

## Charcoal drawings by Jan Yoors

Opening: Thursday, Dec 3rd 2015

Show: Dec 4th 2015 until Feb 6th 2016

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FIFTY ONE TOO is honoured to present a focus-exhibition of the versatile Belgian-American artist Jan Yoors (1922-1977), where his charcoal drawings of the female body will be shown.

From the late 1940s Yoors started to study the female nude: close views of his models, executed in bold, charcoal outlines on sepia toned paper. In the beginning the drawings had a merely figurative style, but from the late 1950s they became more and more abstract, influenced by the modern developments of the European & American arts in that period.

At first sight one might think that this series stands apart from his other artwork in photography, tapestry and sculpture, nevertheless its visual language of a vivid simplicity in a very expressionistic way is a general characteristic of Yoors's artistic gaze.

His interest in the human body, the use of charcoal for the drawings and its composition were formed by different observations. His basic insight in the human anatomy and his choice for charcoal on paper goes back to his childhood. Often he had witnessed the initial creation process of stain glass windows (large-scale figures drawn on full-scale templates of thick paper) at the studio of his father, Eugeen Yoors, a famous Belgian stained glass artist. The bold charcoal outlines of Yoors's nudes refer to the lead strips of stain glass windows that served as outlines of (human) figures as well. Even the thick, tan paper is similar to the one Yoors used for his drawings. One might assume that he preferred the sepia tone colour of the paper due to his interest for minorities with a darker skin.

The "cropped" compositions of the female nudes are mostly headless bodies depicted from their profile or their back. Shaped with bold, black outlines, mostly, only legs and shoulders can be seen against the frame. This was a modernistic technique for making a scene bigger than the format of its base. For this technique Yoors refers in the documentary "A Fleming in New York" (1975, Belgian VRT) that he is directly inspired by the 18th Century Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). Hokusai's most famous work, "The Great Wave off Kanagawa", already illustrates the visual effect of cropped compositions. Nevertheless the practice of cropping was not unique for Yoors, but was connected to the modern development in the arts of the twentieth century.

Therefore one can assume that Yoors was familiar with the artwork of the famous painter Henri Matisse (Fr, 1869-1954) with his well-known cut-outs of the "Blue Nudes" (1952): seated female nudes in which he reduced forms to its essentials and yet expressing a sense of volume. Or familiar with the photographic studies of the nudes by Edward Weston (Am, 1886-1958) or those by Bill Brandt (UK, 1904-1983): their use of close-ups of the female body renders a geometric, abstract composition of lines.

In a more implicit way, these omissions refer to his life experience and cross-border travels with a Gypsy tribe in Eastern Europe as a youngster.

Through all these inspirations Yoors's charcoal nudes evolved from a figurative style in the late 1940s towards a hard-edged abstraction in the last years of his lifetime. This evolution can be seen first of all through the thickness of the charcoal outlines became more and more prominent.

Secondly, the figurative "sketches" of recognizable body parts from the early years became more and more abstract at the end. Although the form of the drawings is flat, the nudes give a very sculptural sensation. Yoors creates an illusion of three-dimensionality with a bold mirage of lines.

At this moment a small photographic presentation of his work can be seen at the Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp (until 28.03.2016). Most recently he had a retrospective at the Baker Museum in Florida, as well at the FeliXart Museum in Brussels in 2012. In 2005 his photographs were exhibited in a group show 'Belgian Photographers 1840-2005' at the Fotomuseum in Antwerp. And yet he had already received international acclaim with his tapestries in the 1950s for which he was listed as a new talent in 'Art in America' magazine (1959).

His work is included in collections such as the Archives of American Art, Chicago Art Institute, Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Art and Design in New York, Fotomuseum in Antwerp, as well as private collections like Christie & John Walton (Wal-Mart), Senator Eugène de Faq (Belgium), James Johnson Sweeney (curator MoMA 1935-46 – director Guggenheim 1952-60), Paule Pia (Belgian photographer, dealer and founder of Fotomuseum Antwerp).