EYEMAZING

SEBASTIAAN BREMER

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Sebastiaan Bremer

Egmont

To be full of joy, of sadness, of thoughts
To grope and to crave almost in pain
Jubilant to heaven, mortally afraid;
Really happy is only the soul in love

—Klarchen's Song, GOETHE'S *Egmont*

Egmont, the latest series by Dutch-born, Brooklyn-based artist Sebastiaan Bremer, helps us suspend our notion that time is linear. Like a meditation or a déjà vu, these lushly painted photographs play with sequence, looping past and present into something more mysteriously connected than our time-lined worldview allows.

Bremer appropriates images that seem very much anchored in time and history—in this case, black and whites of his father as a boy in Holland in the 1940s—and paints on them with thick acrylics. Playing with the surfaces of these one-of-a-kind images, he gives them texture, makes them shimmer and sweat. Millions of brightly coloured little bubbles dance across the surface—bursting like the present moment, again and again and again. These historical photos are no longer dated, but transformed into something alive, vital—timeless.

Bremer, who has worked as both a painter and photographer since the early 90s, has become well known for his painted photographs, or photographic paintings, however you choose to categorise them. This art hybrid is in no way new to the art world, but Bremer's way of doing it is utterly fresh and original. A 2006 article in *The New Yorker* said that amongst the several artists then showing paint on photograph works in town, Bremer's was "the most sophisticated, the most excessive, and the most extraordinary." His creations have been called "psychedelic" and "downright magical."

The contributing factors that coalesced to bring the *Egmont* series to life are multiple. About four years ago, Bremer found an old contact sheet of photos of his father when he was 12 years old growing up in Holland. Bremer said that his father, who is now 78, looked "really weird and contorted and super-happy with his arms outstretched," and it reminded him of the Bruce Nauman self-portrait, *Fountain*, in which Nauman stands with his arms outstretched spouting water up from his mouth.

Bremer discovered that his father's drama teacher had taken this photo, along with many others, in a strict all-boys boarding school in Holland in the 1940s. The drama teacher later published a book, *The Art of Declamation*, a study on 'the full range of human emotion," using 120 images of Bremer's dad and his classmates wholeheartedly embodying different facial expressions. Bremer paints upon these images of his father, along with a few of his young son, daughter, and himself, to create Egmont.

The choice of the name "Egmont" is another pithy component of this project's unfolding. When reading Brassai's *Henry Miller: the Paris Years*, Bremer was moved by Henry Miller's words: "I am either full of heavenly joy or mortally depressed." Bremer says: "I completely recognised myself in that. I have a small family and I've bought a house and there are a lot of things happening in my personal life and I just really, really liked that line."

Bremer later discovered that Miller's words were borrowed from *Egmont*, a Goethe play credited for formalising the notion of "the Romantic Soul"; its phrase "heavenly joy and deadly sorrow" became a hallmark for European Romanticism at the end of the 18th century. "I feel in a weird way," says Bremer, "that this (heavenly joy, deadly sorrow) is predominately the state we are all in. We all have these romantic ideals and hopes and dreams for our lives and it's still very much informed by the idea of Romanticism—whether it be our expectations for what happens when you have kids or what happens when you get married or what is the ideal way to live or the true way to be an artist."

Being Dutch, Goethe's play became even more relevant to Bremer when he realised that it was about a noble Dutch count, Egmont, and his struggle against the tyrannical Duke of Alba. The song of Egmont's lover, Klarchen (above), basically became Bremer's template for this whole series of portraiture.

Bremer's project evolved, of course, as these things do, when his two young children became involved. Bremer showed one of his dad's portraits to his ten-year-old son, Tobias, who mimicked the faces and expressions so perfectly that Bremer decided to photograph him, too. "I put him in my studio on a stool and I said, 'Look at this picture and try to do it,'" Bremer says. "And I pulled out a particularly sad one, and before I knew it tears were rolling down his face just because he was making such a dramatic face. It was really funny—he was taking on the pose and then the pose made him feel a certain sort of way."

So you have Bremer's son sitting on a stool in Brooklyn and Bremer's father, then a 12-year-old boy in Dutch boarding school—and they are making the exact same faces. In *Egmont*, they are two young boys on the cusp of adolescence, still totally undefined in their lives but becoming gradually more curious and more excited about the possibilities that lie ahead in the wide world. Bremer is zeroing in on the fundamentals of human emotion—fundamentals that belie generational and cultural change.

