

Studio visit *Jean Bernard Koeman*



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Koeman: wry humour

A few months ago, Jean Bernard Koeman's landlord tripled the rent on his Amsterdam studio, so he moved into a military barracks he was offered, which was once part of a now-abandoned garrison town on the outskirts of Bussum.

Although he had never thought he would live in a casern, the physical arrangement of Koeman's studio awkwardly mirrors his creative approach. To be in his barracks is a bit like taking a walk into the artist's mind: a labyrinthine space that opens on to endless interconnected rooms and ideas.

Over the past 20 years, Koeman has been creating drawings on paper and on walls, sculptures and site-specific installations placed in 'parcours', as he likes to call them – arrangements of objects that guide viewers throughout the exhibition.

It's hard to look at all the disparate types of multidisciplinary work Koeman has created and extract a single theme, but they all share a collage-like appearance and an interest in language (wordplays in titles, constant use of one-liners). A word or a sentence is often the starting point for a new project.

Koeman has also been creating sets for the Belgian dance company Les Ballet C de la B, whose latest show, 'Ashes', is programmed for the Stadsschouwburg next month. This month at Lumen Travo on Lijnbaansgracht he presents 'Research and Destroy', a selection of new works including a photo series shot across the world first presented in the form of an art book entitled 'Everything Beautiful is Far Away'.

'It goes without saying that these are all ironic titles,' says Koeman, laughing. Though these names might suggest a somewhat moribund character,

Koeman is the type of person who obviously likes smiling; there is a carefree quality to his gentle manner that sharply contrasts with his somewhat imposing physique.

A great fan of Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers, whose work is rooted in the tradition of Dadaism and surrealism, Koeman tends to invent objects and create environments that address the viewer in absurd yet highly poetic ways. One of Koeman's inventions is a utopian personal swimming machine that immigrants can use to overcome national borders. A critique on right-wing politics that turn Europe into a fortress is also the purpose of the installation 'Refuge', showcased in

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'Research and Destroy'. The piece, which looks like a mini stage including a gentian-blue podium, the above-mentioned utopian device and photographs, is also intended as a metaphor for Europe, a paradise for people from abroad.

The barracks in Bussum consists of countless small rooms, each of which is dedicated to storing large quantities of materials Koeman uses in his work – boxes of cannelloni or black plastic straws that he's used for a sculpture that forms the initials of the United Nations. Placed and seen horizontally, these seemingly inoffensive tubes create a dazzling visual effect.

Just as Koeman discovered how straws could be used as ready-made optical devices, he hopes his art will help people to look at the world around them in a different way. In his words, art should be 'the ultimate refuge of the mind', forging new paths into the souls of viewers – but always with levity.

5 Sep-3 Oct. See *Lumen Travo* gallery in the listings. Catherine Somzé