

# BEN SLEDSSENS

With contributions by / Met tekstbijdragen van  
Manfred Sellink & Karen Van Godtsenhoven  
and a conversation between / en een gesprek tussen  
Ben Sledsens & Rinus Van de Velde

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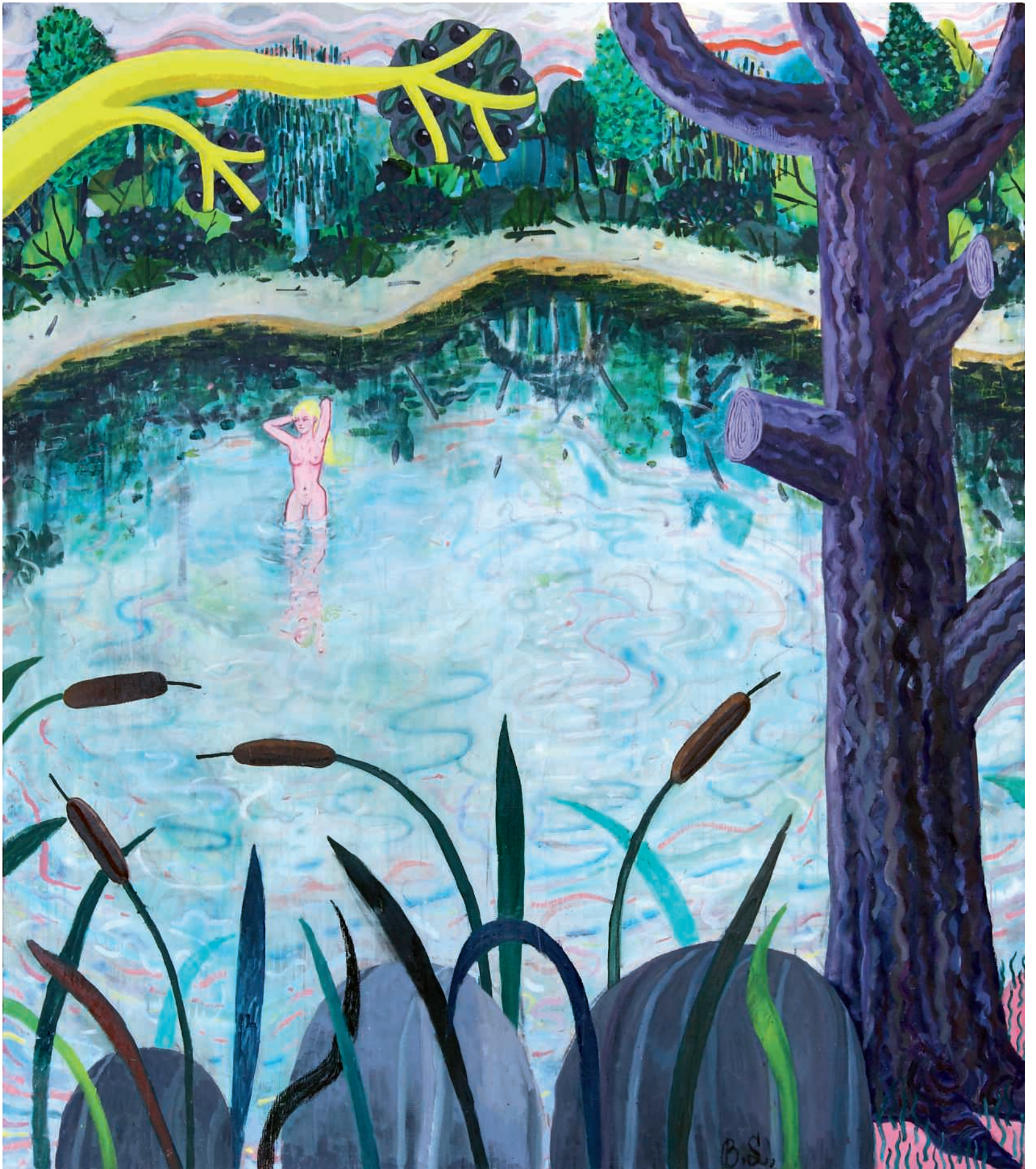
# 'WELL-COOKED TURNIPS': A FEW NOTES ON THE WORK OF BEN SLEDSSENS

Manfred Sellink

A few years ago, the already rich Belgian art world gained a new and striking talent in the form of the young painter and draughtsman Ben Sledsens. Striking is the operative word here, as since his first solo exhibition in 2016 at the Tim Van Laere Gallery, he has featured regularly in the national media and has successfully captured the attention of experts, aficionados and the wider public. This is remarkable for an artist of his age. Equally characteristic and 'un-Belgian' is the nature of his painted work: his large formats, distinctively bright palette, the way he plays with an apparent (but highly deceptive) simplicity and naivety, and his concentration on traditional subjects such as landscapes, interiors and still lifes. Without a hint of epigonism, here we have a kind of contemporary resurrection of the work of the great generation of Fauvists such as Henri Matisse, Raoul Dufy and Maurice de Vlaminck. This is unusual in Belgian art, where there is a clearly established tradition of a more restrained palette, more sombre mood and a stubborn, thematic tension.

By definition, writing about the artist Ben Sledsens means looking at the way that the artist himself views art. Indeed, he makes intensive use of the work of his distinguished predecessors, drawing upon traditions and allowing himself to be inspired in terms of style, technique, formal language and rhetorical visual motifs. The way in which he does this is noteworthy and typical of his artistry. He sees and studies a great deal and is familiar with the art historical classics. I would like to focus on two specific characteristics.

Sledsens has a broad and above all diverse palette of inspirational sources. When you look at his canvases, his admiration for Matisse – and also the French Fauvists from the first decade of the twentieth century – is obvious; he shares this French master's apparently simple method of painting, combined with a marked proclivity for (bright) colours, solid forms and refined composition. Equally marked is the influence of a painter who is probably less familiar to a wider audience: Henri Rousseau, also known as *Le Douanier* – an allusion to his profession before he taught himself to paint and became a full-time artist. Rousseau has acquired an influential place in art history with his large (jungle) landscapes, painted in a simplified, 'naive' visual language, but complex in terms of their composition, with perplexing (exotic) animals and dream-like characters. In Sledsens' recent work, both the perplexing and the dream-like are emphatically present. The canvas *Jaguar in the Jungle* even seems to be a homage to Rousseau. But who Sledsens is looking at, and from whom in art history he has drawn inspiration, is not always as visible as in the cases of Matisse and Rousseau. In a studio discussion with the artist, it was clear that he especially admires Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and his landscapes in particular. This does not seem immediately obvious when you compare the two artists. Indeed, in terms of style, technique and formal language, the young Antwerp-based artist has an entirely different idiom to his illustrious predecessor. But Sledsens looks attentively and, as a result of this observant gaze, purloins one of Bruegel's most important characteristics: his astonishing ability to preserve coherence and structure in an intricately composed landscape, and to lead the viewer's eye through









*Two Girls in the Forest*, 2015, oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 140 × 120 cm  
*Throwing Dice*, 2016, oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 200 × 190 cm →