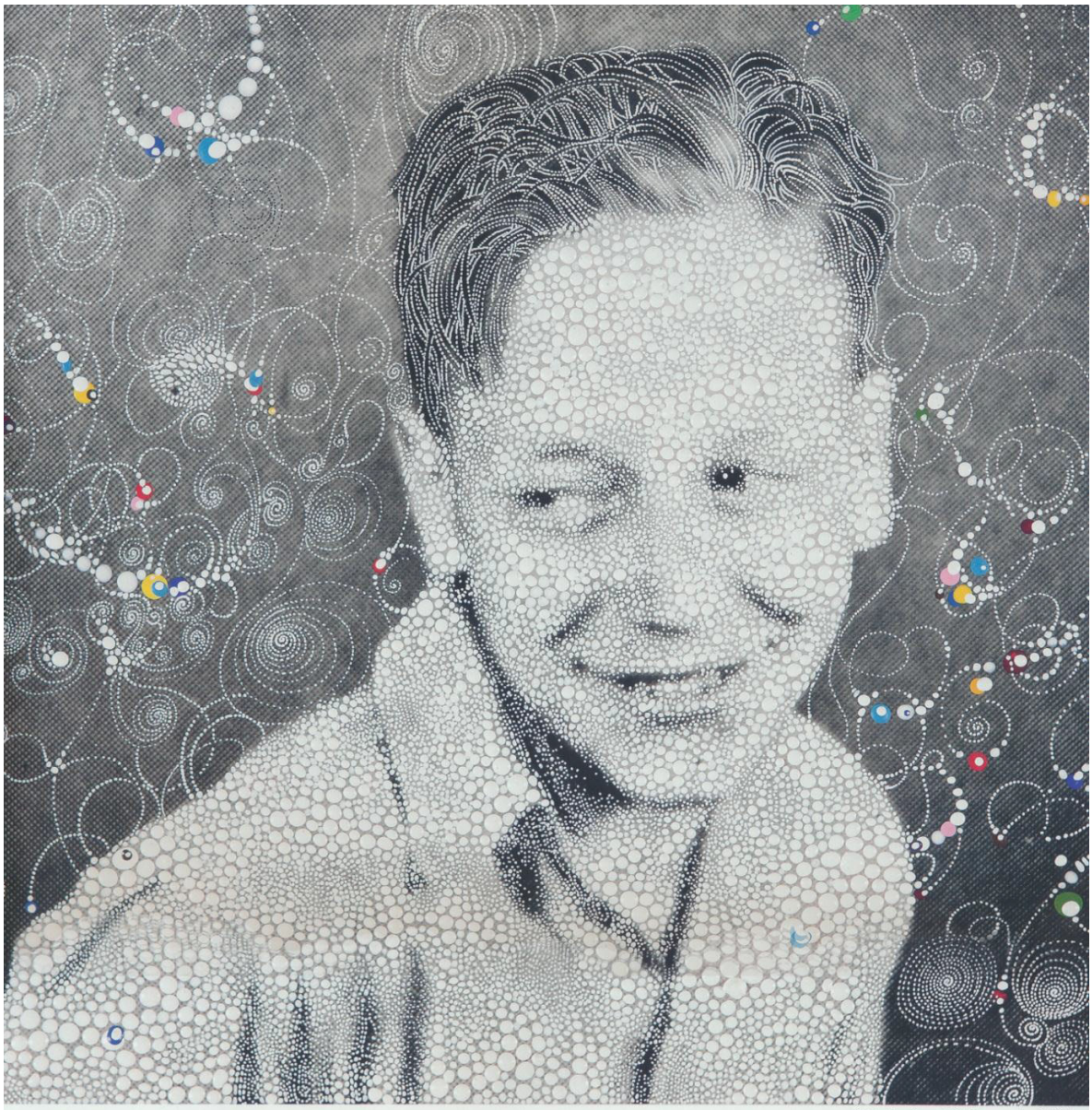
"I'm still playing with the idea of working with all of this," Bremer says. "There is a certain timelessness to portraiture. If you see a picture from a long time ago, people still have similar expressions and faces. And you see something like a Memling from the 15th century, and it can still touch you if it's done well. And then it's amazing to connect with your father when he was 12. He's 78 now. My kids are time travelling—we are all kind of mixing it up."

Yes, his dad is 78 and grew up in the very culturally homogenous bubble of Holland in the 1940s—a world of rolling farmland where classmates wore wooden shoes to school. And yes, his son Tobias is ten and growing up with a Dutch father and a Brazilian Jewish mother in the most heterogeneous city in the world, New York. "If I would have told my father when he was 12," says Bremer, "that he would have a grandson that would be half Jewish and half Brazilian and growing up in Brooklyn that would be so friggin' alien to him—unimaginable. The wonder of it all, it's pretty mysterious."

