

## Sam Eggermont – The Culture Club

We are husks that have been prised open, but now we are exposed, no one dares touch us.

I know Sam as someone who is searching for a state of freedom, but not in order to become inaccessible. On the contrary: it is a desire to live with himself and others, free from complexes. To live with an absolute minimum of limitations. The land where this state can be found is called 'Art'.

### Origin of the form

Sam Eggermont's work goes straight to the heart of the matter. To the point where culture emerges from nature and vice versa. When I look at his work, I see simplicity, a subtle use of colour and – in terms of what it means to me, I think – the tension that is generated between geometry and natural forms. He finds these forms in national borders, decorative patterns dating back centuries, bodies, plants, letters and the work of other artists.

Ever since the emergence of the avant-garde at the beginning of the twentieth century, this search for the origin of the form has been one of the important mainstays of innovation. Sam's work evokes associations with Hans Arp, the quiet avant-garde artist who evaded all categorisation and dedicated his life to the search for primordial forms. It also recalls the work of Piet Mondrian, the painter who shifted entirely from nature to abstract geometry in just a few years. This search for the origin of forms in both mathematics and nature can also be found in the artists who have been crucial to Sam's development: Henri Matisse, Wassily Kandinsky, Christian Dotremont, Zvi Goldstein and Philippe Van Snick.

Sam quotes freely from the work of all these artists, recycling the raw materials they worked with. That means the forms themselves: Kandinsky's shapes freed from representation, Dotremont's calligraphy, or 'logograms', freed from meaning, the geometric patterns of the Arabic tradition... *Form is so important in Sam's oeuvre that I wonder why he is not a sculptor. I will ask him, but that is not a question to discuss in this article, because it does an injustice to the work he is showing here.*

### The hand

When I look at a painting by Sam Eggermont, I see not only form but also a slow sensuality revealed by his love for painting. No matter how calm, subtle and even anti-expressive his way of painting is, it cannot be replaced by a mechanical printing technique. Sam has returned to painting after many years, making a choice that is both interesting and surprising. We see him here playing with the boundaries of various 'traditional' disciplines. The concepts and visual language that Sam develops might equally lead to graphics, drawing or sculpture. So, when I see Sam's work, I see almost infinite possibilities.

### Contemporary paradox

The intersection of all these disciplines also appears to be an ideal place to connect modernism to non-Western art, such as the Chinese and Arab traditions. Modernism, presented as a succession of innovations, collides here with age-old traditions: a linear history set against a circular conception of time in a never-ending loop.

Sam allows, even provokes, that collision. Throughout the process, he shows how modernism has been influenced right from the outset by Arab culture, for example, whose experience with abstraction was far richer. Every art draws upon the artistic wealth of others, but in the colonial

mentality of our own culture, these connections have not been not appropriately valued. The fact that modernism developed when colonialism was at its height makes it all the more important to reveal these connections openly.

Sam shares this critique of modernism with many contemporary artists, but his work can also be read as a declaration of love for modernism. This is expressed in his urge for innovation and for a pared-down, universalised visual language. Clearly Sam is not the only artist to tackle this paradox, but it is still important to see that he could have made other choices, often easier choices, such as the complete rejection of modernism and a return to his 'own' tradition. Yet Sam prefers to follow in the footsteps of artists like Svi Goldstein who call all clichéd dualities into question (west/east or north/south, modernism/post-modernism, avant-garde/tradition, concept/aesthetics and so on).

Svi Goldstein, an artist who relocated to Jerusalem, has inspired Sam in various ways, from his intermingling of social commitment, theory, art and life to his fascination for the Middle East.

The theme of Islam

The Middle East is the region where the first cities emerged, the 'cradle of civilization', and certainly also the birthplace of European culture. The predecessors of our alphabet originated in the region, and, later in history, the Library of Alexandria made the European Renaissance possible. – *The end of the Middle Ages! How I long for that era.* – Later the Middle East made commercial and also cultural interaction possible between the East and the West thanks to the Silk Road. That cultural tradition exists, and yet the region is currently stereotyped as a place of destruction and fanaticism. Any form of cultural or material solidarity with the region seems to be overshadowed by this. So, if there is to be any hope of breaking down superficial barriers, there cannot be enough emphasis on the underlying connections and similarities.

Exposed

When I first encountered Sam and his work a few years ago – *was it 2016? Or 2017?* – I often wondered what the symbols in his work represented. It turned out that I was on the wrong track. The work is not narrative at all, and neither can it be made to serve the narratives I have hinted at above. Often the meaning of the signs he uses does not play any role at all, or they are signs that have never had any meaning. Here, perhaps, we find the greatest similarity with the avant-garde of the first half of the twentieth century: Sam liberates his forms from meaning, thus opening up new ways for him to speak. This immediately clears the way for a (contemporary) multiple interpretation of a language system as well.

Sam's art is obstinate. You might think that what you see is a husk, a shell you have to crack to reveal the underlying mystery. But in my opinion, everything is open and exposed to us; its complexity is located precisely in that simplicity.

You are freely invited to come closer, to look, think and feel.