

Original article in French in:

*Mad - Le Soir*

Wednesday, September 22 2021

Arts, Marché de l'art

Page 46

Translated with the online tool DeepL

# Jeff Kowatch in fullness

The artist of Californian origin exhibits in three different places to retrace a life dedicated to painting.



Parrots in the Park (2021), bâtons à l'huile sur Dibond, 210 × 170 cm, 25.000 €. © GALERIE LA FOREST DIVONNE

Three years after his last exhibition in Brussels, the American painter Jeff Kowatch, who has been living in Belgium for fifteen years, returns to the Faider and La Forest Divonne galleries to show his recent works. To this double exhibition is added a third place, the Odradek space, where the artist exhibits works from his youth, notebooks and sketches, as well as the projection of a film, *Going around in Circles*: a whole critical apparatus that opens with a vibrant letter, written by the young Kowatch to his family when he was twenty years old, to warn them that he wants to become an artist and will do everything to achieve it.

From his late teens on, the young Californian felt a deep metaphysical energy and a need for spirituality that expressed itself in great religious themes such as Christ on the Cross or the already very abstract series of the twelve apostles. His *Coronation of the Virgin Mary*, on view at Odradek, is a poignant reminder of this early pictorial period: the large painting crossed the Atlantic with him and reflects the young artist's lack of means – burlap bags, wall paint bought in a DIY store: he would later learn to make his own materials with little money. “A New York dealer taught me the glazing technique and Rembrandt's recipe for preparing pigments and thinning paint with linseed oil.” This gives his canvases a matte, waxed look and a special luminosity.



Que Seurat Seurat, 2019, bâtons à l'huile sur Dibond, 235 × 190 cm, 30.000 €. © DR

Born into a family with little interest in art, Jeff Kowatch took his first steps in creation thanks to a neighbor who painted in her garage: “She gave me my first lessons and, when I was ten, my mother put me in an oil painting class organized by an artist's material store,” he tells Paul Emond in their interview published by Tandem. There he copied the old masters and learned their techniques. At the age of twenty, the young man immerses himself with passion in theater – to the point of working for three years on the same scene from Chekhov's *The Seagull!* – then he discovers Zen, hence the title of the exhibition, Man Jok, the Korean name given to him during his initiation into the practice of meditation. It means “immobile plenitude”, a state sought by Kowatch in his life as in his works.

### ILLUMINATED FACE-TO-FACE

For the first time this fall, the California-born artist, born in Los Angeles in 1965, is exhibiting his large oil paintings and his aluminum “Dibond” panels, worked with oil sticks, together. A very long creative process: each painting requires one to three years of work for a

hundred successive layers, with necessary drying and sanding times. “All my oil paintings start with a lot of energy, improvisation, but the end result doesn't make that visible, which always disappointed me. The process makes the result more meditative, you lose the initial gesture. So I started this other series on Dibond,” says the artist. Presented separately until now, the assembly of these two mediums aims to show a Jeff Kowatch who fully assumes the diversity of his creation and his personality across time and mediums. Very different energies emanate from these works, as do the small formats created during the confinement: “I've wanted to work on the circus for twenty years, but I lacked a way in. In comedy, you always have to feel the sadness in the background: I wanted to put the grimace under the smile.”

Unable to visit his studio because of the pandemic, and morally despondent, Kowatch worked at home with acrylics – a technique he hadn't used since he started. He also re-read his notebooks and journals of the past thirty years, now publishing in French his "Rare Book" written as a young man in the US. Recalling his California youth, Kowatch remembers visiting the great museums of Los Angeles as a child: “One day I realized I was just following Seurat's lead! My paintings are also pointillism, in a way! Everything completes itself!” The common thread of this life dedicated to painting? The search for the perfect point of balance, that fragile and magnificent moment that is expressed in the colorful fullness of his works: “I almost became a Zen master, but I asked myself: what do I want to be, a Zen master or a painter?”

ALIÉNOR DEBROCQ

► Jeff Kowatch, *Man Jok*, until October the 23rd in three locations in Brussels : Galerie La Forest Divonne, from Tuesday to Saturday from 11 am to 7 pm, 66 rue de l'Hôtel des monnaies, 1060 Brussels, 02-544.16.73, [www.galerielaforestdivonne.fr](http://www.galerielaforestdivonne.fr) ; Galerie Faider, from Wednesday to Saturday from 2 pm to 6 pm, 12 rue Faider, 1050 Brussels, 02-538.71.18, [www.galeriefaider.be](http://www.galeriefaider.be) ; Espace Odradek, 35 rue Américaine, 1050 Brussels, from Friday to Saturday from 2 pm to 6 pm, [//odradekresidence.be](http://odradekresidence.be).