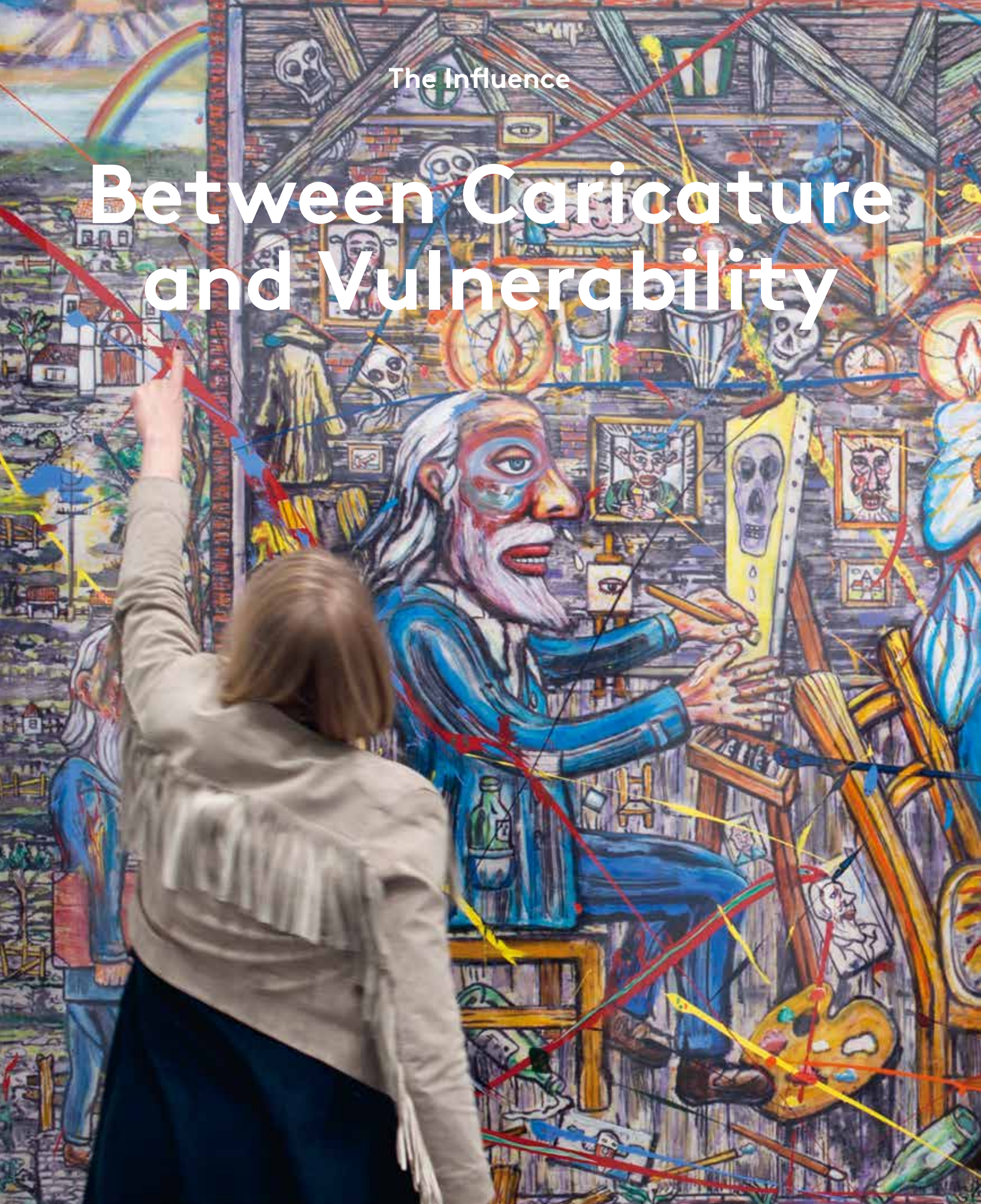


The Influence

Between Caricature and Vulnerability





In her visual work, she is stepping ever closer to self-representation; his entire oeuvre reads like a single, expanded autobiography. At 29, she is an upcoming talent; he, with 45 more years under his belt, is a living legend. Both like to show human beings just as they are, with all their existential ups and downs, wrestling with dualities, always putting things into perspective, with an edge of poking fun. Artist Nel Aerts admires the persistence and the drive of fellow Antwerper Fred Bervoets, who never lets a day go by without making something. In his 70s, he is still adding new pages to his already immense body of work.

