

AGENDA

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NL | FR | EN

JAN VANRIET SOLO AT **ROBERTO POLO**



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'BELGIANS ARE MUCH TOO MODEST'

EN | The well-known Cuban-American art dealer Roberto Polo has a soft spot for Belgian art and has been championing the country's art and design for more than fifteen years. And now he has opened a gallery for modern and contemporary art, with himself as artistic director. First up: Jan Vanriet. **SAM STEVERLYNCK**

Roberto Polo's life reads like the script of a Hollywood film. After Castro's revolution he and his family left his Cuban homeland and settled in the United States. At the age of sixteen he was already teaching painting and aesthetics at the respected Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington, DC. Later he was active as an artist too and also organised the exhibition "Fashion as Fantasy" with work by, among others, Mapplethorpe and Warhol.

Polo started dealing in art and soon had New York's elite as his clientele. A "Great Gatsby for the Reagan era", one US magazine called him. Polo moved to Paris and later, following a turbulent period, came to Brussels in 2007. Here he opened Historismus, a gallery specialising in "museum-quality" furniture. Last year, Frances Lincoln Limited (London) published *Roberto Polo. The Eye*, a 688-page tome with illustrations of 300 of the 7,000 works of art Polo had bought over the previous 40 years.

We met the art dealer in his stylish home in the heart of Brussels. Alongside mountains of books and numerous paintings, it contains furniture by Henry Van de Velde and an imposing clock by Gustave Serrurier-Bovy - a splendid piece by an artist who doesn't receive the international attention he deserves. "Discovering forgotten artists and movements that were important in their time: that's what it's about for me," says Polo with a broad smile. He talks non-stop, with an encyclopaedic knowledge that spans a few centuries.

Where does your love for Belgian art come from?

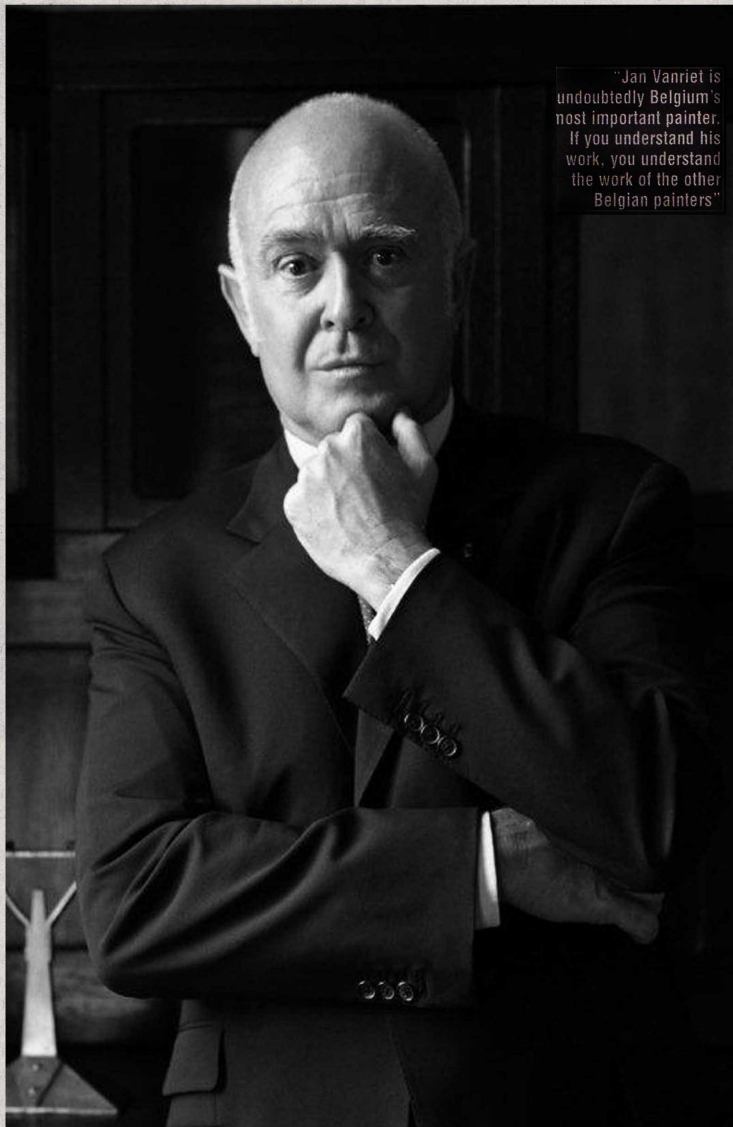
ROBERTO POLO: My love story with Belgium goes back at least fifteen years. At first I championed applied art from Belgium: people like Horta, Hankar, and Van de Velde. And after that Symbolist painting and sculpture. And then modernism. When I started collecting Belgian avant-garde artists like Jozef Peeters, Victor Servranckx, and Pierre-Louis Flouquet the prices were low. Hardly anyone was interested. Belgians are much too modest. Unlike the French, you don't do a good job of selling yourselves. And that makes it really difficult to champion Belgian art. I have already done a lot to propagate Belgian art [the Polo family regularly makes donations to Belgian and foreign museums - SS]. It's only quite recently that people have woken up and started to help me.

