

## Jef Geys

### ESSEX STREET

For a number of years, Jef Geys has made new works out of his past. “Bubble Paintings” was an exhibition of earlier works shrouded in bubble wrap and dated new. The decision to keep the paintings covered is something Geys came to naturally, perhaps even accidentally, as paintings came home in bubble wrap and traveled back out the same. T. S. Eliot spoke of making “quasi-musical decisions.” That’s how I’d put it, too. Some faced out. Others were turned around, wrong-way facing, full of their own out-of-view lives. The images we do see are simple, nothing out of the ordinary: a melodious violet, a factory-made Madonna, a reproduction of a Breugel where a donkey follows its master through the snow. These painted images are common enough to be seen in the rooms of people who are certainly not ruling the world. In this way, class and money come up naturally; so does a sense of what makes an image “worthy” or “attractive” and to whom, and for what reasons.

On top of the bubble wrap is tape sealed with dabs of primary-colored paint. Red, blue, and yellow—the very atoms of paintings. What an awakener. Their ebullience is permanent, though the paintings are decidedly not. Geys can change a work and does. Little is ever fixed. It is as if the works say, “Sometime earlier we were sold stability and totality, much as the far-fetched basics of religion are sold to the credulous.” His own history, it seems, is not something to clarify.

By reusing it, he can claim twin rights that ought to be incompatible—to take leave of one’s own older work while simultaneously exhibiting it. It is admittedly pleasurable to watch an artist enjoy his past with freedom and ease, as if he were making paper airplanes with a house deed or a cherished photo, and then watching it take wing below his window. What holds these works in tension, as equal forces straining in opposite directions, is the artist’s effort to make a painting stand still and escape in the same moment.

Leaving the show, I thought, “Jef Geys is alive and making posthumous art.” It is the most extraordinary and irreconcilable things about Geys that are most easily forgotten. Irrespective of his age, I do feel these paintings exist where life edges into death, and perhaps even have something to tell us about the oceanic force and mystery of that event. It is one thing to see a work made late in an artist’s life as commissioned by death, and quite another when you feel you are being called to from the other side. Ghostly? Posthumous? One can’t explain this. In *The Philosophy of Music*, Theodor Adorno writes, “Death is imposed only on created beings, not on works of art, and thus it has appeared in art only in a refracted mode, as allegory. . . . Of the works themselves it leaves only fragments behind, and communicates itself, like a cipher, only through the blank spaces from which it has disengaged itself.” It is a mystery—one of the many this show induced me to think about: what causes despair, what causes us to lose a sense of constancy, and what causes jubilation. These are the most mysterious things I know, and they certainly don’t come from the places that conventional wisdom tells us they do. Bubble wrap is not a substance thought to contain a deep interior life, yet I entered these paintings and found evidence of just that. One might have arrived at this show and seen an artist consigned to packing up his paintings, and think gloom had descended. But I left with those three painted dots and the words *life, life, life*.

—Robert Snowden



Jef Geys, *Drawing—Greta Meert, 2017*, framed print, bubble wrap, tape, paper, marker, paint, 17½ × 13½ × 1".