

PAPER WORLD

Guy Lec|ef

Lannoo

Art by Guy Leclef
www.guyleclef.be

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This is Guy Leclef's second book, following on from his first book, *Paper World* – and this one, again, is indebted to 'paper', something the artist is still grateful for, every day. At the start of his career, the artist was searching for a way to express himself and, at a certain point, paper became his alphabet. From the first day that Leclef was able to give his creativity free rein using paper, only one thing mattered: freedom!

Rhythm, balance and aesthetics play a leading role in the creations through which he developed his own unconventional language and technique. The result is richly expressive and coherent works of art that impress. Leclef makes his way through paper like an explorer, looking for order in the chaos and, together with his innermost emotions, creates a fascinating paper landscape that has an existential dimension.

Another aspect of his work is that Leclef wants to upgrade paper, giving one of the basic materials of our crazy disposable society – paper – a second life. That said, the artist is not pursuing any particular artistic zeitgeist. Architecture and nature are what inspire him the most – and naturally the material itself. Guy Leclef finds paper sexy, thanks to its mix of the pictorial and the textual.

The artist is constantly looking for new interpretations and forms of expression to take paper in new directions. By tearing magazines – and, more latterly, books – into strips, then folding, moulding or cutting them up again, he has developed an impressive range of images and text.

Looking at his poetic landscapes, we discern craftsmanship in them, but in reality he is searching for sublimation through the flow of planes, shadows and tints in infinite nuances and colours which sometimes appear painted. However, *in the end*, it's the paper, the basic material, that tells its own story.

The result is art that soothes but at which you never tire of looking. Little by little, each piece fluidly reveals an artistic experience to the viewer.



Interview with the artist

Interview: Hilde Van Canneyt

I meet up with artist Guy Leclef in his studio, which stands adjacent to his home but separated from it by a beautiful garden. When I spot the well-clipped privets and boxwood, I immediately sense the courtyard garden's structural quality. Even the gentle slopes of the lawn are neatly edged with tall and not-so-tall grasses. The artist is a lover of simplicity and a certain minimalism. There are no frills in his studio, and its architecture is simple and pure. In his creations, too – for which he developed his own techniques and in which he turns his innermost emotions into paper landscapes – rhythm, balance and aesthetics play a leading role. The result is impressive, idiosyncratic paper works that offer an open invitation to the viewer.

HVC Tell me, Guy, how long have you been working in this oakwood studio in your garden?

GL We've been living here for 25 years. I built this studio 15 years ago. Before that, I worked in a primitive way in my basement, without any daylight; it was also prone to flooding now and then. (laughs) Now I have lots of daylight, I can have lunch with my family, and I don't have to brave the traffic jams in the morning. (winks) And, above all, I want to emphasise that what I do isn't 'work': I do this purely for my own pleasure.

HVC How should I envisage that 'pleasure' starting?

GL Let's just say that my new passion took hold of me professionally, and I felt the need to turn a page. I ran a painting company, and that's where I worked until I was 50. On top of that, my hobby was making figurative and non-figurative collages, combined with a painting technique. Why? Because as long ago as 25 years ago, I was already specialising in painting techniques such as faux-finish marble and wood, tadelakt, classic patines, etc. At that time, I was privileged to set up beautiful exhibitions, in the Grand Palais in Paris, for example, and was involved in a host of wonderful personal projects. I started working solely abstractly and organically with paper in 2004. Someone said to me: 'You absolutely must exhibit this!' It seemed like a big step to me – I'm basically quite shy really. (laughs)

HVC Am I right in thinking that you increasingly moved away from the one-dimensional and started working in 3D? Resulting in something similar to bas-reliefs? You literally tore magazines into strips and folded, moulded or cut them up again. And then you went and did the same thing with books. The paper became almost a tangle of touches of paint. How did you get the idea for that?

GL My family was rather eclectic and artistic. My father had a wonderful art collection, including Fred Bervoets. And we regularly wandered into De Zwarte Panter, the legendary Antwerp art gallery. I was also good with my hands, in everything I did. I needed a way to express myself since I wasn't particularly verbal at that time. Luckily, I've got better at that in the meanwhile, though I'm still a quiet person. In that sense, paper became my alphabet at a certain point. I wasn't really looking for anything particularly intellectual, but I did feel there was something deep inside me that needed to be released. Thanks to the fact that paper is so versatile – something I'm still very grateful for – I've been able to express myself in a completely different way. It really has become almost a language for me – sometimes in black and white, other times in colour.