Ultimately, these images are about that mystery and wonder of being fully alive—or, as Camus once wrote, "Living to the edge of tears." For the *Egmont* series is exploring, as was *The Art of Declamation*, the full range of human emotion, something that is beyond time and place.

One fascinating aspect of this project is the nuance and breadth of emotion offered. Each of the 21 images in *Egmont* is accompanied by its original Dutch word or phrase used in *The Art of Declamation*. They are mostly outdated words or even bits of poetry that describe the "declamation" portrayed. Emotion is not painted in the broad strokes that we often use—words like angry, sad, happy, and scared—but in delicious detail. *Wolop venem* for example, is an archaic was of saying "fully crying." There is one that simply says, *Bijlo!* which is a ridiculously old fashioned way to say, "Wow!" Here, there is not just laughing, but "friendly laughing", "full laughing," "laughing like a girl," "sneaky laughing," "surprise laughing," "painful laughing," crying and laughing. We may just see plain old generic laughing, but really the range and detail of laughter is vast. Bremer's *Egmont* helps us see that.

And that is what art should help us do—perceive the



© Sebastiaan Bremer, *"Terluiks een oogje gaf"*, 2011

subtleties and depth of life that we may miss because our perspective is inherently limited. As P. B. Shelley, the Romantic poet, once wrote about poetry, good art "purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of being. It compels us to feel anew the universe…"

With this work, a skilful amalgam of photography and painting, Bremer is indeed purging the "film of familiarity". By meditatively painting on the black and white photos' surfaces with acrylics and pens, he steers the image to a new place, expanding the expressions, making the surface tactile and bumpy. "You can almost read them as you would Braille," he says. "They really glisten."

And in this way, what could be perceived as the external form—paint, bumps, texture—meld with the subjects of the photos to become the content. The energy they create on the surface of these old black and whites becomes the message—they draw you in so that it is not just about Bremer's father in the 1940s, but about relishing the always there present moment.

"The surface is quite seductive, you can see how it's made of these bubbles and you step away and then you are drawn back in. I'm a believer in seducing with pictures, because if people have a sense of wonder, then it's not just the realm of art appreciation—it works on other levels, too. It's all about communication in a sense anyway, I believe. That's why I think this sense of beauty and seduction is a large part of communicating to the world what's in your head."

TEXT BY CLAYTON MAXWELL

Courtesy
Hales Gallery, London
www.halesgallery.com

among them. The photos are perfectly lit, framed and it seems as if they were almost styled. I did not want to critique the imagery, or interfere with their innate power. Before I printed contact sheets from the negatives, I had never seen them printed.

I did not want to create a barrier between the images and the viewer. I wanted to add to that displayed reality, amplify it. I worked in this way, adding my marks and the larger spheres of color by hand on the print so that the orbs seem to float in the reality of the photograph, 'seen' by the protagonists in the images. Or at least that is what it

seems like. This illusion works, even though upon closer inspection they are clearly handmade marks on the surface of the print.

This series seems to depict a time (the 1970's) that for the majority of people alive seems the pure and happy past. Most of us were either young, or infant. The realities of global warming etc. are not a factor in these works. It's funny how much of life in retrospect is always positively seen, while in the moment itself life is usually not experienced as carefree as that. Just read the newspapers of those days: the early seventies were filled with wars and violence and pollution. Still, seeing these images, that is not apparent at all. I think we all look at family photos and see the holidays and birthdays, and know the stories behind the smiles. Still, there are some wonderful moments and sometimes they were captured on film.

Sebastiaan Bremer is an Amsterdam-born artist now based in New York. Sebastiaan uses hand-painted acrylics and inks on chromogenic prints. sebastiaanbremer.com

Installation view, von Bartha Garage, March 2012

Concrete art and people like Steele) connects with my long standing love of concrete poetry and a sense of ordering materials in a concrete and constructive way. Paint, in its various forms, from watercolour through to encaustic, as well as line (in the form of charcoal, pencil, marker pen, CNC routed line, digitally printed line), is treated as a material to be placed in strict relationship to other materials. This is then adjusted, or disrupted. I like to think I am spontaneous about finishing works, other people visiting the studio sometimes tell me when they are finished, or by asking if they are, trigger the decision. But I would always subscribe to the notion of indeterminacy, re-visiting work in the way that Raoul de Keyser did.

