

Ricardo Brey transforms old into contemporary art



Blue is the predominant color at Ricardo Brey's 'Gap in the clouds' exhibition.

KOEN VAN BOXEM | May 19, 2022

In the 'Gap in the clouds' exhibition in the Hof van Busleyden Museum in Mechelen, Cuban artist Ricardo Brey shows how inventive he merges past and present into contemporary art.

It is almost already blue what you see in the basement of Museum Hof van Busleyden. On the wall, in the showcases. In different shapes and shades, but the valuable lapis lazuli stands out the most. Blue is blue in English. 'But in my work here it doesn't mean sad or melancholic,' says Cuban artist Ricardo Brey (67). "It's the blue of the sky, the blue of the planet," he says.

The link to the title 'Gap in the clouds' is quickly made. For the exhibition, curated by Koen Leemans, Brey has been making new works in various shapes and sizes over the past two years, locked up by the lockdowns in his studio. Brey is a painter and collector of objects large and small, drawn to history and science. In the catalog he writes poetry.

Brey grew up in Cuba. The late Jan Hoet brought him to Belgium in the early 1990s, where he still lives and works. "I have no nostalgia for Cuba, not at all."



'Red Glider', ancient yet contemporary.

Hoet brought Brey to the five-yearly arts festival Documenta in Kassel in 1992, where many careers of artists are launched. It was no different for Brey. After the SMAK (2006) and the M HKA (2015), he now exhibits in Mechelen. At first glance that seems strange. Museum Hof van Busleyden is fully committed to the link between Mechelen and the Burgundian era. Mainly old art. But links are also made with contemporary art. This is called transhistorical perspectives.

Brey has a bit of a problem with the term transhistoric. It seems as if he is adding elements to the old art. In Mechelen, it concerns three centuries-old pieces from the collection that he started working with. 'I will not enter into a

The essence

- 'Gap in the clouds' is a new solo exhibition by Cuban artist Ricardo Brey.
- He has lived in Ghent since the 1990s and was discovered by Jan Hoet.
- Brey has made new works of art for the new exhibition during the lockdown over the past two years. He makes installations and paintings. In Mechelen, he is transforming some old works of art to 2022.

There is great symbolism in 'Red Glider'. According to the African tradition, the butterfly gives energy to the wooden bust. She also symbolizes transformation. That is exactly what happened to Saint Barbara in Cuba. The conquistadors brought her to America. Barbara, who is depicted in red robes, protected them from sudden death. The imported slaves from Africa made their own version of Barbara. Their deity Shango dressed as a woman in red clothes to escape from his enemies. To this day, Barbara and Shango are celebrated together on December 4 in Cuba.

There seems to be an old master at work. Or an alchemist, with whom Brey is sometimes compared.

dialogue with those works. I transform them into new, contemporary works of art. That is an essential difference.'

One is 'Red Glider'. In a cavity near the heart of a 15th-century wooden reliquary bust of Saint Barbara, Brey placed a red African butterfly, the *Cymothoe sangaris* (red glider). 'The people at the museum were a bit hesitant at first. What are you going to do with our image then?', they asked.

They shouldn't worry. After the expo, I remove the butterfly and the sculpture is back to the way it was. Like ice becomes water again when you thaw it.'



The Open Garden Door, two botanical books pushed together.

Much of the art on display is in vitrines. To this end, Brey collected numerous objects - 'I go to a lot of flea markets' - and brings them together in an artful way, often in unfolded, painted collector's boxes. You have to look for a long time before you really see all the details. There seems to be an old master at work. Or an alchemist, with whom Brey is sometimes compared. It is fascinating how he also transforms banal objects into art. On the wall, abstract paintings - in addition to blue also in fiery red - usually correspond to the display cases. 'I paint very intuitively, it doesn't require long thinking,' he says.

At the end of the exhibition, the installation 'The Open Garden Door' has been set up. It consists of two botanical books pushed together. The first is a facsimile of 'Cruydt-Boeck' by the Mechelen doctor Rembert Dodoens. It appeared in 1554. The other is 'El Monte' by the Cuban botanist Lydia Cabrera. She wrote her reference book on Afro-Cuban culture, plants and medicine in 1954. After the revolution it was promptly banned because it did not fit with Fidel Castro's idea.

'Years ago, when it was back in the shops in Cuba, 2,000 people were queuing up. It's that important', says Brey. Between the pages of the old book he placed torn pages of the Spanish reference book. Once again, the cross-pollination between European and Afro-American culture has been merged into a contemporary work of art.

'Gap in the clouds' runs until August 28 in Museum Hof van Busleyden in Mechelen.