

Hans van der Ham
Down the Woods you be Mine

When asked directly what a particular painting might signify, Hans van der Ham resists giving a precise answer. His work unfolds in the autonomy of free thought, each canvas acquiring its own singular presence rather than serving a fixed reference.

His studio, with its lofty ceilings and luminous light, is divided into two levels. A steep staircase leads to a mezzanine that looks down onto the space below. Here, sculptures in plaster, wood, and ceramics, raw, hybrid forms suggestive of mythological beings stand in dialogue with ethnographic objects gathered on his travels, small paintings, books of inspiration, and a piano. Together they form a constellation that enriches our sense of his multifaceted artistic universe.

The painted figures inhabiting this space appear introverted, withdrawn, almost anonymous, as if reluctant to disturb the rhythm of their maker. On one wall, smaller works hang tightly grouped, while above them larger canvases extend imagined worlds that we can only behold from below in humility. Between two large tables cluttered with jars of pigment and paint, three easels are arranged. Not for simultaneous labor, but to allow two works to guide the direction of the one before which he presently stands. The other canvases wait patiently, lined up like children against a pillar, awaiting their turn to leave the studio for an exhibition or to be set aside, should they fail to satisfy their creator.

Ranging from monumental canvases of 300 x 200 cm to intimate portraits of 40 x 30 cm, Van der Ham's paintings demonstrate a remarkable versatility of scale and style. His figures are not merely archetypal symbols, but charged presences, infused with dialogues and intentions. Painted with sculptural intensity, awkward in posture, they radiate a fragile poetry whose layered, almost shadowed force is inseparably bound to their vulnerability.

This direct and urgent way of painting becomes, for Van der Ham, a condition of liberation, a path towards renewal. While his work might be situated in the tradition of Art Brut or Outsider Art, such terms fall short of describing its contemporary resonance. More telling affinities emerge with Markus Lüpertz and Die Jungen Wilden, or closer to home, with contemporaries such as Emo Verkerk and Marlene Dumas, artists who anchor painterly tradition in psychological and existential depth.

The archetypes in Van der Ham's figures confront us at once with earthly fragility and with the collective recognition of solitude. Yet for the artist this solitude is not a burden, but a fertile ground for transformation. His almost compulsive retreat into the studio, where unconscious impressions quietly surface and reveal themselves on canvas, lends meaning to the solitude that surrounds us all.

Text: Kerry Nielsen and Monique Tolk

Down the Woods you be Mine offers a glimpse into this process of revelation, accompanied by the richly layered monograph CON ANIMA, published by Jap Sam Books and presented on the occasion of this exhibition.