



Day in the Life: Michaël Borremans

At a château-turned-studio in rural Belgium, *Annick Weber* meets the enigmatic artist whose twisted imagination is revitalizing figurative painting. Photography by *Marsý Hild Þórsdóttir*





Borremans was once described by curator Jeffrey Grove as a “pop artist”: His unsettling depictions of torture and violence hold up a dark mirror to the media we consume on a daily basis.

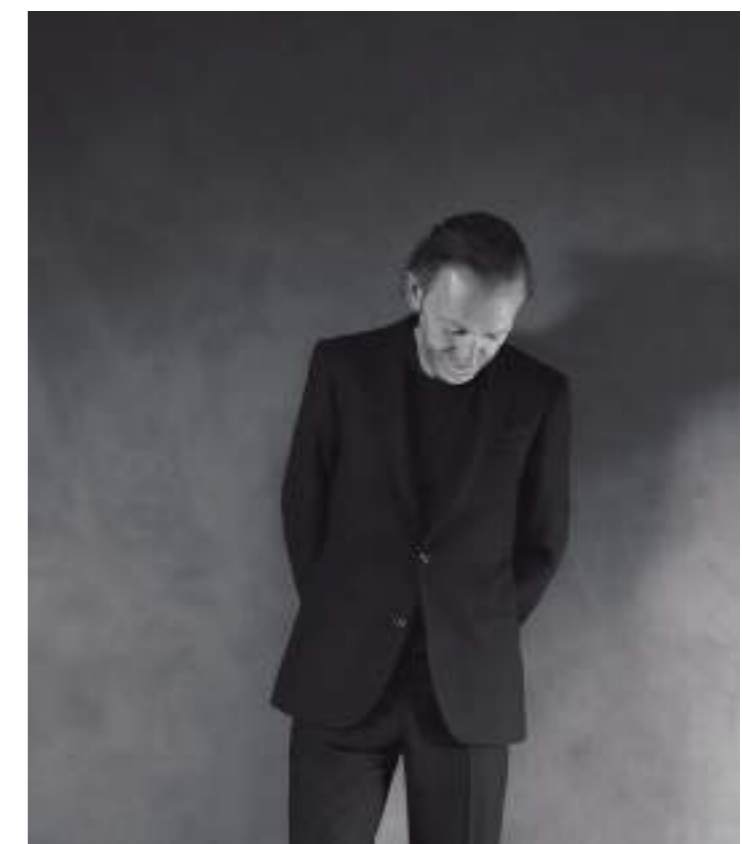
“Can you believe this used to be a car park?” Michaël Borremans asks, looking out onto the vast expanse of greenery unfolding before him. It’s hard to picture the daisy-dotted back garden of the painter’s countryside studio covered in a blanket of concrete. And yet, such was the case nine years ago, when Borremans bought the 19th-century property—formerly a baron’s hunting château—as a rural alternative to his primary studio in Ghent. Today, the site is a tableau of serenity. Ancient trees tower in the distance, and horses graze around them. “A lot of the trees are in their last phase, so I planted some new ones,” Borremans says, pointing to a row of young saplings across the lawn. “You have to make sure that future generations have their trees too.”

One of the most acclaimed figurative painters in Europe, Borremans knows a thing or two about creating a legacy. Born in Belgium in 1963, he turned to painting in the mid-1990s after training in graphic arts and a stint working as a photographer and art school teacher. “I already had a certain control over form and light, I just had to teach myself how to work with colors and the materiality of paint,” he says of his transition. “I started off with things that I could master; a hand or face would have been too hard.” It took five years for Borremans to develop his con-

fidence, and find a figurative language that was truly his own. At the time, the city’s Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art had just opened a new offsite space in Ghent, where he landed a solo show in 2000. The founder of the museum acquired a work and interest from galleries and museums around the world followed soon after. Now, he says, “My paintings get snatched away as soon as I finish one.”

