

“THE ART OF MEDICINE”

What has struck me recently, is that the art world is fundamentally changing.

To explain this observation, I like to cite the example of how a top doctor has been working at UZ-Ghent for years: Tessa Kerre is a haematologist, working with cancer patients of all ages. Not just the classical treatments of course, but she also uses art during her patients' healing process. She calls it 'healing art' rather than 'medicine'.

She also scientifically demonstrates that art, at a sick person's bedside, can be comforting. In fact, patients choose a work that they like.

To look at, to cherish, to listen to... in their hospital room. Doctor Kerre proves that art gives the happiness hormone a boost, and lowers the experience of pain. It is so much more than an aspirin. And when a doctor says: “Art is not a nice-to-have, it's a must-have”, then I think everyone here present can agree wholeheartedly.

But, even renowned painter Ben Sledsens (he spearheads the gallery's Tim Van Laere in Antwerp) is on the same wavelength. He says: “I make paintings that calm the viewer. I would like the viewer to experience silence. Maybe that's because there is already a plethora of opinions and emotions, especially on social media.”

Coincidentally, this summer I read a fine little book with the title 'The Song of Art'. (I was casting a series of bronze owls with fellow artist Didier François, a process in which we had to keep a baking kiln going for three days. Day and night, at 1.600 degrees. So I had a lot of time to read...)

What writer Maggie Nelson wants to tell us with this book is exactly that concept of 'cherishing', or in other words, 'caring for'. The inspired artist creates a work of art with great care and therefore cares for people. Art that does not so much wants to please, but can play a 'nurturing' role.

Art, dear people, does not always have to frighten us. Art does not always have to be 'punk'. The days when contemporary artists were only satisfied when the audience came out of an exhibition nauseated, is quietly -and thankfully- behind us. There are fewer cats being thrown into the air, there is less painting with blood or urine, less excrement is sold (there was once a machine called the 'cloaca', remember...). The need to shock is decreasing. We see more and more art that chooses to sympathise, rather than pure provocation. We see a visual language that not only focuses on the deep soul of the artist himself, but also thinks about what their work can trigger in the viewer...

Probably because there is already enough horror in the world. Or perhaps because the viewer needs care, protection, in these times. A tiny bit of grip, recognition, or wonder. Art as a healing band-aid. Medicine, in other words.

This does not mean that artists should be wimps, or that they should walk on eggshells from now on. On the contrary! The point is: art that does not transcend the ego of its creator is worthless. Or more nuanced: art that transcends the ego of its creator is that much more valuable.

Dear people, what I want to say is that art is evolving from 'rebellion' to 'empathy'. Stroll slowly through this castle full of art. There are so many rooms to discover, but above all: let the artworks open your rooms of feeling.

Karl Meersman (godfather of 'KOTK 2024')

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(40 artists, 600 artworks)