

SAAR DE PERMENTIER

An interview with Saar De Permentier by 1605 Publishers, on www.1605publishers.com on January 20th 2022
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Saar De Permentier: interview

By 1605 Publishers

Art, Interview

Gallery [FIFTY ONE](#) is based in Antwerp, Belgium and it specialises on fine art photography and drawings on paper. The gallery that celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2020, represents artists such as Katrien de Blauwer, Masao Yamamoto, Bruno V. Roels, Harry Gruyaert, Arpaïs Du Bois, Eric Manigaud, Sean Sullivan, Dirk Zoete to name but a few. Being inspired by the beautiful work presented at FIFTY ONE, 1605 Publishers interviewed its assistant director Saar De Permentier who revealed the insights of the art world and shared with us her personal experience of working in one of the best galleries in the world.

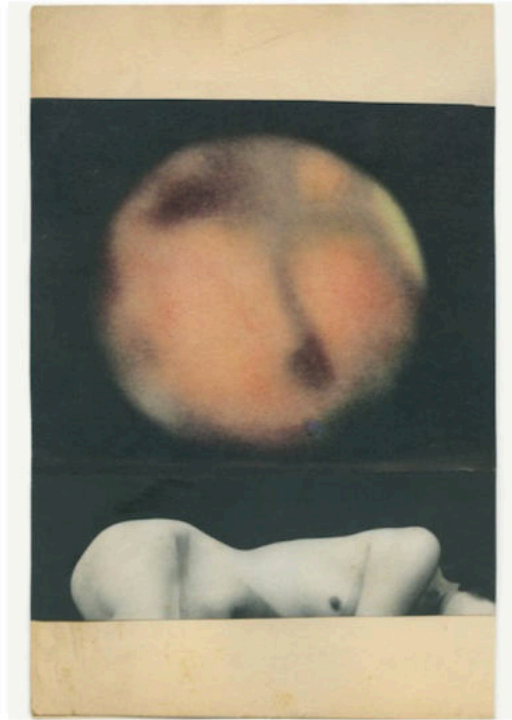
1. You work at one of the most coveted galleries in the world how does this feel?

Great! This was my first job in the art world and I still consider myself very lucky that I could immediately work at such a high level and in a gallery whose artists and program I genuinely love. Photographers like Saul Leiter, William Klein and Harry Gruyaert are among the best in the world; it's an honour but also quite humbling to represent their work.

Regardless of the top artists, we work with, Gallery FIFTY ONE has always remained relatively small-scale. We don't play in the same league as the mega galleries of this world but remain to work in a small team and maintain a very personal approach. It's also fantastic to have a job where even after 5 years, you can still evolve every day.

I learn a lot from Roger Szmulewicz (the owner of the gallery) just by listening to his art-world stories and watching how he handles things. Last year, Gallery FIFTY ONE celebrated its 20th anniversary and in that period Roger was able to build up a strong international reputation. It has been a dream-like to work in such an inspirational and challenging environment.





Katrien De Blauwer

2. And what is the most exciting part of working at Gallery FIFTY ONE?

Of course, there is the beauty that surrounds me every day. Having a new exhibition set up every 3 months, seeing the new work for the first time (whether it's an exhibition in the gallery or a booth at an art fair) is always a magical moment for me. Every exposition tells a new story, lends a new atmosphere to the gallery space and attracts another audience. I know I'm biased, but I honestly love the artists we represent and their work moves me. They are all intensely involved with their art and can tell about it in such an inspirational way. I'm grateful for being a witness to that.

I also like working at Gallery FIFTY ONE because there is always a lot going on. We have two exhibition spaces (Gallery FIFTY ONE and FIFTY ONE TOO), where we organise 8 exhibitions a year. Next to this, we have many side projects, like a well-functioning webshop, our online art platform 28 Vignon Street, we publish our own FIFTY ONE Publications, etc. Lately, the art fairs are also back from a year of absence (although still fragile). It's been a very long time since we had a "quiet" period in the gallery, but this is what keeps us going.