Borremans paints people, but not portraits. He depicts anonymous sitters who look somehow absent, their eyes never meeting those of the viewer. Hooded figures stand frozen as if consumed by some mysterious ritualistic force. Children clasp objects—a missile, a dead hare, a bunch of carrots—that could be mistaken for toys, were it not for the gruesome or absurd connotations they carry. Sometimes, his sitters’ features are blown into grotesque proportions. “My work is two things at the same time: It’s holding a mirror onto the complex, often dark facets of human nature while borrowing a very familiar vocabulary of classic portraiture,” Borremans explains. “It’s contradictory and it’s alienating the beholder, and that’s the fun of it.”

Borremans likes to keep his distance in life, as well as art. He bought this second studio-home in the countryside because he





longed for a place where he could paint in peace. “I’m a loner,” he notes. As well as granting solitude, the sheer size of the property—one floor with a dozen rooms, a barn, an attic “for large-scale works” and a large park-garden “to watch the wildlife”—gives him enough space that he can leave his paintings alone. “The whole house is a studio, which means that I can lock up a work in one room and move on to something else until I’m ready to go back,” Borremans says. Each room has an atmosphere of its own. One resembles a traditional painting studio with easels and map cabinets filled with paper drawings, while others blur the boundaries between working and living—semi-finished canvases rest on windowsills, and painting tools are scattered around dining tables. The interior teems with oddities—a taxidermic badger here, a vintage toy farm there.

Borremans’ process is meticulous and unusual. To start each new piece, he has models come to his studio and pose for him, awkwardly holding a prop. He compares these bizarre, staged situations to theater. Rather than painting from these live models, however, Borremans photographs the scenes and uses the shots as sketches for his work. “These photo shoots are a crucial step in my process,” he says. “I try a lot of things in them; they allow me to check whether a composition is working in terms of space and light.”

When Borremans works in his countryside studio, he likes going for walks around the grounds to clear his mind, though sometimes he’s so absorbed that he forgets to take breaks. Other times, the most productive sessions can happen in 15 minutes. His ideal is to be like “a dandy, who starts working without realizing it,” he says, biting into a piece of flan tart. It’s late afternoon, and this is the first time he’s eaten today. “When I’m into a painting, it becomes my life, and my studio—my microcosmos,” he continues. “I get obsessed with things happening beyond my control. Having a plan is dangerous,

Both Borremans’ countryside retreat and his house in Ghent are filled with odd objects that interest him, some of which are used as props in his paintings.

it produces these clean, uptight results. But being open to taking risks when working with paint, that’s what brings energy into it all.” Borremans’ voice is calm. He often pauses before speaking, taking the time to ponder. “I revere old artists who painted very quickly, like Goya and Caravaggio,” he says. “In their work, the paint itself tells a story.”

Borremans’ admiration of the Old Masters shines through in his technique, which combines the multilayered approach of his Flemish forefathers with the desaturated color palette of the Spanish Baroque and the firm brushstrokes of early Impressionism. Art history books are piled on coffee tables, desks, floors and shelves. But while his style references the classical canon, Borremans’ subject matter—power, race, gender and religion—situates his paintings firmly within the 21st century. “Many painters copy ancient techniques and the result looks ancient too,” he says. “There’s a lot of boring work in the world. It may sound arrogant, but I think mine is not.” Art is a way of “dealing with existence,” he says. “People say my art is cruel, but it’s just how humans are. We can all be cannibals under certain circumstances. We all have good and bad inside us.” But it’s no wonder that viewers might ask the question: His 2017 series *Fire from the Sun* shows naked toddlers, sometimes missing a limb, sometimes covered in a blood-like substance.

Back outside in the garden, Borremans has taken a seat under the sprawling canopy of an oak tree. One of its giant branches is resting on a metal structure he built for support. “We try and help him wherever we can,” he says, looking up at the fragile branch. But the idyll is short-lived. Seconds later he admits to the silliness of his intervention into nature: “We don’t even know if he wants to live,” he says. “Who knows, maybe he’s suffering.” If Borremans were to make a painting of the scene, the metal brace would surely be the prop that his subject is absurdly clinging on to.



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Borremans' desaturated color palette is in part the result of his artistic roots in the black and white world of pencil drawing.