

# SPEAK – Joachim Lambrechts

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**When we walk into Joachim's studio, the sound of the Beastie Boys and a mass of finished paintings are there to welcome us. Having just finished a large series of canvasses for his exhibition in Antwerp, Joachim is a satisfied man and he has every reason to be. For someone still in his early 30s, he has an incredible trajectory to look back on and most of all, a lot to look forward to. Mix raw talent with true passion and perseverance and the outcome may very well be the Antwerp based street artist and painter in front of us.**



ALLEC KNITWEAR - PYTO PANTS

**I take it you're a big Beastie Boys fan?**

Definitely. I've got two favorite bands; Nirvana and the Beastie Boys. I don't listen to Nirvana that often anymore, but the Beastie Boys are the common thread throughout my life. I discovered them as a teenager in the late 90s and they've stuck with me since. I got to see them live once and that was one of the best things I've ever seen.

**Would you say music is a source of inspiration to you?**

I listen to music almost all the time, so yes. It all depends on the state of mind I'm in though. Sometimes I can focus better without music, but often whatever I'm listening to can push and inspire me. That can be very direct, I've got a few canvasses that feature certain words or phrases lifted from songs and that – in my opinion – fit the vibe of that specific painting. I always start off with an empty canvas. It's rare for me to start a painting based on a sketch. I prefer working spontaneously, I try not to force anything. That's what works for me, the freer I feel, the better my work is.

Which is opposite to the way I create murals. That process is very different. For large murals I usually prepare several studies and sketches, which makes sense because of the size of those paintings and because most of those murals are commissioned. So obviously, in those cases the customer wants to see what I'm going to be doing before I start.





COOP OVERCOAT - ALLEC KNITWEAR - PYTO PANTS





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**Is it easy for you to take on commissioned assignments? Is it hard to find the balance between your own creativity and the customer's expectations?**

It depends. More often than not, it's pretty easy to work things out. If I'm given a theme, a concept or a few keywords to work with and I feel comfortable with those, then I'll do it. But sometimes I know from the get-go that it won't work out. For instance, someone recently contacted me to paint a mural of his pet. Something like that is too restrictive, I can't function that way. I don't mind compromising and listening to what a customer wants, as long as I have enough maneuvering space. It's crucial for me to be able to fully back the work I create and to have fun with it. Otherwise, there's no point, no matter how much money is involved.





AOMY KNITWEAR - MIRE SHIRT







**You don't seem like someone that would have money as a primary concern anyway.**

I'm not going to lie. Money is important. This is what I do for a living and, like everyone else, I've got bills to pay. But money has never been and will never be a motivational factor for me. I've been drawing and painting for as long as I can remember, simply because I love it and because I need to create. If I can't paint, I'll go mad.

**While you were growing up, did you ever think that you'd do what you love for a living?**

Not at all. It wasn't my goal at the time, simply because I didn't have any goals. I dropped out of high school when I was 18 after having been kept back 3 or 4 times, which is crazy in itself (*laughs*). I was in art school, but anything that wasn't related to art was disastrous for me. If something doesn't grab my interest then you can do whatever you want to, but you won't get it in my head. I know I'm not stupid, it's just that the school system just wasn't designed for someone like me, I guess. Honestly, it was demotivating. I pretty much lost all hope of succeeding at school. By the third time that I was doing my third year in high school, I didn't even bother getting books anymore. Instead, I spent the money on partying and weed. It was over for me.



**How do you look back on those school days now that you're older?**

Surprisingly positive. All things considered, I did learn a lot there and got to meet a ton of like-minded people. It opened doors to new worlds. During my first couple of days at art school in Antwerp I saw graffiti and tags everywhere. On the walls, in the bathrooms and so on. Coming from Lier – which is a fairly small provincial town – that really



impacted me, I hadn't seen anything like that. I got to meet some of those graffiti writers because they went to school there too, I started joining them on their nightly excursions and that got the ball rolling. Going to school there opened my eyes to the real deal, so to speak.

### **Was that your very first exposure to street art and graffiti?**

No, that goes back even further. Even though I lived in Lier for a big part of my life, my family's roots lie in Antwerp. My grandparents lived in 't Kiel (a district of Antwerp south of the city center – ed.) and I remember, during one of my visits to see them, being on the tram on the way to the city with my grandmother. I must've been 6 at the time. I vividly remember passing by a bar called *Den Blikvanger*, which had a super old school graffiti piece on one of its walls, featuring a fella holding a fishing net and cans of Coke and Fanta (*laughs*). I saw that and my eyes opened wide. It made an immense impression on me.