‘That man is inspired.’

Text Grete Simkuté Photography Sanne Delcroix

When I interviewed Nel Aerts a year or so ago about an exhibition in which her work adorned a small corridor of an Antwerp project space, the conversation quickly found its way to the name and work of Fred Bervoets. Certainly considered one of the greatest living Belgian artists (in Antwerp art circles, despite his headstrong, straight-up character, he is a true cult figure), Aerts mentioned Bervoets as an example in the context of the shift she was making towards a more direct form of self-representation. 'He is the master of that. He tells real stories, anecdotal things from his life, and he makes himself the central point of focus. For me, that is interesting. I am interested in the way I am getting closer to doing that.'

Nel Aerts' practice clearly finds itself at a turning point. Her weathered wooden panels, with their coarsely scratched, burnt or pasted-on figures have gone on to populate an entire universe of their own, and they have dominated the signature of her work. Anthropomorphic forms, colourful and cartoon-like, seem to have been created from careless doodles, interpreting a plethora of diverse emotions – some of which themselves seem to have no idea of what to do with it all. These mad little lords and ladies, as the artist affectionately calls them, bounce about anxiously in angry seas or form a U-shape which, despite the physical resemblance of the two sides, never flows into any real unity. Their foolish and sweet appearances are something of a contradiction to the distress in their facial expressions, and to the sexual connotations they

can exude – to the great delight of Nel Aerts, for whom they must, most of all, never become 'too comfortable'.

Perhaps these figures were also becoming, indirectly, subliminal portraits of Nel Aerts' own emotional life, indeed too comfortable, too safe – or so the other works in the exhibition seemed to suggest. These too were on wood, now no longer populated by abstracted, figurative beings, but a female figure. In minimal lines, Aerts had represented herself: as a caricature, to be sure, but nonetheless recognizable. This simplified likeness also sent a multitude of diverse expressions out into the space: she revealed herself with long, teeming and intertwining appendages, spread out in acrobatic splits or just staring in front of her, in a café setting, slurping at a glass of wine and holding a cigarette, and – why not? – with a turd plopped on her head. 'Yes', she laughed, 'it's moronic, isn't it?', when I asked about it. 'I don't think a lot about it ahead of time, and then there's a line that doesn't work right, so I pull it up higher and ... this came out. The perspective of the cigarette isn't right either. I think it's super-fantastic – that you can put yourself in positions like that and poke fun at yourself. That you can laugh with yourself like that. It's almost liberating.'

Then, once again, Bervoets' name came up: the way, as a figurative painter, he also puts himself in the most bizarre situations, and uses the 'ugly', the crude, almost as a trope to reinforce his story, which reads visually like a kind of sentimental, corny ballad, with a laugh and a tear. She

recognized his couldn't-care-less attitude, that nonchalant flippancy, his 'just messing about', and knew how deceptive it was. She had to laugh at the recurring motifs of the café scenes and wine bottles they shared: the folksy scenes, if you like. She was not even really aware of those shared motifs, but she did find it curious: yes, she would like to have a chat with him sometime, a real discussion, not just the quick nod or raised hand at exhibition openings where they sometimes saw one another. The fact that she was not conscious of it did not necessarily mean that he had no influence on her work.

It is 11 April, 2016. We are at the De Zwarte Panter, the Antwerp gallery that has forever been Fred Bervoets' home base. Nel Aerts, a photographer and I are welcomed by Adriaan Raemdonck, the gallery owner who, as well as officially representing Bervoets' work, is also his close friend and protector. Some 45 minutes later, Bervoets shows up, visibly disconcerted, hunched over and wearing a long raincoat with cigarette burns ('Those cigarettes, huh,' as he later muses). He walks straight to the bar to pour himself a Dutch gin and coke (the first of many). With the large glass in his hand, he says 'hello' to us. Then he tells us about how he spent no fewer than four hours that morning at the eye doctor's, an event that has become more the rule than the exception, and that he has to have an eye operation. It is not really so surprising, he explains, given his maniacal working methods and the not-so-gentle materials he works with. He has been painting, drawing