HVC Was blank paper the first thing that triggered you or was it printed magazines that grabbed your interest from the start and made you want to reinterpret them?

GL I haven't worked much with blank paper. For my first pieces, I treated the magazines by impregnating them with natural glue based on loam and all sorts of resins. That gives the paper a lovely patina. I'm a grafter. I'm used to working with my hands, and I wanted to give that paper a bit more body. I take the paper out of the glue bath just before it becomes papier-mâché. Then I let everything dry out. That way, I can cut all the strips by hand, with the cutter knife, so that you can still see all those lovely cut edges and their texture. I like it all to stay vibrant. I still want there to be labour in everything I make, even today. I enjoy a labour-intensive day that follows a period of intense preparation.

Right now, I'm working on a piece that's structured from various pieces of paper with lots of text and colour which I select specifically, then cut, fragment and nail together, and afterwards glue and nail onto the base. There are at least four to five thousand segments that I have folded and moulded.

HVC My goodness, what a lot of work! That's why your creations are so expressive! Do you think of yourself more as a painter or a sculptor?

GL I'm certainly not a painter; I can't even do figurative painting. I think of myself more as a collage creator in 3D, one with a lot of patience. That tractability probably comes from my past as a diamond cutter and my unwavering creativity.

HVC What do other people mostly think of you as?

GL As a paper artist. I take that as a compliment.

HVC What do you do to recharge before going to your studio?

GL If there's really no flow, it's better to go for a walk first.

HVC As the French painter Paul Cézanne said: 'A work of art which did not begin in emotion is not art.' Sometimes it's the subtle emotional charge that moves the viewer fastest and most intensely and is long felt inside. Should I think of you as an artist who constructs their work of art in a silent act of devotion?

GL I like to listen to music. My taste is eclectic so it could range from something modernist to something really contemporary. Sometimes one of my Spanish lessons will appear in the mix too. (winks)

HVC You rarely make sketches beforehand. I think it must be difficult to know how a composition is progressing.

GL I'm constantly looking for new interpretations and forms of expression to take the paper in a new direction. I do make a draft. I'm not the chaotic kind of artist who waits for an urge or who just 'knows when something's finished'. When I walk into my studio on a Monday morning, I know what to do and how to do it. It's important that I have a serious motivation for what I create. The progress I make each day is not simply mathematics. That said, it still doesn't seem like work to me, and it never will. Art is a haven for me.

HVC You have to prepare well in a practical sense before your working day can begin. Just like a painter has to have enough paint and a sculptor enough clay or stone.

GL The preparations for my compositions take up at least half of my time.

HVC You start your work process by going through various steps, and along the way you see that the piece is progressing and the effect is visible. Of course, magazines have their own impressive range of colours, shapes, images and texts. But of course you don't know what this will do to the final result of your creation.

GL It's in my mind beforehand, technically and in terms of atmosphere. To use the language of music: I know the notes, the basic melody, and I always strive towards a certain rhythm. I only find it really interesting when there are highs and lows – relief – in the piece of work so that, when it's finished, it can be seen in different lights through the day. That way, you the viewer always see something just a little different when you look at my composition. People often tell me that my work is soothing, and that they never tire of looking at it. Even if you stand in front of it and then close your eyes, you can't definitively visualise the piece, and that keeps things interesting for the viewer.

HVC In the final result, we see almost a flow of colours, planes and shadows in infinite nuances. When we look at your work, we discern a certain craftsmanship in it, but with your colour gradients, which sometimes appear to be painted, you're actually searching for sublimation.

GL I always want to let the basic material speak. I am an aesthete, but what is beauty? Who am I to say that the pieces I create are beautiful? I'm not that pretentious. I notice that people who view my work – or buy it *tout court* – have the feeling they're looking at some kind of stone and only discover what the real basic material is when they get closer. It's aesthetic – I'm a lover of things that are finished to perfection but that also have a rhythm that is not imposed but is playful. And, above all, I love humour.

HVC Even when the humour is not 'visible' at first sight, if I can put it like that.