3. You are a gallery assistant and I am sure many of our readers would be interested in your day-to-day work. Could you please tell us what are your daily tasks?

Contrary to what many people think, there is more to the job than drinking champagne :). I often have very diverse and well-filled days in which I do a bit of everything. I do sales and everything that comes with it (such as client contact, invoicing, supervising framing and shipping, etc.). I welcome visitors to the gallery and, if required, give them an introduction to the exhibitions and the gallery's program. There are communicative tasks - such as writing press releases, drafting our monthly mailings and maintaining contact with the press. However, I also do a bit of administration, like keeping an eye over our inventory, making price lists for the exhibitions, etc. Furthermore, I assist with the build-up of our exhibitions and booths at art fairs (where I am also present). An important part of my week is also filled with responding to questions, inquiries and problems from clients, artists, etc. And then there are all kinds of other side tasks that pop up every day. The job requires a lot of planning, time management and creativity.

4. We love Gallery FIFTY ONE selection of artists, especially Katrien de Blauwer, Masao Yamamoto and Harry Gruyaert. They all have a very distinct style, however, they found themselves under the roof of Gallery FIFTY ONE. Could you maybe comment on what is the selection criteria of the gallery and how do you personally feel about the work of these artists?

It's true that, for example, the poetic manually edited prints of Yamamoto Masao are completely different from Harry Gruyaert's colourful street photography. However, what combines all of our artists is a kind of honesty and consistency in what they do. We don't have fixed selection criteria. Gallery FIFTY ONE's artistic program has changed over the years but was always built on Roger's personal sensitivities and preferences. The galleries' program transcends the classic division of genres: fashion can be shown at a side of fashion photography as long as it is relevant to a broader context. Consistency is another important pillar in the selection process; an artists' oeuvre cannot be based solely on one good series. It needs to have a clear focus and a convincing evolution. And that's very obvious when you look at the oeuvre of the above-mentioned artists.





Harry Gruyaert

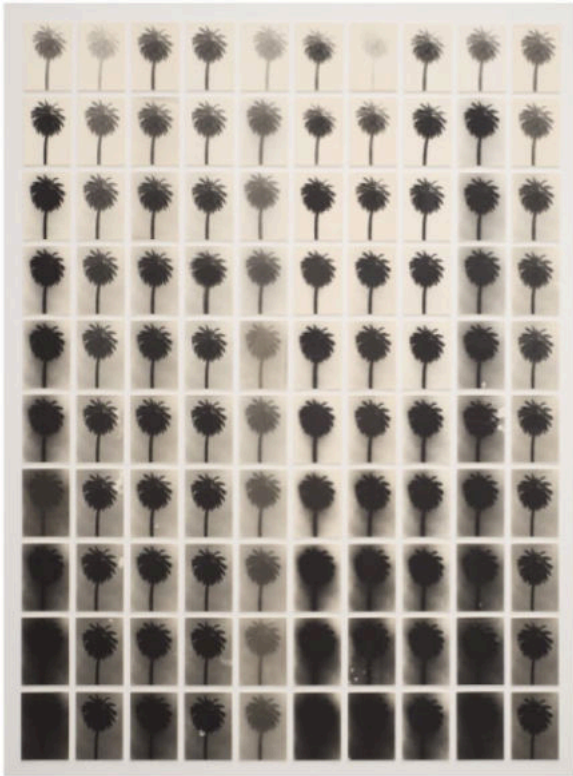
5. I know that Gallery FIFTY ONE participates in many international art fairs. What kind of photography, in your opinion, sells better nowadays? Do you see some emerging trends?

