

Voyeur of human discomfort

text Martine Zeijlstra, WATCH magazine, 2006, Netherlands, article also appeared in Russia, 2007

The ugly side of society elevated to art; Gerard Boersma has made it his speciality and paints with the deadly precision of a camera.

It's a colourless saturday afternoon. The sun disappeared behind the clouds, no shadow or sunbeam is shown. Two bikes are hastily put in front of a store for a last grocery. A man is waiting with a plastic bag between his legs for someone we will never see. He has a stoical look on his face. If you look closely you can still see the letters 'tos' on the store. It's a recognizable image of artist Gerard Boersma (1976): the woman shops, the man waits. They're living past one another. Boersma paints the ultimate loneliness with the sharpness of a picture.



The Etos, acrylics on masonite, 36 x 48" or 91,5 x 122 cm, sold



The Hunger, acrylics on masonite, 36.7 x 27.6" or 93,3 x 70 cm, sold

Cash machines, record stores, busstops, telephone booths and elevators. The surroundings Gerard Boersma creates for his figures breath anonymity. An anonymity which oppresses. Like the cash machine where he places his main figures. Count the money and let's go. The cash machine dominates the painting. Man is reduced to a miserable, lonely being which only shows his vulnerable back. A group of people exists of individuals who don't have anything in common with one another. Everybody is looking in a different direction at busstops, in trains and subways.

Gerard Boersma is a voyeur of human discomfort. 'I only have to take a look around to see that people are very individualisticly. I observed when people are put together, nobody has a story to tell. In my opinion this is the ultimate loneliness, but everybody does it, including me. Nobody talks to one another at a busstop, but they seem to be relieved when people do talk. For example because the bus drove through a puddle and got everybody wet. Then you have something in common to talk about.'

His small studio in Leeuwarden of five square meters has room for paintings with titles like The Eye and The Brother. Camerasystems are keeping an eye on the individual like Big Brother from the book 1984 by George Orwell. Loneliness is not the only subject that Gerard Boersma presents in his paintings. He finds the opposite of loneliness, privacy, also very important. 'I find these things quite annoying,' he says pointing at the camerasystem on a painting. 'Big Brother. I'm kind of fond on my privacy. I think it's amazing how everybody accepts being filmed when taking money out of the cash machine or doing their groceries without thinking twice about it.' A neighbour sitting in his frontyard who says Boersma isn't home when he doesn't directly open the door for the interview annoys him visibly. 'What a pleasant social supervision. They really keep a good eye on you here,' he grumbles.

It's Gerard Boersma pre-eminently. Loneliness and a love for privacy, mixed in a modern jacket. His works of art speak of a love for metropolises like New York, where he already showed his works a couple of times in Soho - the place to be for artists. On one of his latest works a man makes a call in the neonlights of The Big Apple. On the telephone booth the brand Verizon is placed subtle, which raises associations with the word horizon. A new world opens just to clench you in the glass of the telephone booth. In the subway of New York people look even more lonely than on his other paintings.

Boersma has love-hate affair with large cities. He was born in Harlingen and lived in Makkum, a small town which at the time had a population of threetousand. 'People allways say hello to one another there. There's this kind of friendliness which I miss in large cities. Sometimes people bump into you without saying anything at all. They simply don't care.' But Boersma also says: 'I'm not living in a small town, but in Leeuwarden. I also feel at home in the big city.'



The Subway, acrylics on masonite, 36.7 x 27.6" or 93,3 x 70 cm, sold



The Brother acrylics on masonite, 23.6 x 17.7" or 60 x 45 cm

Artist or a copying machine?

Boersma is a hyperrealist. His paintings don't accidentally look like pictures; he wants his works of art to be as realistic as possibly can be. 'I sketch with pictures,' he says laughing. 'It may sound strange, but that's the way it works.' A painting based on a picture. What's the surplus value? Doesn't he degrade himself to a refined copying machine? 'The pictures I take are allways pale. I stink as a photographer. There's allways a string hanging in my pictures. The pictures are only sketch material. I allways adjust the colours. They have to pop right into your face, so the whole surrounding on a painting looks like a happy place to be at. The figures on the painting seem more lonely when you paint it like that.'

