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Mark van Huystee's Townscapes

Watching and daydreaming

Mesmerising colours, changing perspectives, and an endless mass of detail drawing you in so you keep recognising new elements. The townscapes by Mark van Huystee, who lives and works in Delft, appeal to a wide audience and have an instantly recognisable style of their own. This year he will be showing a new work, 'Looking at fish', featuring the fish market in Delft. Blauww interviewed Van Huystee about drawing a view of a town while it changes before your very eyes.



Mark van Huystee was always into drawing. "Like any other child, really," he says. "But at the point where other children stop drawing, I kept going, all the way through secondary school and even while I was studying Industrial Design. I attended drawing classes at the Rietveld Academy and had lessons at the Open Academy in Rotterdam and The Hague. I simply enjoyed doing it." We are in Van Huystee's studio on the Voorstraat, where he keeps a number of giclée prints (produced using a high-quality inkjet printer) and several original drawings. Most of his drawings are large, measuring over two metres wide, and the Voorstraat studio offers the space he needs.

The people of Delft have come to know Van Huystee because of his townscapes, but he has only been doing those for the last decade or so. "I started drawing from my imagination, and later added drawing with a specific purpose, to design things. I never drew from life; somehow it seemed a bit dull. And then, about ten years ago, I decided to switch and do just that, to sit down and simply record what I could see, on some interesting spot in town. The early subjects were relatively small: the Vrouwenregt canal, a detail of the Old Church. Then I started on a panorama, simply because I thought it would be fun to do. It was at that point that people really started noticing, because the location meant something to them, they could recognise the place."

Connected

I am standing in front of the giclée print showing the Van Leeuwenhoeksingel, still with the old houses that had been painted Delftware blue before they were demolished to make way for a new building. I look at the sea of bicycles parked in front of the houses, and I think of the cyclist's underpass below the line (how many times must I have passed through that?) and how I used to play hide-and-seek among the bicycles with my partner's children. Memories are tied to places. The fact that this is a drawing rather than a photograph makes you look closer and notice the finer details. Van Huystee gets to hear the most wonderful stories to go with his townscapes. "Especially

when a work is finished, but also when I'm drawing on location."

'I never drew from life; somehow it seemed a bit dull'

So how does one go about drawing a townscape? Mark points out a drawing he is currently working on, a view of the Market Square in Nijmegen. "I start with something that's drawn my attention. It will often be something in the foreground, like this bicycle. That then becomes my starting point, and everything else gets connected. In this case I continued with the tree against which the bicycle was parked, and from the tree crown I went and drew the upper parts of the buildings. I can't immediately complete the buildings all the way down to the ground, because then I wouldn't be able to put anything in front of them. You see, I don't do preliminary sketches; every line I draw stays where it is. On the one hand it makes things more exciting, because you need to get everything right the first time, but

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Van Haystee voel aanspraak als hij zit te teknoon! "Dat in afhankelijk van hoe ik zit. Als de mensom nakkelijk over mijn schooder mee kunnen hijken wel. Wanneer ik Haderen aan een boom teken, kan ik bot in de stasserijd een gespeek voeren, maar teis ingrukkelish aanla de straatklinders van een brag, waarbij je rekening moet bouden

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on the other hand it is very relaxing. When you're working with a pencil and eraser, you tend to keep changing, improving, doubting. I just skip that stage. And I don't have to make anything up, I simply draw what I see."

I can imagine how the process works with stationary objects, but how does Van Huystee go about drawing passers-by? "Again, I start with something I notice, something like a pair of spectacles, a shoulder bag, or a scarf. Once I've got that down on paper, the subject will have passed by, but there is always somebody else that comes along, and I just keep adding bits from a succession of persons. Sometimes I need up to twenty people to make up a single figure in my drawing."

Mark moves on to his drawing of the Wijnhaven in Delft. "Ik work up to 60 hours on a single drawing, often spread over a three-month period. As a result you can often see more than one season in my drawings. This drawing was made in April, and the trees here are still bare, while over there they have leaves."

The townscapes remind me of the pictures favoured by estate agents, taken with a wide-angle lens. This is because Van Huystee turns his head as he draws, which results in a mix of perspectives in a single drawing. It doesn't always work out:

"I have learned not to make the viewing angle more than 180 degrees. I once started a drawing that was to include The Hague, Delft, and Rotterdam, but I ended up distorting the railway tracks to such an extent that they appeared crooked. That was a drawing I decided to throw away."

Interest

Does Van Huystee get a lot of interest when he sits in the street doing his drawing? "It all depends on how I'm positioned. I do get a lot of interest if people can look over my shoulder. When I'm doing the leaves on a tree, there's nothing to stop me carrying on a conversation, but when I get to something tricky such as the paving bricks of a canal bridge, where you have to take into account the perspective, the curvature of the bridge, and the herringbone pattern of the paving, that requires my full attention." He laughs: "So it gets put on hold for a while."

Selfie stick

Has he changed his way of looking at the town over the last decade? "You'd think so, but no, I haven't. I have in my way of drawing, but not when I'm walking through the town. It's because I come here so often, I suppose." The biggest change over the years has been how Van Huystee has been increasing the level of detail in his drawings. And he leaves nothing out. "I want to show the town the way it really is,

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and show to people how much beauty there is in the details, even in details that are generally frowned upon, such as that leaning bollard in the Market Square, or a piece of rubbish lying about." How the world has changed over the years is reflected in the way selfie sticks suddenly arrived on the scene, and inevitably have become included in the drawings. On the other hand the earlier townscapes show elements that have disappeared from the real world. An extreme example is the way the Van Leeuwenhoeksingel has changed, as mentioned earlier, with the row of old houses making way for the new railway station and council offices, and I notice that the Market Square townscape includes traffic-control bollards that have since gone.

Colouring

Once he has finished the line drawing of a townscape Van Huystee makes a digital scan of the image. He then uses a computer to add the colours to the drawing, using photographs he takes when the lighting is right. Like the drawing, he does the colouring himself. "For another project I once had someone else do the colouring for me, but our styles were too different." He uses a computer for the colouring mainly because it is practical. "I don't like to think of having to do that by hand as well." Has he ever considered doing different versions of a drawing, with different colours, say night and day versions? "No, not yet. I did have a problem with the drawing of the Van Leeuwenhoeksingel where the test print showed that the sky was too dark. It looked as if the drawing had been made during the evening, with the foreground lit up by floodlights, like a building site."

'Every line I draw stays where it is'

The day after the interview I suddenly think of a question that simply begs to be asked: working outdoors, as Van Huystee does, don't you run the risk of the occasional bird, um, releasing something onto your work? Van Huystee replies by e-mail that it has indeed happened. "The drawing I'm currently working on has received its fair share of bird droppings, and it has had a cup of coffee spilled over it. No problem, I just keep on drawing and remove the mess later by digital means."

If you would like to read more about Mark van Huystee's townscapes, or if you are looking for an original gift from Delft, visit www.townscapes.info