I know I work in a commercial environment, yet I don't like to think about art from an exclusively commercial and opportunistic perspective. Participating in art fairs is indeed expensive, plus, we have to support our artists, and for the selection of what we will be showing in our booth, we, of course, have to take into account that we have to sell. However, equally important is to give every artist the opportunity to show (new) work and present it to a broad audience, including the less "commercial" work. Classic street and fashion photography will always remain a constant. A walkthrough, for example, the last edition of Paris Photo also showed a tendency towards large-scale and colourful works. Recent social events and evolutions, such as the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements, continue to inspire artists. You also see many artists working around the boundaries of the photographic medium. In his work, Bruno V. Roels for example explores the possibilities of the analogue photographic process. Through darkroom experiments and by playing with the reproducible qualities of the medium, Roels creates unique works that often consist of multiple variations on the same negative. He also manually edits most of his prints by drawing on them and lately, he started to experiment with placing texts on his images. This organic process in which he reflects on the intrinsic qualities of the medium results in a playful oeuvre that transcends the photographic medium in the strict sense of the word.

6. And another curiosity... What fairs do you participate in? What are your criteria for choosing the right fair for the gallery and for the artists you represent?

Of course the fairs we choose to participate in fit our artists' profile, our audience and the size and resources of the gallery. Since 2011, we no longer exclusively show photography, but also specialise in works on paper. That's why we don't only participate in fairs that focus solely on photography. Paris Photo in November is our most important fair; a fixed value for us since the beginning and always a great pleasure to be present at. We also always participate in Art Brussels (and since 2021 the spin-off Art Antwerp, which had its first and successful edition last December). Since these are fairs for contemporary art, we tend to show a different selection than at Paris Photo, with more attention to our drawers, such as Arpaïs Du Bois, Eric Manigaud, Sean Sullivan and Dirk Zoete.

If all goes well – and Covid-19 doesn't plan otherwise – this year we will also participate in Drawing Now Paris for the first time. We are very curious about the reactions of the public there. Finally, a nice fair to participate in is the small-scale and edition-oriented Limited Edition Art Fair (LEAF) in the Fondation Boghossian in Brussels. The perfect opportunity for us to highlight our FIFTY ONE Editions (lower priced works in an edition of 51, which refers to the gallery's name) and other limited editions, and moreover, it takes place in the beautiful setting of the Villa Empain.



Bruno V. Roels

7. With the advent of social media and with everybody having a camera within hand's reach, and some photographers even have projects shot entirely with their phones, making us live Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" reality. How do you think this affects the contemporary art world?

I don't think that the advent of the mobile phone and the fact that everyone is in a way a photographer now has had a negative impact on the position of the medium in the art world. On the contrary; in recent decades, things changed clearly for the better. In 1999, when Gallery FIFTY ONE was founded, photography was not generally regarded as a full-fledged art form. In those uncertain times, the gallery tried to gain an audience and to guide and educate the viewer, a.o. by organising high-profile exhibitions featuring important players of the moment. Gradually, with the support of museums and auction houses along the way, the unfavourable climate towards photography has nowadays largely disappeared. We are also way past the point that photography was exclusively considered a documentary medium, only fit to record reality. Of course, you still have people visiting the gallery saying 'I can do that too (and better)'.

Photography will never lose that democratic aura (which is also reflected in the prices, that are usually positioned in a lower category than, say, paintings), but it doesn't prevent contemporary collectors and museums from accepting the medium as a real art form. I also don't think there is any competition between art forms or a shift from buying photography to other let's say 'unique' media. That tendency to separate photography from other artistic media is exactly what Gallery FIFTY ONE is working on.

When in 2011, the gallery broadened its terrain to draughtsmanship, the first steps in this new direction were two exhibitions featuring the works on paper of William Klein and Saul Leiter: two artists of the gallery who, like many other fellow photographers, had a background in painting and drawing. The often very strict distinction between the different media was further deconstructed by a dialogue between the Japanese photographer Yamamoto Masao and the Belgian artist Arpaïs Du Bois, and a solo show by Frenchman Eric Manigaud, who departs for his life-size drawings from photographic archive material. It shows that the boundaries are not so fixed, there is a lot of mutual influence between photography and other art media. Since we are also specialised in works on paper; we see several types of collectors: those who focus solely on photography, but also those who buy both. Sometimes we welcome collectors who have never bought photography before, but who visit us through our non-photography based artists and so discover a new world opening up to them.