KB: And let's say, putting it crudely, that paintings are like 'sentences' (part of a wider language) would you say that painting for you is an ongoing conversation or argument full of 'question sentences' with no answers? Should we be worrying about the function of painting?

AB: The relationship with the viewer is very important to this work; it is about creating space in their minds as much as good writing opens space in the imagination. Conceptually the objective is very different from providing solutions or answers, but nevertheless I believe it addresses vital issues around human modes of attention. I worry more about the weaknesses in our infrastructure for looking at art than I do about the problems of making it.

KB: I know you have used the words 'doubt' and 'uncertainty' before when discussing painting – perhaps there is some humour here? Which other contemporary painters do you identify or empathise with at the moment, with regard to these notions?

AB: Without humour I am lost. I have already mentioned the British Construction and Systems artists, de Keyser, and I would add Noel Forster. These are artists who are either in their eighties or dead. Basil Beattie, in terms of gestural abstraction of a particular intelligence would be another one I would add, and some of my contemporaries in Switzerland such as Karim Noureldin and Daniel Robert Hunziker are making great work. When I was working in Holland in the mid 1990s, Marien Schouten was making

extraordinary painting/construction/installation hybrids, and then colleagues I have worked with in the UK, such as Cullinan Richards, Robert Holyhead, Adam Gillam, David Rhodes and Gareth Jones are great because of the ways their work crosses painting with other territories to a greater or lesser extent. Patrick Fitzgerald is one of my oldest friends and a great painter based near Bilbao. Painter and writer Sherman Sam also introduced me to the work of Thomas Noskowski a number of years ago, which was a real discovery. I could go on, there are many others. The crucial thing for me is mobility and generosity in looking at other artists' work.

KB: I have been looking at very early Renaissance Florentine panel painting recently. I am struck by the colour relationships, compositions, and surface painting and patterning techniques such as sgraffito. Are there paintings from history that you study in this way?

AB: Not systematically, but in the big collections and when I travel. Fifteen minutes in front of a Piero Della Francesca at the National Gallery is never time wasted.

KB: Is there a spiritual factor somewhere? Perhaps this might be a question about philosophy or which philosophers have been important? What sustains your practice?

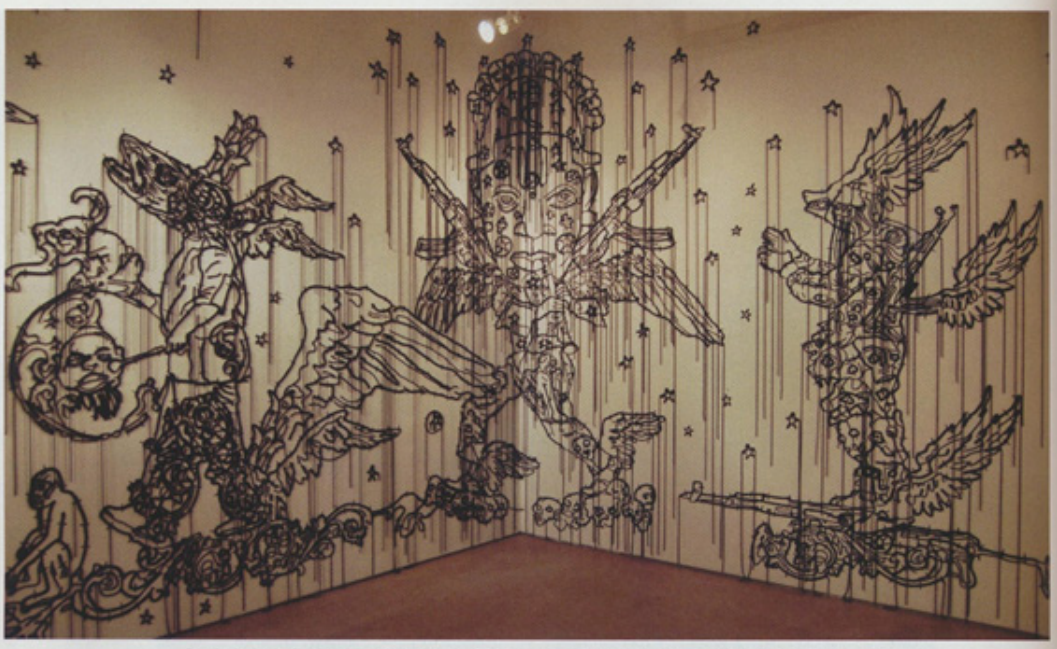
AB: Going way back in my own reading and thinking, the intellectual wrestling of late Medieval mystics such as Meister Eckhart (around negative theology) has an oblique but critical link to my own approach to making art. There was logic (having grown up in a Church of England vicarage) to finding a way to philosophy via theology. My first ever catalogue text, from a writer called David Miller, discussed my work in relation to negative theology, and in the world of ironic 1990s Brit Art my then gallery viewed this as career suicide – suggesting I drop the essay and get Sarah Kent to write something more catchy! The interest in the kind of thought Eckhart pioneered hasn't been supplanted, but the notion of silence (thinking of concrete poets such as robert lax and dom sylvester hoćdard) is carried in my approach to ideas of attentiveness in art, not as something quiet or passive, but as a social and political force.

