

DRAWING ROOM

EXHIBITION ESSAY

Crossing the Circle

‘A drawing is inflexible and offers just a single possibility, a single chance. One does not catch a drawing by the tail: it either is or is not. A drawing is a pure sparkle, a glass splinter that cuts, while a canvas is rather a plot of cultivated soil.’ⁱ

Drawing was Philippe Vandenberg’s solace, an activity that fuelled his quest for authenticity and a means to express his personal experience and perception of the world. Considered one of the foremost Belgian painters of the 1980’s and 90’s, he was an accomplished and prolific draughtsman, filling hundreds of sketchbooks with drawings in pencil, ink, gouache, and richly coloured watercolour.

‘My first act of resistance was my first drawing. And that resistance has always remained.’ⁱⁱ

His early childhood encounters with religious painting and the Old Masters, and in particular with Hieronymus Bosch’s *Christ Carrying the Cross* in the Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent, inspired Vandenberg to become an artist. His Catholic upbringing left a deep impression on him, explicitly in the imagery of the crucifixion of Christ, the Stations of the Cross, the Madonna, and the Pietà. He used drawing to abstract these symbols of Christian faith, which he found increasingly empty and meaningless.

His works on paper display stylistic and thematic shifts that combine highly personal images about life, sex, death, and good and evil, as well as powerful responses to war and violence in the past and present, such as the Nazi atrocities, the conflicts between Palestinians and Israelis, and references to political leaders and freedom fighters such as Yasser Arafat and Ulrike Meinhof. The works explore confrontational subjects of personal suffering and brutal depictions of human cruelty expressing an existential disgust and despair with the world. On a number of occasions, a dark humour also makes an appearance against the backdrop of this disturbing imagery.

In many of his drawings, the technique is loose yet highly controlled, in styles that vary from lyrical, cartoon-like heads and figures to watercolour and pencil-line abstractions. Whilst Vandenberg was an accomplished draughtsman, he was not interested in making a drawing beautiful or sublime, but rather saw drawing as a direct means with which to describe the horrors of the world that he observed through the media of TV and newspapers. Vandenberg did not seek to understand what he committed to paper. The mystery of his imagery was important to him as a way of exploring the hidden and unknown.

‘In drawing, matter is reduced to a minimum, as a matter of course. But even when reduced to a pencil stroke on a piece of paper, it is still menacingly present.’ⁱⁱⁱ

The immediacy of drawing often provides an artist the means to investigate new ideas. For Vandenberg, repetition was a way to work through ideas – with the cross and the circle acting as metaphors for hope and salvation. Returning to the same motifs and compositions from page to page and over numerous sketchbooks – many of the drawings were unfinished, but the narrative continued – he attempted to transcend the limits of failure to find redemption.

'Failure is often the foundation of genius. It's what I call the triumph of the accident. Failing to bring it off is not anything negative, on the contrary, it is what makes us start again.'^{iv}

His use of recurring motifs of the cross and the circle appear throughout his figurative and abstract works: the cross as crucifixion, the sarcophagus, the circle as a place of refuge, a void, a halo, or a crown of thorns. For Vandenberg, this imagery symbolized the innocence, guilt and sacrifice of Man, or the tortured self-destructive artist himself. In the more abstract works, the pages are filled with repetitive geometric shapes of the cross and the circle: the circle as labyrinth, as wheel, as hell, or as eternity; the circle and the cross combined in a threefold cruciform associated with Christian or pagan iconography; or the cross turned swastika – both a reminder of the political fragility of the world, and a recuperation of its original Sanskrit meaning as a sign of peace. Vandenberg speaks of the act of destruction as being one of creation, and much of his imagery plays on the contradiction of good and evil; the human is portrayed both as perpetrator and victim, which for him stood as a metaphor for the failure and the futility of the artist himself. Vandenberg was compelled to explore unknown territories through his work and to meet the darkest side of humanity.

The themes in his oeuvre resonate today with a generation of artists who are making work in response to personal, psychological states.

Mary Doyle

Crossing the Circle - Works on paper by Philippe Vandenberg 21 September – 13 November 2016

ⁱ Philippe Vandenberg, 'The Song of the Finch' (Journal), in Philippe Vandenberg. *L'important c'est le Kamikaze. Oeuvre 2000-2006* (Charleville-Mézières: Musée Arthur Rimbaud, 2006), p. 113.

ⁱⁱ Philippe Vandenberg in conversation with Bernard Dewulf, in Philippe Vandenberg: *Visite*, edited by A. De Lannoy (Ghent: Museum Voor Schone Kunsten, 2008), Philippe Vandenberg – 'Visite', Ghent: Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent, 2008, p. 41.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'What Counts Is Kamikaze', see note i, p. 105.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 95.