Nel Aerts and Fred Bervoets at Gallery De Zwarte Panter

and making prints since the 1960s, and in the 1980s, he developed a new printmaking process, which he poignantly christened his 'reverse acid' method. It is a direct etching technique in which the artist literally 'paints' on his plates with nitric acid, sometimes later adding colour with paint. This method has already served to produce countless series of works, and at 70 × 100 cm, most of the prints are fairly large in format. 'Fat slabs,' as he calls them, in his thick Antwerp accent. His unique style of gestural expressionism is coarse, yet flooded with dark humour, and it tells his autobiography. Fred Bervoets' works are filled to bursting with a sultry, lava-like flow of images, impressions and colours

that he gleans from his immediate environment, both internal and external. As did James Ensor, one of his painterly role models (and fellow countryman), Bervoets considers no subject whatsoever as beneath his dignity. He lifts the most mundane, often urban issues out of the realm of the banal: a visit to the dentist, for example, making pancakes, or – also a welcome theme for Nel Aerts – the local drinking establishment. Using everyday issues to expose the people engaging in them, and doing it in a way that both narrative and plasticity are equally important: that is Fred Bervoets to a T.

Once somewhat recovered from the hospital atmosphere, with Nel Aerts hanging on his every word,

he picks up steam. For the next four hours, calling on a never-ending stream of anecdotes, Bervoets relates memories and stories in the way that only men of his age can, about 'that one, back then', and 'him, over there', referring to friends from the Antwerp art scene, living or dead. In the process, he shares a theory for predicting rain ('If the sewers reek, it is going to rain! And no, it is not going to rain today.'), wonders why he hasn't seen any swallows lately ('Back then, in the countryside, I used to shoot them down with a bow and arrow.' Aerts comments, 'Maybe that's why there are so few of them.'), and mischievously wonders aloud if he could create a new kind of painting by inserting paint bombs into frogs

and throwing them onto canvases (all the frogs enjoying themselves and grunting away, and of course, ‘...no animals harmed during this interview’). It’s a story with no beginning or end, which, as the cigarettes and the gin cokes accumulate, is expressed with ever more animation and enthusiasm, revealing Bervoets’ peculiar, daft playfulness.

Nel Aerts shows him a publication with her newest works, some 100 A4-sized ink drawings in which she has put herself in all kinds of fantastic settings. As the book progresses, the settings become more real, ultimately definitively closing the chapter on her amorphous little figures. She completed this work during a residency in Zundert, the small Dutch village close to the Belgian border where Vincent van Gogh was born. Aerts asks herself out loud if she would be able to translate these drawings into paintings. ‘Of course you can, girl! Fantastic!’, bursts Bervoets. ‘In oils, or acrylics. Sometimes then it’s even more strange. Then you can really flip out with your colours. Yeah, then you are really out there.’ For both Fred Bervoets and Nel Aerts, ‘strange’, ‘weird’, ‘deviant’, ‘bizarre’, ‘imbecilic’ and so on are all decidedly good things.

I wonder how bizarre that first real encounter between Nel Aerts and Fred Bervoets was for her. Does she see his work differently now? Does she see her own work in a new light? The next day, we compare notes.

After you graduated, in Ghent, you came to live in Antwerp, where you once said there was no

way to avoid Fred Bervoets...

‘A lot of the people I know took classes from Fred [at 50, Bervoets began teaching at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp. ed.]. He has had a real hands-on influence on a whole generation of artists. Vaast [Vaast Colson, artist and Nel Aerts’ partner] talks about how Fred would go out drinking with his students after class, until three or four o’clock in the morning, and that he would be the only one standing there in class at eight o’clock in the morning. Those former students are now well into their 30s or 40s, but they still regularly phone Fred at midnight, and say, “Come on Fred, we’ll come pick you up.” He’s tougher than those young guys. But he also says that it’s this contact with the younger generation that keeps him alive, feeds

him. For him, art is not about competition – he has long since passed that stage. (...) I think that is typical of the Antwerp art scene, by the way. It is rather small, so there is less of a hierarchy. Here, someone who just graduated from art school can sit in a pub and have a conversation with someone like Luc Tuymans. There is real interest from both sides.