KB: Despite the crisis in painting, which seems to have gone on forever, there is plenty of renewed interest at the moment, with lots of painters just getting on with it, 'hang ups' gone and looking to the future. How do you account for this? Or perhaps I am wrong. You teach in several art colleges and see what is going on first hand.

AB: I like Thierry de Duve's essay in Kant after Duchamp, The Readymade and The Tube of Paint, in which he describes Marcel Duchamp's crisis with his own inadequacy as a painter as a trigger to his whole artistic career. The truth probably is that everyone is responding to painting (or the idea of painting) all the time, leading to all sorts of individual crisises on a near permanent basis. This is far more interesting than the end of painting (in 1981 - courtesy Douglas Crimp), it has always been ending, the critical questions are more about if any of us are capable of having a useful crisis with painting, or art in general, or art in a social context? I don't see a crisis of painting in art schools. There is a crisis of resources, of cultural confidence in the value of art as art, as opposed to a weak subdivision of the social sciences, but the energy and desire to make painting, among students and artists in general remains undimmed.

Hexad X Six – Katrina Blannin
2013
Acrylic on linen
120cm x 100cm

Courtesy of the artist



Locke's installation *The Nameless*, 2010, made of cord, plastic beads, and gaffer tape, taps into the narrative art of the past, outside of time and sequence.

tyrants toting weapons who are almost invisible under the ill-gotten wealth and flowers cloaking them top to toe. "It's about making something knowingly exotic to be consumed—playing with a whole bunch of stereotypes," says Locke. "It's making a dark bogeyman for our times who's going to come and eat your babies." Despite considerable commercial success, the artist has been on the wrong side of the trends for the big institutions, being considered either too foreign or too homegrown, which both frustrates and amuses him. "Everybody's hunting for the latest thing, but what if the latest exotic, cool thing is around the corner? Give me a solo show at Tate Modern, and I'll blow your socks off! In other words," he asks, "how do you want me?"

Locke used to resist biographical readings of his work; these days, however, he embraces the personal influences that shape it. He traces his interest in pomp and regalia to boyhood memories of kilted bagpipe bands marching through Edinburgh and credits his love of color and kaleidoscopic excess to the tropical vibrance and cultural diversity of Guyana, where Christian, Hindu, and Muslim festivals are widely celebrated. Locke is married to Indra Khanna, an artist and curator he met in the early 1990s when both had studios in a squatter's building, along with the British Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare. By way of hobbies, Locke enjoys visiting stately homes, traveling, and collecting "weird things," such as obsolete share certificates, which have featured in several works, including *Gold Standard*. The piece consisted of enlarged certificates pasted temporarily across a building facade for the 2012 Deptford X arts festival in South London.

Over the past year, Locke has branched out into new mediums in two projects. The first, a bronze sculpture of a black moon goddess exploding in stars, titled *Selene* (2013), was commissioned for the facade of a hotel in London's Soho district. The second, *Mummy's Little Soldier*, depicting a glass voodoo doll, was shown at the Glasstress group exhibition "White Light/White Heat" at the 2013 Venice Biennale and subsequently at the Wallace Collection in London.

Despite the variety of materials he employs, Locke regards all of his art as interconnected—"like DNA," he explains, "it loops and twists around." He says his aim is simply to create hauntingly vivid works. He marvels at Titian's graphic 1558 painting *The Martyrdom of St Lawrence* and Velázquez's 1650 *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, which he finds so lifelike he exclaims: "God, you bastard, you'd kill me without blinking!" Locke sees the power of his own reliefs as being in the figure's eyes, which he adds right at the end of a work. "So when I put eyes on the queen, it's for you to come and think, God, that has a reality to it," he says. "That's what I'm trying to do—to make something that gets under people's skin." ■

The bronze sculpture *Selene*, 2013, which updates a Greek goddess in the figure of a black woman, is informed by the Baroque, Art Nouveau, Victorian fairy tales, and more.