Boersma uses pictures to make his paintings as realistic as possible. Ironical, when one knows that realist painting has lost much of his influence due to the arrival of photography. After the picture resembled the reality perfectly, many artists turned their back to realism. Does he take the old masters from the golden century, before the arrival of photography, as an example? 'If you only look at their technique, it really is astonishing what they do. But the subjects they paint don't really get to me.' He chuckles: 'Painting the same jar forty times is quite boring to me. I return to the same techniques as Rembrandt used, but I do use completely different subjects. Artists who wish to return to realism and who are painting exactly the same thing as four centuries ago are quite boring to me. They only imitate.'

Boersma stands for a realism with a modern twist to it. 'You have to re-invent how to make it of these days and time. Rembrandt or The School of the Hague doesn't catch you by surprise no more. Art should be like that though.'

Boersma doesn't want to be a Rembrandtclone; although realism is the ultimate painting for him. 'You really have to put in some work to let a pole look like a real pole. Not everybody can do that, it takes a talented cat to do that.' He calls modern art 'abstract violence'. 'I want art to be clear so everybody can understand what your work is about. Modern art isn't always like that. I think an artist is in the wrong when people need to read a book before they can understand your art. The image should be strong enough, the book not necessary. Look at Mondriaan for example.

How he changes his realist paintings into one with only lines is an very interesting thing to follow. But I'm sticking to my opinion that a painting should tell it all. If you don't know the story behind the lines, you're having a hard time understanding the painting.'



The Distance, acrylics on masonite,
36.7 x 27.6" or 93,3 x 70 cm, sold



The Trip, acrylics on masonite,
23.6 x 17.7" or 60 x 45 cm, sold

Coloured objectivity

The artist doesn't want to make a romantic still life or even charm his observers. 'My paintings don't always have to be happy and positive. On the contrary. I often paint things that I find ugly in some way. I let people know that I see these things. I capture it in my paintings. Because it always is just a moment in time.' Boersma wants to capture his own time. Loneliness and privacy, completed with an modern streetscape. An 'objective reproduction'. 'That's impossible of course,' he explains. 'I decide what to paint. But as a figure of speech you have to be able to run into the image that I eventually create. I often feel like I'm walking through my own paintings when I knock about the streets of Leeuwarden. And that's the way it should be. A moment in time. A picture, but way more powerful.'

A second look at his work shows a subtle view at this 'reality'. Boersma has more to tell than only the story of loneliness. A man watching television stares at an empty screen. A man standing in front of a hotdog-stand in New York can wait forever. The food is there, but there's no assistant in sight. A boy standing at snack automat, can forget about his croquettes and hamburgers, all the compartments are empty.

Boersma plays a game with the truth. He's consciously looking for contradictions. 'With the snack automat I could have decided to paint a fat man, but that's too easy. I've asked a really tall and skinny friend of mine to pose, just to make clear that fast food has no nutritious value at all: you can eat all you want, but it isn't nutritious.' You can say the same thing about the hotdog-stand. The painting is called 'The Chain'. 'It represents the position of the Third World. There's plenty of food, but they're not getting their piece of the pie. They're chained. The assistant disappeared, the food is there, but they just don't get their share.'

Perhaps the best way to describe the works of art by Gerard Boersma is as painted indignation. One of his latest works is called 'The Attraction' and it describes Boersma at his best. On the large painting two tourists are photographing the excavated buildingsite of the Twin Towers. 'I really thought it was an attraction. An amusement park, a curiosity. People are laughing and posing for a picture. Smile! So they have a picture to remember it by. 'This is me with the ruins of 9/11 on the background,' that's what they think. It's tasteless. Can you imagine people taking pictures of themselves, smiling, with the gas chambers of Auschwitz at the background? In New York it happens. I want to show you this. With bright, sharp colours, so the contrast is even bigger. I've reached my goal when people start thinking about this.'

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The Diner, acrylics on masonite,
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The Trip, acrylics on masonite,
36.7 x 27.6" or 93,3 x 70 cm,

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