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Moving Art

An interview with Edgar Jansen

For my final, I looked for an artist who uses expressive strokes. I came across expressionist paintings of dancers by the Dutch artist Edgar Jansen. In his work, each watercolor stroke is different and each painting has a unique quality and its own story. I looked for more information on the artist, but could not find much on the Internet. So I contacted Edgar Jansen and he was willing to answer a few questions.

In his hometown of Amsterdam, Holland, Edgar Jansen is well-known for his portraits. From early childhood, he has been drawing from his imagination. As an adolescent, he would join his parents on sailing trips and holidays and draw harbors and scenery or go to the country by bike or train to draw the landscape. His favorite media were watercolor and pencil. He had a great deal of patience and could sit for hours drawing detailed historical cityscapes. People in the neighborhood would bring him coffee.

At a young age, Edgar knew he wanted to be an artist. He did not come from an artistic family. His father was a businessman and his mother a French teacher. His only connection to art was through a friend of his parents, a drawing teacher who gave him advice and encouraged him. At school, he got good grades from a teacher who loved to draw and forgot to teach mathematics. At the age of twelve, Edgar found himself in an

artistic crisis when his childhood imagination dried up and the drawing lessons stopped. At around fifteen though, he drew illustrations in a book for his grandparents, cityscapes of Delft, that the adults around him were enthusiastic about. Edgar resumed his artwork, but with more realistic subjects. He would draw scenery very precisely in pencil, and began taking drawing lessons every Saturday in the artists' village of Laren. His parents encouraged his art as a hobby, but not as a profession because it was a hard way to make a living.

That is why Edgar did not dare apply to an art academy after high school, and also because he doubted his own talent. He felt lonely and isolated because he didn't know any other artists. There was no Internet at the time, so he was unable to explore the world of art and it was not easy to find out more about art academies. He began to take private portrait classes in Utrecht, studio courses at the Vincent Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, and summer landscape painting courses in France. However, Edgar's ambitions went further and he thought the courses were not professional enough. In his early twenties he showed his work to the Rijksacademy of Fine Arts in Amsterdam and was immediately admitted. Slowly but surely, he realized his talents were in art more than any other field. To this day, Edgar Jansen is committed to his art. He feels connected to the Henry Moore quote, "I don't paint to live, I live to paint."

When I ask Edgar what his favorite medium is, he replies, "I like a variety of materials, I don't have a favorite one. I like to change from one medium to another depending on my mood or the subject, and I like to explore new materials like different kinds of paper and new brands. Sometimes when I work with a good new material, it can feel like a new bow on my violin. I think it is part of the artistic process to be open to new materials and techniques. I am more of an artist who works in a quick direct way, that's why I don't go in for time-consuming techniques like etching or sculpture".

(Attached is a more detailed description of each type of art material.)

I ask Edgar what the message is he hopes to convey to people who look at his work. He says, "I feel the need to express my feelings and share my personal visual experience through my work. I have become a visual artist because I would like to do something with things that please the eye, the beauty of a face, a dancing body, the contours of an animal, the atmosphere of a landscape or the color of a flower. By observing and studying these things and trying to paint or draw them, I understand them better and experience them more intensely. I hope people who look at my work can experience what I have seen and felt."

"Though I do have an eye for the sad side of life (there has always been a certain melancholy in my work), I prefer to focus on the beautiful side. I like what jazz musician Stan Getz said, 'I believe you should play music as beautifully as you can ... There is so much hate in this world. You should counteract it with loveliness.' I believe this can apply to art as well. So maybe my message is enjoy the beauty of life. Henry Moore said 'to be an artist is to believe in life'."

For inspiration, Edgar has traveled to the US, Canada, France, India and Israel. He travels to see new landscapes and faces and other colors and light. When I ask him about his reason for traveling, he quotes Saint Augustine, "The world is a book, and if you don't travel you have only read one page." The country that impressed Edgar Jansen most was India. It is the colors of this exotic country, the beautiful people and religious ceremonies that inspire some of his work. In Israel he sketched the orthodox Jewish world. He was even given permission to draw at a yeshiva in Jerusalem. The bearded men who resembled the ancient prophets studying the Talmud or Torah impressed him. In the US and Canada, the wide open countryside and unending natural landscape

fascinated him because in Holland, everything is on a much smaller scale. Edgar believes that although it can be good for an artist to travel, his immediate vicinity can also be enough. The studio can be an entire world that some artists never leave. Edgar quotes Twyla Tharp, 'Art is the only way to run away without leaving home.'

