective of the 48-year-old Amsterdam-born artist offers everything from small graffiti drawings to myriad giant robots – one even playing electro music.



First achieving fame as a graffiti artist under the pseudonym Delta in the early 1990s, Tellegen's work has branched out into visual arts, graphic design, architecture, music, fashion and film – all displayed in freestyle, non-chronological order over three of Mima's four floors.

But, as both one of Mima's founders, Raphaël Cruyt, and Tellegen make clear, the walls – somewhat ironically for a one-time graffiti star – remain bare. "Graffiti is the foundation of my work, but it's difficult in a museum," Tellegen explains. "I am flirting with graffiti again, but I wasn't always a graffiti artist."

Tellegen trained as an industrial design engineer, and this schooling is evident in the wealth of toys showing the beauty of industrial design, from a special Centaur pinball machine, with Tellegen's distinctive black-and-white artwork to geometrically patterned Braque-like T-shirts and designer shoes. "It never seems like he's working," says Cruyt. "He just wants to play."

## Eastern exposure

---

It's hard to pick out highlights from this [fascinating show](#), but the video of the graffiti-covered Deutsche Bahn train is mesmerising. "I still do the occasional graffiti workout," Tellegen says with a smile. "But it's with a different intention now. I go back and do this as an artist, not as a graffiti artist."

But the show's *pièce de résistance* is on the second floor: a mammoth, white robot (Tellegen prefers the term totem), with its legs sticking out of the windows and a model railway train running around inside. And with "Do not touch" signs nowhere in sight, everyone is welcome to clamber on board.

As Tellegen puts it, "I really like the small pencil sketches, but you need the big sculptures, too."

“*Sometimes all these references to Russian art in my work make me feel old*”

- BORIS TELLEGEN

There is a Russian 1920s Constructivist feel to much of Tellegen's oeuvre, from his little patterned pictures and collages to huge sculptural installations. Three monochrome wood-block artworks on the first floor form a particularly striking triptych, and Cruyt calls the large-scale painting of a brown-and-white starship shooting up one wall "spatial art".

Tellegen is reluctant to admit these influences. "Sometimes all these references to Russian art in my work make me feel old," he says. But with a visible sense of pride, he says that since 2009, all of his sculptures have been made from recycled and recovered materials – "what you can get from the local skip".

## Cabinet of curiosities

---

Though he feels embarrassed to “have all the toys and the pinball machine,” the cabinet of curiosities on the ground floor, he explains, is “like a shelter to hide away from the big, bad world outside.” The room is filled with his graffiti sketchbooks, drawings, toys and smaller sculptures.

The space also describes his life. “These are all special things, each one has meaning,” he says, pointing to the various pieces. “My seven-year-old daughter, Mia, made this robot out of a CD rack and paper cups.” The glass case filled with Transformers figures was put together by his 10-year-old son, “like mass-produced totems, items to worship”.

As a child, however, Tellegen played more with Lego and model aeroplanes; the show includes his collection of Manga figures. “Collections... you want to have them, and then they become a weight on your shoulders.”

*Until 28 May, Mima, 41 Henegouwenkaai, Brussels*