‘Fred is one of a dying breed, with those stories of his, and the way he speaks. He has seen a lot of hard times. As the son of a harbour worker, he went to the academy to become an artist, and studied there amongst the elite. I can imagine that he really had to fight for his work. That makes him very honest and generous: this is what it is, and this is who he is. And yes, that demands a lot of respect.’



Nel Aerts - Nachtreizigers (2015)



Nel Aerts - De doorgedraaide (2015)



Nel Aerts - Heksen nacht (2016)

Something that has been part of his work for a long time, and which is becoming more and more visible in your own work, is the autobiographical aspect. It seems that artists who keep drawing themselves over and over again – you would think they had huge egos. But for both you and Fred, the idea is to undermine yourself, to put yourself into perspective.

‘There are artists who completely eliminate themselves from their own work, which is fine, but why shouldn’t you let people see who you are, in your own way, see what you stand for, what you are doing? In every other sector, people shamelessly promote themselves, but as an artist, revealing yourself in your work is apparently not allowed. You are supposed to have more integrity than that. But I find that Fred is more authentic than all the rest of them put together! It is simply a more direct way of giving form to your world. You know yourself better than anyone else. In my case, it is a bit duplicitous: by representing myself in caricature, I expose myself more, but I am still always protecting myself. I have control of that game of revealing and concealing. In Fred’s case, I think, all is still much more intertwined with himself. He tells real stories from his life, how he sat on his mother’s lap as a baby or joined the army as a soldier. I place myself in a kind of fantasy moment; more than basing my work on memories, I draw in the moment.’

He calls himself a storyteller or a printmaker, not a painter...

'I am more a painter than a storyteller. If I am telling stories, then those stories are more open, more ambiguous about what they actually might be. In Fred's case, you can't get around it. That is a bit risky as well, in fact – that the person and the art are so close to being a single thing. You can never step back from it. With Fred, you can see that all too clearly.'

Fred's work is rarely rose-coloured, but full of obscene characters and deformed freaks. Sometimes his extreme, fantastic images of violence, eroticism and fear first make you shiver, before you see the humour in it. Do you recognize yourself in his rough image of mankind?

'For me, it might be more subtle, more poetic, and perhaps even more depraved. I find it hard when people say that they think my work is 'amusing' or 'cute'. Many of the images are balanced right on the edge. But I can really appreciate the explicit quality that Fred has. For every artist, that existential layer is somewhere different, sometimes deeper, and you have to search more before it becomes visible. But with Fred, it is Bam!, right in there: a figure with a knife in his back, with blood gushing out of it. The way that he applies his 'ugly patches' with a bow and arrow [Bervoets is an accomplished archer. ed.] is magnificent. I seek that resistance by carving and gouging, cutting or burning into my wood, and sometimes I also work with old wood. Some of his etchings are just slightly retouched with paint, but in terms of visual language, they are real mas-



Fred Bervoets - Exhibition view at Gallery De Zwarte Panter

terpieces. I can go on and on about it – like, in one work [*De Verschijning*, 2015], the way he depicts himself as a statue of the Virgin Mary, with a spouting penis. That is mega-heavy, a real shocker. '

By depicting yourself in caricature, you feel as if you have opened up a new page. If there is anyone who has experience at doing that, it's Fred, who has produced whole ranges of different series, both stylistically and thematically. How much do you need reactions or feedback?

'Now, with my paintings, I do have the feeling I've reached an endpoint. Sometimes you work so intensely on something that there suddenly has to be a break. That particular vocabulary is used up. If you work from your heart, from that gut feeling – and Fred does that as well – change is inevitable. You move on in life. You change, your world

shifts, and your work shifts with it. If there is no longer any surprise in it, or you don't experience something while you are making it, then it's worthless. Philip Guston once said it very nicely in a documentary. He was being filmed the entire night while he was painting, but when the film crew came back in the morning, the canvas had been painted white again. "I made a Guston, but I didn't experience anything", he told them. There can be pressure on that process right from the moment that you start to function more commercially, so you fall into the trap of making work that you actually already know is passé. I get bull-headed at that point. I immediately see that it's not as good. (...) It really does pay to stay true to yourself. You can see that with Fred as well. He has always been very radical about it. In the 1960s and 1970s, the entire art scene was all about Pop Art and Minimalism, and people laughed at him because he



Nel Aerts - Vakantie (2015)

was still painting. Something like, “Jesus, there he is again...” But today, everybody is back to painting again. Time catches up. That is what is so fantastic about his work. It does not go out of style; it never becomes dated. Young people understand his work, maybe also because he uses

the visual language of comic strips.’

