

The direct expression of primal feelings, *By Jace van de Ven*

For some years Bart van Hoek studied sociology. At first pursuing an artistic career seemed to obvious to him. But since his father, Luc van Hoek was a highly accomplished sculptor and stained-glass artist in whose studio Bart, as a child, was always present, in the end it had to be art he was going to devote his life to. First somewhat tentatively, being an art-teacher, but finally as an artist in his own right. Someone going his own way, influenced by such artists as Permeke, De Kat and Spilliaert.

Bart van Hoek's work is undeniably rooted in the Dutch province of Brabant but, from here, has no difficulty crossing international borders, both literally and figuratively. For years he tried to find a big, remote studio in Portugal, Italy or Spain. By the end of the nineties he succeeded. His artistic independence found a basis. It took him some time to get used to it, but his newly found freedom has been bringing forth powerful sculptures for a number of years now. And what is new is that he has been making charcoal drawings, a number of which he turned into paintings.



But sculpting remains the core of his work; creating sculptures that bring happiness. Take his St. Anne threesome, made for the Hasseltse kapel, a chapel in the town of Tilburg. Anyone suffering from depression should go and see it, see the young, lively mother, big-bosomed, with her strong, proud neck, see the eager infant in her lap, the liveliness accentuated by the horizontal bronze folds. And opposed to that modest Anne, with her withered forms, the hanging folds, peacefully and full of tenderness enjoying the affectionate game she does not actively take part in. Yet the child is attracted by a gesture of her monumental, arthritic hand. The infant hand meeting the adult hand in the centre of the sculpture creates a subtle tension full of expectation.

As in many of Bart van Hoek's works it is a scene that asks to be closely observed, to be touched and to be pondered upon. Forget the underlying story and you will understand that this work of art is a direct expression of a primal emotion: sculpted family affection. Tenderness in bronze.

Avoiding the trap of mere story telling, the artist chose to leave the faces of his figures sketchy and open to suggestion. He probably did this because there was no need to further stylize his figures. Thus they remain ordinary people of flesh and blood, making the St. Anne threesome a monument of motherly love, a moment, well-captured, of instinctive happiness.

Woman is the constant factor in van Hoek's work, not only in his sculptures but also in his drawings and paintings. His work is about the woman for whom there is no need to care for idealized forms forced upon her to be irresistible. Bart van Hoek shows her as an introvert source of energy, strength and tenderness, full of reverence and awe for the indefinable secret she herself is.

So woman is not just a woman in his work. For the sculptor she is a sublime opportunity to express endless variations of such qualities as stillness, modesty, inner strength or on the contrary exuberance. Woman as the origin of all things, the universal seed of all life, God the mother, the starting point of everything.

All of this is indicated to us in a clear, light and expressive way, without any fuss. The sculptor reminds us for a moment of a certainty we have always known deep down inside, whereas we never had any idea of its shape.