In the course of time, Edgar's work grew more dynamic. At a certain point, movement began to play a role. "I think it was when I was doing live drawings of people at a cafe every week. I sat in the corner with a sketchbook and of course nobody stood still. I once did a portrait of a model who was a dancer. When she looked at the portrait at the end of the session, she said 'Your lines are dancing, why don't you draw dance?' She invited me to a rehearsal where I made sketches."

Edgar went to an open air performance in Vondelpark, Amsterdam where a Spanish flamenco dancer did a passionate and energetic dance. He suddenly felt inspired by the fire of her performance and immediately produced interesting results with his pencil sketches. He attended more dance performances and was invited by the teacher to come to her flamenco classes.

A friend of his worked as a violinist at the opera and introduced him to the ballet group there. Later, Edgar explored Oriental and African dance, tango, modern dance and contact improvisation. At the dance studios, he explored ways to catch dance and movement. He tried different materials and techniques. He got to know more and more people from the dance world, some of whom modeled for his portraits. He was invited to their classes, rehearsals, improvisation jams and performances. When they dance, Edgar tries to imagine what they are feeling: the weight, muscle power, pain, speed and freedom the dancers are able to recognize in his work.

What Edgar usually does when watching and drawing dance is look for a movement that expresses a certain emotion and appeals to him. He tries to catch the movement in his mind. He takes a mental photograph and draws this movement – including the feeling that goes with it – from visual memory. “I do it very quickly, otherwise I forget, especially since the dance goes so fast. On paper I draw the dance as I remember it but I change a lot in the color and composition, turning it into my own dance. I work in a very intuitive way, I hardly know what I am doing and I forget all the rules. I like to draw dance because it gives me freedom in my work. I try to see how far I can go with this free drawing without losing the sense of shape in my work.”

“I think everything in life is constantly changing and moving and nothing remains the same. So when you try to draw life, movement is a big part of it. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, ‘Panta Rhei’ which means, ‘Everything flows. You cannot step twice into the same river’.”

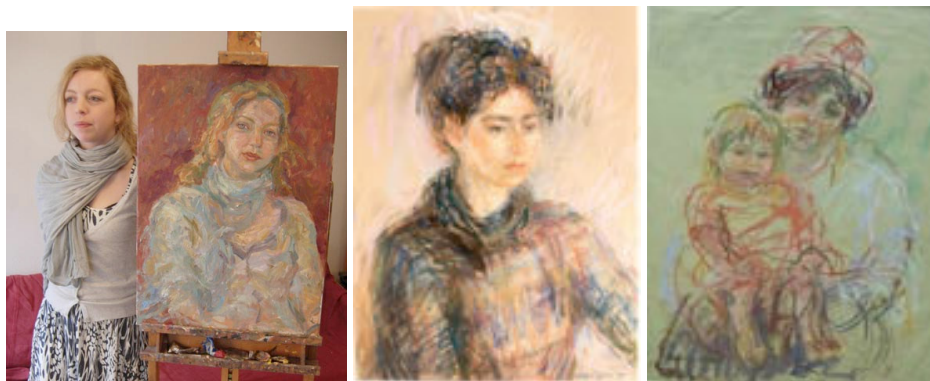
With his experience drawing dance, Edgar is also able to draw other moving objects more easily: a galloping horse, a young child who does not sit still, a violinist at a concert, people walking down the street, trees in the wind, birds in the sky.

When I interviewed Edgar Jansen via e-mail, I found his words inspiring. His passion about art is reflected in his work. I have always had an interest in fine artists who capture modern dance because combining these two forms of art is no simple matter. Although it may look easy to capture a figure with only a few lines, it takes great talent and skill to depict a figure in constant motion. Not only does he make expressive and sensitive line drawings of dance, he also does portraits. On his website, there are photographs of his models with his portraits of them. His art is amazing because the

people look just like the portraits done in his free impressionist style. This shows that Edgar Jansen puts a lot of time, energy and talent into his work.

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Appendix: Edgar Jansen's Perspective on Art Equipment

Pencil

"I discovered when traveling through India what a practical sketching material it is. With a number of pencils and a small sketchbook you can draw everything under even the most difficult circumstances, e.g. in the cold of a winter landscape. It's good for sketching in a café or a concert hall where you have to limit your equipment. The other reason I like the pencil is that you can do very subtle things with a lot of variation in grey tones and thin and thick lines, using black and white in such a rich way that you don't miss colors. I like to combine pencils of all kinds, hard and soft, big and small. I like to use a pencil for sketching on the spot, music drawings and portraits.

