

Jan Van Mechelen, *Consenting between Adults*, 2022

Yes it is; no it is not. The artistic defies every category, including the artistic. This explains why terms like *outsider art* have their best days behind them. If they still mean something, then it is only in a purely documentary or cultural-historical sense. This is why after World War II, some boundary markers in the art world needed to be moved.

Moreover, the notion – in French, *art brut* or *art singulier* – is today a (far too) broad term covering a welter of meanings. It once referred to the authentic artistic expression of psychiatric patients. In other words, the art of people living at the margins – i.e. ‘outside’ – society, in institutions or prisons. Since then, the term has been stretched quite a bit (now covering all creativity that keeps its distance from the conventional art world) even though the label continues to chafe and irritate. The *outsider art* category reduces artists to their ‘otherness’. As if there were such a thing as *insider art!*

Today, the roles may be reversed. As we now all find ourselves – socially, economically, politically – in the ‘universe of madness’, there are fortunately still ‘outsiders’ left who hold up a mirror to us and expose our (collective) lies. Jan Van Mechelen (Mortsel, 1954) is one such figure who, as a loner and a straight shooter, has the courage to go his own way. Consistently he toils and plods, scratching, scraping, tenderly trying and retrying, until finally an image that is ‘right’ comes to him. He recognises it when it ‘makes sense’.

In this respect, he does indeed seem like a madman. Like a man devoid of fear, yet not lacking in survival instinct, he enters the ‘other side’ of mainstream social reality. He brings it to light while also embodying it. The madman frees us from the social constraint of order and regularity. He brings us face to face with our own imagination and integrity (and especially lack thereof). This has a beneficial and liberating effect on those with the courage to look.

If you *assent* to the image Van Mechelen presents to you, you enter a world of enchantment and pain, of doubt and recognition. Like any image, this painting appeals to your memory and your imagination (which are in fact the two extremes of the same experience of consciousness – for without imagination, there is no memory, and without memory, there is no imagination). If you recognise something in what you see, the image stimulates your senses and your memory. If not, you need to appeal to your imagination. You try to understand what you see. If necessary, you make your own relationships or invent a story. Or you submit to what you feel – without words, intuitively or subconsciously – and *enter* the image. (In the end, this is what we all do with our own memories too).



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Acrylic paint on paper, 65 x 90 cm

Donation De Fraeye-Verburg, 2023

Depository: Museum Dr. Guislain, Ghent

In a sense, every artist is the keeper of imaginary, other worlds. In their work, they guide us to the primal source of matter: chaos, the incubator of all creation. What we call inspiration or soul naturally resides in the wilderness, which, by definition, is uncontrolled, untameable. Only those who are passionate can drink to the full from that secret spring – in complete surrender, ecstasy or even trance. Coincidence has found you. If you allow it, it will also seize you.

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