



Philip Akkerman

Self Portrait no 124, 2003

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#### ARTWORKER OF THE WEEK #35

**Philip Akkerman** @ **Andrew Mummery Gallery, London, UK**

Having **declared** that, "I paint myself, and so I paint the whole of mankind", one can speculate that **Philip Akkerman** (bn.1957), who has been painting only self-portraits since 1981, is doing more than just capturing his own image. Like the tradition of Dutch still-life painting where a universe is expressed within a few simple objects, Akkerman's continuous, and slightly theatrical, documentation of his self-image lies both within this tradition as well as the more conceptual one in which time's passage is marked. Based in Den Haag, he offers, in this simple approach, less answers but more questions about change, ageing, and how we see ourselves in our daily lives. A prolific painter, by following Old Master techniques, he is re-invigorating the past with a contemporary attitude.

Philip Akkerman is currently in **Altered States** (with Tony Matelli, Jim Nutt, Peter Saul and Thomas Schutte) at **Leo Koenig Inc.** in New York (till 31/07) and he has a **solo show** at the **Andrew Mummery Gallery** (till 26/06).

This interview was conducted by fax between London and Den Haag.

**Sherman Sam:** You have painted **self-portraits** since 1981. I've heard that you had a more conceptual education. What brought you to the conclusion that self-portraits were the art to make?

**Philip Akkerman:** I studied at the conservative **Royal Academy** in Den Haag for two years. I left this institution because I wanted to be a modern artist, contemporary, you know, and stuff like that. So I went to Atelier 63 (recently renamed "**De Ateliers**") in Amsterdam. My teachers were **Jan Dibbets**, **Ger Van Elk**, and my favourite **Stanley Brouwn**. So I went to this modernistic art school. But the galleries were white, the art magazines were glossy, the people were sterile and I hated it! I felt lost and decided to withdraw into myself to seek refuge, which I found... And I found a way of painting with slime, sperm, blood, snot, spit whatever: the Secret of the Old Masters.

**SS:** Do you consider your paintings a continuation of the tradition of the Old Masters then?

**PA:** Yes, we are still in the **Renaissance**. The Renaissance was the rise of the individual. No more church, no more king. Do your own thing! This meant the rise of the easel painting. It also meant the start of a culture of chaos, crisis, one after another. No two persons are the same; continuous schisms, eternal paradoxes, revolution after revolution. And, thank god, we are still in it. Both Fascism and Communism tried to oppress the individual but they lost.

**SS:** Do you not think that, given the "innovations" in contemporary art (photography, installation) or even the range of "communications" or "topics" artist have used, you have limited your "approach"?

**PA:** In the beginning of my artistic "career", I had to find out that I am in the first place a painter. I love to paint and I love to look at paintings, that's all. "Innovations" and "topics" mean nothing to me.

**SS:** Do you approach your work in any systematic way to create these paintings?

**PA:** I am painting with the method of the **Old Masters**. This has nothing to do with grinding your own pigments or purifying the oils. It has to do with the division of the working process. When painting, one has three problems to attack: first, the drawing, then light and dark, and finally, colour. Since the 1800s most painters try to solve these three problems in one single layer of paint. The very practical Old Masters divided their work in three; first they made a full-scale drawing, then on top of the drawing, a **grisaille**, and finally the colours were painted on top of the grisaille with a glazing paint. In this way they achieved control over the result, and that is what I want too.

**SS:** And you've been making small paintings too. On the phone we spoke about the fact that all your paintings are in a small scale. I recall in a book about Dutch football (**Brilliant Orange**) that what made Dutch footballers special is their ability to **understand space**, because there is so little of it in your country. Do you think that may be the case too with you?

**PA:** It might be true. Holland is small, Dutch houses are small, and so are the walls in those houses. Inevitably the paintings must be small. But also the subject matter of those paintings is small. One bouquet of flowers, one cow, one boat, one street, one dying tree, one face... all small, but in a mystical way they contain the entire universe...

**SS:** Do you consider then that your work continues a grand Dutch tradition?

**PA:** I have never wanted to continue anything. But I can't deny it; I was born under this sky, on this watery soil, between these people. Yes, I am Dutch. Yes, my work is typically Dutch.

**SS:** What do you foresee in the future and do you think you might one day stop?

**PA:** Of the future, we know nothing. I intend to keep on painting nothing but self-portraits, I hope to become more and more "routine-ous". We all have to dig deep, dig, dig, and overcome our personal artistic crises, and when we have reached the bottom, and we can't go any deeper, there is this treasure: in routine lies the secret for real heavenly art!

**SS:** Finally, speaking of heavenly arts, with the **European Championships** on, which team again did you say you supported? And do you think the **Oranje** will win this year?

**PA:** I am a supporter of the local club: **ADO Den Haag**. I visit the home matches and always enjoy myself whether they play heavenly or not (usually not). Oranje this year consists of arrogant and lazy old men, they won't get far. Personally, I think the English team has a good chance to win. Who is this **Rooney** guy anyway? I never heard of him!

Sherman Sam is on the staff of KultureFlash, and is also an artist and writer. He contributes regularly to **Contemporary**, and recently to **Third Text**, while his drawing are in the **Flix** project at the **Rubicon Gallery**, Dublin, and will be in Plan D in Porto, Portugal this November.

*Image © the artist, courtesy Andrew Mummary Gallery*