My grandmother was rather artistic too, she drew and painted a lot, and she noticed that I was super impressed by what I'd seen. Back then, all graffiti was illegal – very different from how it is nowadays. But anyway, she explained what graffiti was and how it was made, without judging at all. She actually encouraged me to dig a little deeper and I remember thinking that graffiti was something I wanted to do later.









**So, in a way, we have your grandmother to thank for who you are now?**



I spent a lot of time with her, here in Antwerp. Not only because my father worked a lot, but also because there were 8 of us at home. So, when my brothers were playing with their Legos, she let me use her easel, her brushes and her paint. She'd take me to museums to see exhibitions because she felt that I was drawn towards that world. One exhibition that sticks out specifically was seeing Pierre Alechinsky's work in Ostend, somewhere in the mid-90s, which I loved seeing. She definitely was an important figure in my life.

**Are there any specific artists that have influenced your approach and your style?**

A wide range of artists, for sure. Going from Ensor over to Van Gogh, to Lichtenstein or even Pollock. When I was younger, there clearly was a Haring & Basquiat influence – you can still see that in those black outlines I use, for example. What I love about their work is that it is instantly recognizable. The same way that a Beastie Boys song usually is instantly recognizable when you hear it on the radio. That's what I'm aiming for and I'm getting there. I want my work to speak for itself. I don't sign any of my murals because I feel like the painting itself is already a signature. It doesn't need more than that. I do sign my canvasses on the back though (*laughs*).

**With this solo exhibition coming up, you're wrapping up a very creative period. Was it hard to trigger yourself to produce such volumes of work?**

I like leaving my comfort zone and pushing my limits, which is what I have to do to be so productive. Like I said, I definitely have a style of my own, but I also want to make sure that it doesn't become some sort of "trick". Painting just for the sake of painting isn't what I want to do. So, when I have exhibitions like this one coming up, I try to start working as early as possible. In this case, I started in January. That way, if there's a week during which I'm uninspired or simply do not feel like painting, there's room for that.





FRISH T-SHIRT - GONEY OVERSHIRT -





FRISH T-SHIRT - GONEY OVERSHIRT



**The exhibition in Antwerp is called “223 Days”. Is that a theme you decided on? Do you get guidelines from the gallery, or how does that work?**

I want to be as free as I can when I’m painting. For this specific expo, the more work I got done, the more things took shape. It’s the first time that I also took the opportunity to reflect on each painting and to write an accompanying text. Even if there’s not always a specific message to convey, there’s something to be said about every canvas. They’re all linked together in a certain way.

The title is a reference to the time it took me to produce these paintings. From the first brush stroke to the day of the opening; exactly 223 days. So, that became the theme. Every exhibition needs a title, just like every music album or book needs one and this title says it all. It’s the first time that I’m giving people some insight as to what is behind my paintings. Stories and memories, going back all the way to my childhood. It feels very personal to me.

**It’s a very direct, no-frills title.**

I firmly believe that a title or an explanation shouldn’t be too pompous. A lot of art does have a clear story behind it and when it’s told, it makes sense. But the opposite happens too, when there really is nothing behind a work of art, but people invent some sort of grand narrative. Like the tale of the Emperor’s New Clothes, where no one understands a thing, but everyone pretends to (*laughs*).

I like saying it as it is. These paintings were often inspired by small things that strike me and put me to work. That can be an ancient circus poster from the 19th century that I came across, an old western I watched or an afternoon in the city center during which, all of a sudden, a heavy rain shower breaks out and people start running left and right to find shelter. Inspiration can come in all kinds of shapes.

I’m not out to change the world or to be a political artist. My work is easy to digest and what I really want to hold on to is the slightly naïve, childlike character that it has. That’s why I paint the way a child does, starting without knowing where I’m going. Have you ever seen an ugly drawing by a child? It doesn’t exist because what they do is so pure. The challenge as an adult is holding on to that wonder, that purity.

**What’s the story behind the boxers that keep occurring in your paintings?**

It’s true that they keep popping up (*laughs*). One of my first paintings was called “Boxing” actually. This one here (*showing a new painting - ed.*) was inspired by the fight in which Mike Tyson won the WBC title, as the youngest ever to do so. That was in 1986, the year I was born. Tyson’s always been an underdog, someone that had to struggle to get ahead and I find those types of stories fascinating. I guess that’s because I can relate. Life is pretty similar to a boxing match at times.