Whenever I go to a concert, I take plenty of short, sharpened pencils. In a classical music hall I have to work carefully and silently so as not to disturb people. I listen to the music and let my hand go. For me, drawing with a pencil is like writing. It feels very natural. The pencil is an extension of my fingers and my feelings."

Watercolor

Watercolor is another of Edgar's favorites. "This transparent medium with clear colors and no white is a risky technique. You have to keep the colors clear, be careful with open white spaces and make sure the wet colors don't mix too much. Although it can be nice if they flow into each other, you should avoid a 'color soup'. This makes it an exciting and adventurous if not nerve-racking medium. Picasso said his drawings told him what to do. With watercolor it is the same, an interaction between the artist and the medium.

The watercolor can react differently than you expected, and you have to react to that. It can even happen that a watercolor is almost a total failure, and you make the best of it, you try to fail successfully. You need to be flexible.

Watercolor is a practical medium. You don't need much equipment. And afterwards you wash your brushes and your hands in water. So it is handy for travelling, and good for painting outdoors in sunny countries, where it dries easily. I had a good watercolor experience painting a camel market in the heat of the Indian desert, where the very wet watercolors on rice paper dried immediately. My favorite watercolor artists are the English landscape painter William Turner, who could suggest a wide stretch of scenery on a small sheet of paper, and the German expressionist painter Emil Nolde with his portraits in bright colors painted wet-in-wet.

You can say watercolor is the hardest technique. You need years of experience, even a lifetime to get good results. The Canadian watercolorist Toni Onley said, "The good watercolor takes a lifetime plus half an hour'."

Soft Pastel

"Pastel is my specialty in portraiture. The subtle colors and soft texture are excellent for the skin tones. The medium is also practical, it does not have to dry like paint and it is good for making a portrait in one session. It is in between painting and drawing. At the academy I worked a lot with pastel. The art professors liked it and encouraged me, though the other students rarely did it. In Amsterdam I give courses in pastel portraiture."

Oil paint

"Nowadays I work hard developing my oil paint technique. I like the fact that oil paint has a century-old tradition in the fine arts, so I can go to a museum and look closely at how the old masters worked with the same medium. I use it for portraits, landscapes and flowers, not for action on-the-spot sketches of dancers and musicians. For oil paint you need lots of tubes and equipment, so I mostly use it at my studio, and occasionally outdoors for landscapes.

What I like about oil paint is that it is a strong material. It has substance. Sometimes I

use thick layers (impasto) of different colors. Working on a large canvas is really physical labor. With oil paint, you can continue working on one portrait at any number of sessions. You have to let it dry for a week or so and then apply more layers. During the drying period, you have time to think about what changes are needed in the painting. Sometimes I take the canvas off the wooden frame and change the size of the painting to adapt it to the specific composition.”

Ink

“I like this deep black medium, it is strong, clear and expressive. Mixing it with water yields special effects. I use ink with Japanese brush pens (soluble ink) or straight from the bottle (non-soluble). For portraits and models, I draw on large sheets (70/100 cm) of Asian bamboo paper. When I work with ink, I always wear black clothes.”

Mixed Media

“I use this technique for drawing dance, and also for portraits and models, often on large sheets of handmade paper from Thailand. It took me a while to figure out what the best medium was for drawing and painting dance and movement. Edgar Degas drew ballerinas in pastel. I tried that but it didn’t work for me. I feel a wet medium suits dance best. Painting on wet sheets of paper, the colors and ink flow and mix, suggesting the motion and flow of dance. I like to work in a very free, loose style to suggest the freedom of dance and movement. And I like to explore how free I can be, following my intuition, not thinking too much. I take risks and give coincidence a chance. This can yield unexpected results.

Within this wet technique, I try to combine watercolor paint, ink, chalk and watercolor pencil (mixed media). Watercolor pencil or watercolor chalk is relatively new. When you wet it, it becomes paint. Sometimes I make a print of the drawing when it is still wet and continue to work on the printed sheet.

When I draw dance, I like to do a lot a quick sketches. If you work too long on a dance drawing, you lose the movement. I usually do twenty drawings or one sketchbook at each dance session. When the drawings are still wet, I spread them out to dry. An entire corner of the dance studio is covered with my drawings and I sit on the ground among them.”



