



Philip Akkerman has just finished his 2,400-and-somethingth self-portrait. And he's just started another.

## EVERYMAN REPRESENTED AGAIN AND AGAIN

By Floris Dogteron

'I'm not self-obsessed.' It sounds a bit odd, coming from a man who is surrounded by 98 of the nearly two-and-a-half thousand self-portraits he has painted so far. But Philip Akkerman is deadly serious: These paintings are not so much

about me as they are about life itself.'

The room in Haarlem's De Hallen where Tweedezendzes is exhibited is an amazing sight. Ninety-eight depictions of the same face are hung at eye-level with exactly the same space between each, lending a staccato rhythm to the whole series. Akkerman painted the first one in

*Akkerman is Bouman is Everyman.*

January of this year, and the last one on Monday of last week. In fact, he has just brought it in, still wet.

Really, in Tweedezendzes his complete oeuvre will be accessible, because visitors will also have the possibility of thumbing through Akkerman's 2004, a whopper of a book that contains the eponymous number of self-portraits he has done between 1981 and 19 January 2006.

Akkerman portrays himself in a variety of styles, from realistically figurative to unrecognisably abstract. 'It just happened to me,' he explains, sitting in the exhibition space where workers are putting the finishing touch to the display. 'When I was young I tried out everything, art wise. Every three months or so I did something else, be it photography, performances, sculpture or whatever. But at a certain moment I had had it, and wanted to get back to my roots, to the time when I was about thirteen and made self-portraits. I wanted to go back to something that I felt was pure. Ever since, I've never done anything else, and I will keep on doing it, even in times when I am not that motivated. I paint every day, from Monday to Friday.'

That sounds pretty well organised. As Akkerman points out: 'I have a family these days. Kids regulate your life.'

The history of self-portraits roughly started in Italy and Northern Europe when the Renaissance came about, the period in which individualism arose. Before that, during the Middle Ages, life—and consequently, art—was completely dominated by the church and the state. Now, artists are inclined to develop their personal fantasies, their own vision on the world around them. Eventually, they look at themselves.

'Today,' says Akkerman, 'individualism is still the dominant factor in our culture. The Renaissance also was a period of crisis, in art, politics and everything else. The same applies for the time we live in. In times of crisis you tend to withdraw into yourself. To me, self-portraits are linked with the idea of crisis. I withdraw into myself and make self-portraits.

I can't stand the modern art world, with its superficiality and its lack of feelings. It's a make-believe world of assembly-line production, where people form cliques. I don't want have anything to do with it.'

Margreet Bouman, another artist who almost exclusively takes her own face as subject (see [www.margreetbouman.nl](http://www.margreetbouman.nl)), also claims she's not self-obsessed. 'It doesn't matter what you make. I just use my face as a stepping stone to create something else, which are the emotions that lay behind that face. I don't really care if the result really resembles my face.'

From the 1990s onwards, Bouman has focused her work on the bigger structures in life, in which man is the measure of all things. The end result is meant to appear as something that goes beyond the notion of 'here's Margreet Bouman again.' As the artist puts it: 'In my work I try to depict universal emotions, like melancholy.' After a recent nasty bicycle accident in which her face was badly injured, Bouman now tries even more to portray general human feeling. 'People do appreciate what I do and sometimes buy my work. I have the feeling they understand what I'm trying to say.'

By painting his own 'mag', as he calls it, time and time again, Akkerman also says he gives us a picture of life in general. 'I see myself as a *pars pro toto*—a part for the whole. My life stands for, not only the life of all people, but also for that of trees and objects. I think my work deals with the mystery of life, the bare fact that the universe exists. Religion, philosophy and art all try to get to terms with that, to no avail, because the human brain is ill-equipped to comprehend the mystery. You could say that I live in a permanent state of amazement. On the other hand, it is only paint on a plank. That notion gives me the freedom to do whatever I want.'

Still, a person's got to make a living somehow. 'If I sell forty paintings a year—and I do—me and my whole family can get by.'

*Tweedezendzes is from 9 September until 19 November at De Hallen (Tues-Sat 11.00-17.00, Sun 12.00-17.00), Grote Markt 16, Haarlem, 023 511 5775.*