



Portrait of Mariss Jansons by Sam Dillemans, oil on canvas, 194 x 140 cm, 2014.
 Offered by Stichting Donateurs Koninklijk Concertgebouworkest in Amsterdam
 on the occasion of the departure of Mariss Jansons as chief conductor, 20 March 2015.
 photo, Wim Van Eesbeek

When I paint, I say goodbye to it all

‘The face alone is one metre tall!’ Sam Dillemans straightens up for what must be the fiftieth time this afternoon. His huge studio is cold. It’s January and the gas heater is humming. I was supposed to drop in for an hour but I’ve been here almost four hours. With my coat on.

His monumental portrait of Mariss Jansons is hanging amongst landscapes, nudes, authors and boxers. This studio in Borgerhout has been his place of work for twenty-five years now. No holidays. No breaks. ‘I paint so that I can be even more of an outsider. Sometimes I’m living more in 1632 than 2015.’ He puffs on his thick roll-up cigarette. ‘When I paint, I say goodbye to it all: time, myself.’

He has been working on this for weeks. He took a small photograph of the conductor and got it blown up at a tacky copy shop. ‘The pixels were as big as Lego bricks.’ At first the painting was on the floor and he worked on his knees. No clean white canvas but a piece of sailcloth that he’d been wiping his dirty brushes on for months. ‘I never throw anything away. Those dabs of paint give a crust, an interesting texture.’

While that crust causes the left arm with the clenched fist to protrude more, he has swabbed the right shoulder with white spirit. ‘Of course. That’s the dinner jacket et, it has to sparkle.’ Dillemans is a master of his trade but he is always looking for adventure. He wants the paint to surprise him. ‘If you plan it all, you’re done for. Look, that white line appeared early on, it was just right as the corner of the mouth. And this wide black line isn’t there but the wrist needed it. Here you can even still see the canvas underneath.’ His palette and nonchalant precision remind me of Degas. From a distance this is a powerful portrait; from close by, a wild, chaotic mix of blobs and colour.

‘Yes,’ he sighs. Evening falls. The tip of his cigarette glows. And then, quietly: ‘It’s a battlefield.’

David Van Reybrouck

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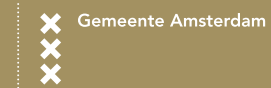


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