What is it that appeals to you about our art?

POLO: Belgian art is characterised by its narrative character. Narrative painting tells a story, using symbols, signs, and icons. That was already the case with the Flemish Primitives. But it gained greater importance in the 1890s with Symbolism and later with surrealism. And from the 1970s then you had Jan Vanriet, a contemporary narrative painter.

Which is why you are inaugurating the Roberto Polo Gallery with Vanriet?

POLO: Vanriet is undoubtedly Belgium's most important painter. If you understand his work, you understand the work of the other Belgian painters. Then you can also see the influence he has had on



"Jan Vanriet is undoubtedly Belgium's most important painter. If you understand his work, you understand the work of the other Belgian painters"

© Jean Terezhchenko

Tuymans and Borremans. Right down to the brush technique. Vanriet doesn't need promoting any more in Flanders. But it has been years since he has been on show in Brussels. His work now needs to be exported more internationally too.

A lot of foreign galleries have opened up in Brussels recently. How do you explain that?
POLO: Brussels is in the process of winning itself an important place in the contem-

porary art scene. There are a number of reasons for that. Rents here are much lower than in Paris, for example, and the taxes aren't excessive. There are lots and lots of well-off foreigners, and there are wealthy Belgians too. The central location is another plus point. But one of the most important reasons is the people. Belgians have an open mentality. This is a fantastic country! **A**



Deer © Jan Vanriet

A WRITER'S PAINTER

EN | Jan Vanriet (born in 1948) is a born painter. He took up the paintbrush at the age of 17 and kept on painting, undaunted, even when painting had been declared dead. Vanriet's work has been shown at the Venice and São Paulo biennales. The general public also knows him from his drawings for the daily paper *De Morgen*, his design for the De Brouckère metro station, and his illustrations for books by various writers, including Hugo Claus, Stefan Hertmans, and Cees Nooteboom. And there was nothing accidental about that: Vanriet prefers the company of writers to that of painters. He himself has been known to write and his art often has a literary dimension to it.

Vanriet's oeuvre is strikingly diverse. But the "Closed Doors" series, from which some 40 works are on show at the Roberto Polo Gallery, forms a coherent whole, in which the artist alternates figurative works with more abstract images. Often, he operates in a no-man's-land between the two. At times, for example, he just depicts the background in a painting, leaving out superfluous details, so as to leave room for suggestion to operate. The paintings often have an emotionally charged atmosphere. At times this is at least partly due to the subject matter, when Vanriet touches on themes such as the Second World War and the ideology of power. But he is equally capable of painting everyday objects such as a vase or a couple of buttons - and those works, too, convince by their suggestive power.

JAN VANRIET: CLOSED DOORS • > 24/2, dl/ma/Tu > vr/ve/Fr 14 > 18.00, w-e 11 > 18.00

NL | De bekende Cubaans-Amerikaanse kunsthandelaar Roberto Polo heeft een zwak voor Belgische kunst en design. Sinds 2007 woont hij in ons land. De gloednieuwe Roberto Polo Gallery, waar hij artistiek directeur van is, wordt ingehuldigd met een tentoonstelling over Jan Vanriet.

FR | Le célèbre collectionneur et marchand d'art américano-cubain Roberto Polo a un faible pour l'art et le design belges. Il s'est installé dans notre pays en 2007. La toute nouvelle Roberto Polo Gallery, dont il est le directeur artistique, s'ouvre avec une exposition consacrée au plasticien anversois Jan Vanriet.

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