**Exactly. I can imagine things weren’t exactly easy after dropping out of high school. How did you end up eventually finding your way?**

After that turbulent experience in school, during which I'd already started drinking and experimenting with drugs, I really lost my way for a while. Dropping out at age 18, I spiraled out of control. I was self-destructive, disappointed, angry at the world too. Keep in mind that I was still an adolescent as well. I started partying hard, as a form of escapism. Drinking heavily too. I'd leave home on Thursday night, only to get home on Monday. I stopped telling my parents where I was going, they didn't really know what to do with me anymore.

I was unemployed but did some odd jobs on the side so that I could afford to party and buy drugs, but other than that I didn't care about anything. Though throughout it all, I kept painting, trying to find my own style.







**Did you manage to stay productive in such tumultuous circumstances?**



Not as much. I created some work but was unfocused. I definitely wasn't on the level I'm at today. The thing is that – back then – I still thought that an artist had to be under the influence of whatever substance to be creative. The old cliché, you know?

### **What made you change your mind?**

An important factor was becoming a father myself, at a young age. I mean, I wasn't even 22 yet when my daughter was born. I was still drinking and doing drugs at that time but started realizing more and more that a lifestyle *that* destructive could not be combined with being a father. The Joachim that didn't give a shit about anything was on his way out. I didn't want to be that person anymore and did not want my daughter to have a father like that. You could say that she saved me from myself.

Under some pressure from the people close to me, I started going to AA meetings. At first just to listen to what they had to say, because I didn't want to totally quit yet. I just wanted to prove that I was willing to get help. But through attending those meetings I started to see that I was ill. It took me 4-5 meetings to get to that insight. After that, it was all or nothing for me, so I stopped drinking alcohol completely.

My paintings may be very colorful, but my mind is very black and white. You either do or you don't, simple as that. It's been 10 years and I haven't drunk a drop of alcohol since. Same goes for any other drug and even cigarettes. I've gained an enormous clarity by cutting those factors out of my life, which has helped me to get my career off the ground.



ALLEC KNITWEAR - PYTO PANTS





ALLEC KNITWEAR - PYTO PANTS

## **You got your focus back.**

Exactly. People often assume that having a child that young was the result of an accident, but it wasn't. In a way, it was what I needed. I didn't have a degree, but I did have a daughter and a family which I needed to take care of. We needed a house, 'cause at the time I was living in a trailer. So, I was taking every job that I could get to get out of that situation. Finally, I started working as a forklift driver in a warehouse, the early shift. I swear that I hated every second I spent there, but it made me realize that I needed to give everything I had for my art. I had something to prove to myself and to all those who thought I was a loser. That gave me the fuel I needed.

## **How did you go about getting work as a street artist?**

The big advantage of street art is that it's very in-your-face. You don't need a gallery. Your work's out there and it's visible. But of course, you still need to get that chance. What I would do is take my bike, drive it around Antwerp on a search for walls that already had graffiti on them or that looked neglected. I'd ring the doorbell and ask the owners if I could paint their wall. For free. I'd show them the small portfolio of work I'd already done and then for every yes, there were 5 no's. That's how I gradually started building my operation. It was all an investment in my future career. It cost me time, energy and money but it enabled me to build a name and show the world what I was capable of. Word of mouth did the rest and people soon started asking me for their projects.

I firmly believe that an artist – of whatever type – doesn't need a degree. You need a certain talent to start with and after that it's all about believing in yourself and keeping on. It's not easy at all, but you've got to keep working hard. Eventually you'll end up getting somewhere.

## **What's the most challenging aspect of painting big murals?**

The preparation can be a challenge because it's key to a successful mural. Technical issues, like your aerial platform, or weather circumstances, like rain. But what I personally find hardest is the people that are watching you. Even though I'm used to having people around, watching what I'm doing, it can still make me nervous. To that extent that I sometimes have to take a break and come back when everyone's gone. But it's part of the package and it's a challenge I like to take on, exactly because it's outside my comfort zone.





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@joachimofficial

« 223 DAYS »

Opening night on October 25th, exhibition from October 26th – November 24th  
at <http://www.verbeeckvandyck.be/>

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