

Daniël van Nes

The magic of *three lines*

Contemporary art isn't always digital or polystyrene, as this Dutch artist shows. Words: Lynn Parr



ABOVE Daniël van Nes in front of *Exit Node*, plexiglass, 34x40cm

RIGHT *Routine*, plexiglass, 25x30cm

UNLIKE MANY contemporary artists, Daniël van Nes is something of an enigma. While he uses ultra-modern materials, instead of producing strange video art or lightbulb installations, he employs a technique dating back centuries to produce delicate engravings refined by light.

And his attitude is more like those of a master craftsman than a modern, commercially thinking artist.

“I used to paint a lot and I’ve been doing that from a really young age – sometimes it even felt like I was born with a brush in my hand,” he says. “But there was no challenge anymore, and I didn’t really know what else to do. Of course, I could’ve looked for a challenge and made something super-realistic, but that wasn’t what I was looking for. I studied graphic arts – the whole range, from stone carving to etchings – but ended up with wood engraving.”

Now, as part of his quest for the ultimate challenge, he has adapted this age-old technique to plexiglass.

“The wood I was using was box wood and is very rare, so you can’t really get box wood of a serious size. But I don’t really like tiny things – I wanted to make larger engravings, so I started looking for different materials.”

He settled on engraving partly because of the exciting results he could achieve through the manipulation of line.

“In engraving, one line is just a line, two lines are two lines, but three lines next to each other are a tone, and there’s something magical about that.”

His artworks may take many hours to execute, but that is part of the beauty of the technique for him.

“It’s trying to step away from the Ikea kind of world; the ready-made, throwaway world and large-edition prints. I’m trying to reach a point of quality, one-off pieces. I really like to put a lot of work and time into my pieces, and I like it that you can see there’s a lot of time put into them.”

To further expand his artistic horizons, and make his art work harder, van Nes likes to turn his pictures into useful items such as lamps – in which the engravings are enhanced by the light illuminating the delicate tracery of the lines.

“You may be putting so much information into a piece that, even though some pieces may look very simple because you are working so long on them, you can’t ask a viewer to decode them. In the end, people have to enjoy ▶



it, but there's more to it than just a nice piece. I like to just make it and let people decide for themselves whether they like it or not – if they want to step into the story, or if they just want a nice picture.

“It doesn't always have to be in a frame on the wall. It's nice if people can use it, so you can maybe make a piece of furniture and engrave it. It would still be something to look at, but you could also use it. I'm trying to think of all kinds of shapes and sizes and different ways to present my work. I'd like to play with more conceptual art and maybe incorporate the engravings into a figurative piece.”

Constant inspiration


Van Nes' inspiration is all around him, in the things he sees every day, the people he meets, the music he hears.

“I'm basically trying to make my own fairytale, my own story, and it's influenced by things I may see in day-to-day life. Ideas come all the time, and I have to decide which idea to take seriously and work on so it grows and becomes something real. I don't really know how it works, but they come to me all the time.”

Unusually in this computerised age, van Nes engraves every line by hand from his own pencil sketches, using very old wood engraving tools. Each piece may take a month or more to complete and is unique. He believes he is perhaps the only artist working this way, so does not want to explain his technique in so much detail that it can be copied.

“I'd like to enjoy the technique for a few years before I give it away,” he laughs. “A lot of people will be smart enough to figure out how it works, but I'm like magician – I don't want to give away too much.”

Even though he has achieved great success with this technique, van Nes is not content to sit back and become complacent.

“I'm trying to find different ways to challenge my own thinking,” he says. “I'm using a different material now and I'd like to go beyond that and make new things, and maybe make them bigger. When you are working on a piece for so long, after you've done five pieces you are really bored with it so you have to change your way of working and thinking and find new ways of expressing yourself.” 

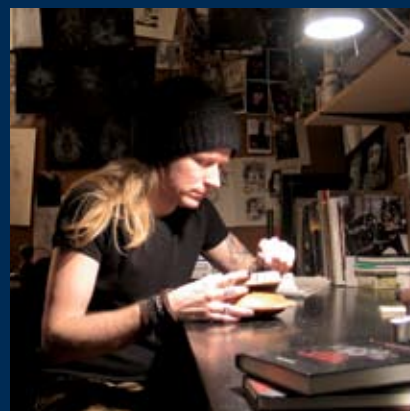


Photos: Alban Finchen

ABOVE *Kingdom Lost*, plexiglass, 25x30cm

Profile

Born in 1972 in Terneuzen, the Netherlands, Daniël van Nes studied graphic arts at the Royal Academy of Arts in Antwerp, Belgium. Originally a painter, he switched to wood engraving in a quest for a more challenging form of expression, and then to engraving on plexiglass. In 2003, he was nominated as Dutch Artist of the Year. He is represented by Strychnin Gallery in London, New York and Berlin, and more of his work can be seen on www.nessed.nl or www.strychnin.com.



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