GL No, it's something that creeps in during the work process. People sometimes say to me: 'There's rhythm in it', but they don't notice that I like to deviate from the beat. That's why every piece is different – I am lord and master.

HVC Are you saying that you might dare to smuggle a ... let's say a copy of *Playboy* into the mix? (winks)

GL (laughs) For example. Or sometimes, you come across a nice fragment of text. I don't always take myself seriously, but I do take my work, and creating it, very seriously. I'm critical about what I produce. If a piece isn't balanced or doesn't have the right 'feel', it doesn't leave my studio.

HVC I hear in the way you talk about your work method just how intrinsic it and your story are. How do you determine the dimensions of your pieces?

GL Quite simply, if I instinctively feel like working in a large format, for example, then I do. That's the most important criterion for me. The idea for what to make comes after that. Once I have the base for my piece in front of me, I start to think about what I'm going to make. It also depends on my preparatory work and my stock. Sometimes, I'm out of the base paper I want to use.

HVC But you don't tell a specific, thought-out story as such, do you?

GL The paper tells its own story.

HVC Without getting nostalgic, you literally and figuratively breathe life into something that has passed. When is a creation 'completed' in your eyes? Not an easy consideration, I imagine?

GL When a boundary has been reached. Then it's time for the finishing: for example, there may be bits that are too thick so I sand them some more. One time I'll play with the snippets based on text, at another time with those based on colour. Sometimes I see or feel that there is too much black or blue in the final result and systematically remove it. That way, you get a lovely colour range without an excess of one particular colour. And all my pieces are firmly fixed and nailed.

HVC Who's the first person to give you feedback?

GL My wife.

HVC Someone like that doesn't always have the best eye.

GL (laughs) She really does have a good critical eye for





things. Either I reflect on her advice or I work on to create a new balance. And she knows the colour range I always use, so it's easy for her to share her thoughts.

HVC I imagine it's sometimes necessary to get some distance from a piece, literally and figuratively. The cut or folded magazine strips are not fixed at random, but it seems as though the right place for each bit is carefully chosen. The result is that, during your work process, you incorporate a whole world from outside the studio into your composition. How do you work out your variations?

GL I elaborate on certain ideas, though they're definitely not 'series'. Each piece is a unique work because the basic material – a particular magazine, for example – is always different. I can't possibly make the same piece twice. By now, I must have around 30 variations.

HVC Tell me about those variations.

GL There's the organic story, which does the paper the most justice. Other variations are less organic but, for example, more refined. Depending on the material I have in my hands, it achieves a certain purpose: colourful remains colourful. Glossy paper sometimes gets an upgrade. I'm quick to feel which purpose it will get. Sometimes, I recover material from publishers. At the time, I'm enthusiastic about it, but then I realise that this precious material will only find a place in my oeuvre at a later date. Sometimes, a progression needs to take place, something like: 'What on earth should I make with this?' The idea might take a year to pop up, once I'm ready for it and have seen lots of other things, etc.

Recently, I was able to recover some of the earliest editions of *Paris Match* from an elderly lady. They contain incredibly beautiful material. I don't want to cut it up; I want to present it as a whole, for nostalgic reasons, but most of all out of respect for the magazine. I would like to not actually convert it into something of mine but rather to 'honour' it. That will probably result in a work that isn't abstract, to allow it to come across as purely as possible and completely true to itself.

HVC You really are like an explorer travelling through your paper. Looking for order among the chaos. I have read that you want the viewer to discover the work of art as it is. People only see how the composition is actually constructed when they look more closely. The piece gradually reveals itself in a fluid manner.

GL That's right: pure and surprising. I compare it to how chefs can work with the same three ingredients but everyone makes something different of it; no two creations are alike.

HVC I'm still not totally clear about your work method, but I'm starting to understand your thought and work processes. That only adds interest to the mystery! (winks)

GL (laughs)

HVC And still, I suspect that, in order to make really good pieces, you have to feel it in your bones. Constructing your piece purely technically won't work. You're going to get more inspiration after breakfast one day than you get the next aren't you? And struggling with the medium can only lead to a more interesting result, layers of meaning and references hiding in every corner.

GL That's right. In any case, I'm basically emotional and you see that in my art. At that moment, you make more links to certain comments or expressions you come across in your text material.

