

Ezra Babski  
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### “Jonathan Vervoort at Sint Lucas Antwerpen’s Graduation Show”

A graduate of Sint Lucas Antwerpen’s Fine Arts department puts together a slowly dazzling exhibition that pushes figurative painting forward.



*Sunglasses, 2021*  
Jonathan Vervoort.

On the top floor of Sint Lucas Antwerpen’s new campus in Zuid – a kind of immense glass and concrete cubicle, serving as a multifloored, modular studio space for the student body – the graduating master’s students of the fine arts department have set up their end-of-the-year show. There is some painting, textile and a kind of *in situ*, warehouse-themed installation replete with bubble-wrapped canvases and authentic wooden crates. The painting, this year, has delivered a few surprises – not least the crisp, bold work of Jonathan Vervoort (alias John Padrino).

The five large canvases arrayed on the long slab of concrete wall are impressive and attention-grabbing, discrete displays of neon-coloured shapes, sharp outlines and figures that pop out of the canvas. In *Angelus Novus* (a direct reference to Paul Klee’s iconic print), a troupe of identical cartoonish, toxic-waste green grim reapers advance across a flat, blurry plane, its mess of colour suggesting a doom-ridden landscape or explosion. Juxtaposed to this and literally fastened to the canvas is a giant, plexiglass print of stock-photo oranges. In a work titled *Survival of the Fittest*, grisaille eagles prepare to lock talons in a mid-air as giant, defleshed teeth fly by, all of this superimposed on what looks to be a blown-up fragment of a juice advertisement (repeated once horizontally). According to Vervoort, the painting is about ‘the current state of contemporary image culture, where images constantly compete fiercely for our attention’. These paintings may offer some kind of comment on image culture – perhaps by using painting as a kind of transparent trojan horse for subjects it has historically shunned or ignored – but in doing so they also substitute one kind of fetishism for another. The painted object (and the painting itself) takes the place of the commodity it depicts (is a painting of a sneaker any less fetishistic than the sneaker itself?).

Raised in Amstelveen but based in Antwerp, Vervoort's trajectory in some ways exemplifies a recent "illustrative" turn in painting, harbinger of a new kind of pop-art or neo-expressionist revivalism that combines digital sensibilities with street art aesthetics and borrows techniques from both realms. Springing from a rich ground of collectives and tight-knit networks, this 'post-graffiti', 'post-internet' style of painting has provided for some interesting shake-ups in the scene, as illustrators, (ex-)graffiti artists and others further afield have taken their specialised equipment and skills and applied them to canvas painting. Figures that fall into this category (by virtue of background or style) include the likes of Parisian graffiti artist Antwan Horfee, the London-based painter Vivian Zhang, the artist duo Javier Rodriguez and Lou Buche (Robuche), Marria Pratts, Linus Bill, as well as the young Antwerp-based artist Ayrton Eblé... The most successful of them are visible, social-media literate and savvy when it comes self-branding and attracting gallery attention.

Trained as an illustrator and having himself once confessed to minor acts of vandalism, Vervoort seems to typify this impish force in contemporary painting. His use of an actual airbrush can seem ironic since the subjects he paints might include 'airbrushed' photos. He has a penchant for quality Belgian canvas, but also paints on toilet paper. His paintings can often read as surrealist-lite mashups but hold up less a mirror to the unconscious than a mirror to your browsing history. What sets them apart is their formal simplicity (there is usually not 'too much happening' on the canvas) and the neat formal logic that is at the core of Vervoort's humour. Among his paintings, the best are 'easy to get' in the sense that they are both visually striking and formally intelligible; they make formal jokes that make sense within the closed chain of references they create. More than that, they stage a rowdy confrontation between painting and its own limitations, which are then slyly and virtuosically overcome.

### The Palimpsest

Vervoort's art is full of cuts, erasures and absences. The central figure of this formal play, which is also its mode of critique, is the palimpsest. A palimpsest is a document or object on which another object or writing has been superimposed, yet still bearing the trace of the former. In contrast to graffiti, which can function to overwrite, obliterate or *deface* a surface, Vervoort employs a technique of *superimposition* to create a multidimensional space of signification in which layers of meaning accumulate. While graffiti is only capable of limited forms of erasure, Vervoort's paintings marshal a whole arsenal of techniques – displacement, precision cuts and blurring – to open up a space for referential play.

This productive use of destruction is a dominant feature of Vervoort's recent work. In *Aergsvadfs* (2020) and *Adfgg* (2020) – whose titles suggest the product of a furious keyboard smash – three-dimensional tubes of colour are laced with Gordon Matta-Clark-esque 'cuts', revealing blank canvas, like a sticker torn from a page. It's not clear what the extracted shape should be, but that doesn't matter; the tension created by this 'deletion' – evocative of digital image-manipulation processes – is the point of the work. This tension is driven to an exquisite peak another painting from the series, in which an outline (or rather

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cut-out) of Bugs Bunny disrupts a tangle of overlapping blue loops, a perfectly recognizable absence.

## Tubes

Although Vervoort's earlier paintings already dabbled in digital motifs, last year he began incorporating sculpture-drawings made in virtual reality in his work. His 'tube paintings' from this period suggest a sense of joyful, spontaneous movement and mark his return to figuration, a breakthrough for his later large-scale work. In *Mona Lisa* (2021), the blurred outline of Leonardo's most famous subject serves as a background for tubular white blobs, suspended in abstract space, some arranged into vaguely geometric forms, some spilling out of the canvas in globular streaks. The shapes are based on the mathematical doodles of Vervoort's partner's little brother, copied by Vervoort and then rendered in VR. The painting presents a kind of cosmic drama, staging the beginning of art history (a child's uninhibited doodles) *in virtual reality* and having this event play out on top of the symbol par excellence of Western Art History's cherished values.

The tubes, occupying a place somewhere between drawing and writing, also retain the aesthetic of the tag (in graffiti art, a tag is an inscription or drawing that serves as the 'trademark' or signature of an artist, proof of their presence at the scene). Except that these are tags in *virtual* space, which have then been *reinscribed* in the real space of the canvas, transformed back again into mere flat marks and bound within field of the picture. It's a delightful if sometimes tiring *trompe d'oeil*, an irreverent and inventive way of staging painting's response to its own anxiety with regard to visual culture and the ongoing digitalization of art.