In this context, how important is working in the studio?

‘For me, it is extremely important. Rediscovering yourself all over again happens to me not in the form of an idea of doing something

differently, but in the visual language that I continue to work through and develop. Once you’re into a powerful rhythm, new things keep coming. Fred is much more intense about it than I am. From the time he wakes up, it’s full-on, a lot of alcohol, smoking, painting, drawing, and then he continues working through the night. For him, creating is always a kind of explosion, when he loses control and is almost flipping out. He works really fast, with high energy. And at a certain point he started looking for a new visual language, because he had become too good at doing what he did. I think I am getting an increasingly better notion of it, when I have mastered a given vocabulary, understand it too well.’ She laughs, “Then that is the end of it. I work much longer on a panel than Fred does, and sometimes I just have to plan a break. At that point, I’m sick to death of the studio. Fred never is. He is forever in a continuous, ongoing trip. (...) But where that admiration is concerned, I suddenly remember that Fred once said something like, “I don’t want to know how the work will end, because then I would



Fred Bervoets - Exhibition view at Gallery De Zwarte Panter



From left to right: Adriaan Raemdonck (Gallery De Zwarte Panter), Fred Bervoets and Nel Aerts

just be a manual labourer.” That is absolutely true. Recently, I was messing around and burst out laughing at the expression of the figure that I was drawing. When that happens, then I know that it’s okay.’

There is a lot about loneliness.

‘Yes, a lot of Fred’s friends have been destroyed by isolation and alcohol. What it is really about is choosing this profession. It is a lonely decision. It’s not as if things in the studio are always the way I just described. You don’t come up with good work every day. There are just as many days where absolutely nothing works. That can be very frustrating. And that is what is so intense about it: you make a decision to sit and do that. You can’t get out of it, and you get caught up in the rhythm, which is very powerful. You give up a lot for it. In Fred’s case, again, it is very extreme: he can’t do it any other way. He gets sick if he doesn’t do it. (...) I sense that this keeps sounding more and more romantic, but in his case, it really is: that idea of the

maniacal, mad artist creating away in his studio is absolutely true.’

In what way have you been influenced by Fred’s work?

‘Where the visual language of his paintings is concerned, I am not aware of any influence, but you never really know what is going on inside. Out of curiosity, I have certainly looked at how he sets himself down as a figure in his own work, and that is why I don’t think that his influence can be directly read into my work. Other than that, I find his being an artist, the way he does what he does, extremely interesting. On the one hand, he has always had the most incredible discipline, painting his entire oeuvre. He works bizarre hours. On the other hand, he has spent just as much time in the pubs. That alcohol of his – he says that it is a kind of fuel, his natural gas. He is a functioning alcoholic. He also says that he no longer has hangovers. He combines it all seamlessly. For him, it all runs together into one thing. Do I want to become as old as he is?’

Well, if an artist can still keep doing the work he is doing at his age, so tirelessly, then absolutely! Lieven Segers [an Antwerp artist] had a film made of Fred, and he called it *Fred in his Perpetual Storm*. I think that’s accurate.’

Do you see Fred as the prototype of an artist?

‘There are so many artists. No, I don’t see Fred as prototypical, not as such. He is extreme in that big romantic idea of the artist, but what is so fantastic is seeing all those different artists and how they each approach their work. Their drive, working full throttle – it is remarkable. I think it is fantastic the way somebody like Guillaume Bijl [a conceptual Antwerp artist], a completely different artist than Fred, uses his time. In that sense, it really reinforces me in the idea of really doing my own thing, instead of identifying myself with some specific ‘type’ of artist. We are all different, and in being different, you are never alone. That is a real consolation.’