HVC How do you get to know all that? A first generation of abstract artists appeared around a hundred years ago.

GL Architecture and nature in particular were the things that initially triggered me. I travelled the world and saw a lot. Sometimes when I walk past something, I have to take three steps back because I know: 'I have to capture this – I'll never pass this way again and that could be a loss.'

In my youth, I loved artists such as Alberto Giacometti and Jan Schoonhoven because of the purity of their work. By the way, do you know what the most important thing is to an artist? Being free!

HVC Someone recently asked me why, given two similar abstract works, it's possible to be really moved by one and feel nothing for the other. I said that it's really about the feeling behind the work, the energy it exudes, that indefinable 'more'.

GL That's right.

HVC Your compositions remind me a little of Arte Povera which was at its zenith in the 1970s. It's also difficult to say whether your work is timeless or contemporary.

GL I don't pursue any zeitgeist in the arts. Paper is not time-bound. It has never been time-bound.

HVC Your creations are nods to daily life, past and present. How defining are your titles?

GL I don't give my pieces names. I wouldn't be able to let them go if I did. I give them numbers. Sometimes, I call them 'waves', 'folded paper', or name them after colours or triangles ... but I don't get philosophical about it all. Even though the

wider audience asks for works to be given an identification. I did give a title to my cardboard work *Favelas* because, once it was finished, it looked like an aerial view of favelas.

HVC In your last book – *Paper World* – Ivo Pauwels wrote about your work. He framed your work in a lovely poetical way. I particularly enjoyed the nice analogies to walking. In some ways, you also ‘walk’ through the paper landscape: from blank paper to magazines from highbrow to lowbrow. Can you still remember the day when those magazines first inspired you? And is the light-hearted content of, for example, glossy magazines an aspect you want to address?

GL I’m mainly interested in the material itself. I find paper sexy. I find the mix of the pictorial and the textual inspiring. My first collages were visual ones, incorporating beautiful women, fashion and slogans. The slogans were rather in your face, which pushed the glamour into the background and created what was more a moment of reflection for the viewer. I’m sometimes asked: ‘What exactly is in your work, because I see this and that?’ but for me, it’s about emotion and aesthetics, and also about upcycling the paper so that the basic material of our crazy disposable society – in this case, paper – gets a second life.

HVC So is that your sense of commitment, artistically speaking?

GL Don’t ask me to use plastic or a synthetic material – that’s not my thing. Although there are very beautiful works of art made by people who recover plastics. I saw a really lovely creation in Portugal, by Ricardo Ramos, who worked with plastic found on our beaches. I also saw a concreted façade there which Alexandre Farto had worked with hammer and chisel. I love that simplicity, but at the same time you sense that there has been research done. I aim for that in my own work.

HVC When did you first ‘dare’ to call yourself an artist?

GL On the first day I was able to give my creativity free rein. (exuberant) Freedom!

HVC What is your gallery and exhibition life like?

GL I was able to exhibit for the first time in Antwerp in 2004: monochrome and coloured works. If I’m being perfectly honest with myself, I have to say that there wasn’t much variation in my work then. But it did give me the pat on the back I needed to carry on! I get an incredible amount of satisfaction from it; I have an awful lot of energy, and for me it’s just wonderful to be doing this.

I was recently privileged to take part in the Homo Faber expo in Venice that runs concurrently with the Venice Biennale. All the exhibitors were paper artists, with Japan and Europe the invitees. I feel quite at home in projects like that. In the meantime, my pieces have found their way into numerous national and international galleries.

HVC (laughs) Do you have any other artistic dreams? Making sculptures maybe?

GL I have made a few sculptures, although I would like to produce a series from which a face almost seems to emerge. That’s not easy. I also created a piece with a 3D scan from which I had an NFT [non-fungible token] made. That’s a path I find interesting.

HVC Your second book is about to come out. How did you find the process? Are there similarities with your first book, *PaperWorld*, or differences?

GL My last book came out in 2015; that’s seven years ago now. It showed my creations from 2004 to 2015. My work evolved after that into new interpretations, and I’d like to record them in the form of a book. I see it as a substantiation of my oeuvre.

HVC It certainly is, Guy! Lots of luck with creating your new repertoire!



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