

## Vincent Vulsma

STEDELIJK MUSEUM BUREAU AMSTERDAM

Vincent Vulsma's exhibition "A Sign of Autumn" looked like a design shop gone native. The walls of the bare, austere space were hung with tapestries in black-and-white patterns of unmistakably African origin. There were also four plain wooden sculptures (all about two feet in height), making the works *Socles a c b* and *Soele d*, both 2011. Each part is composed of pairs of stools, one inverted atop the other: a classic walnut stool designed by Ray Eames for the Time & Life Building in Manhattan and an early-twentieth-century stool from what was then the Belgian Congo. The showpiece of the exhibition, however, was an antelope mask, made at least eighty years ago by an anonymous member of the Baulé people of Ivory Coast. This piece—normally in the collection of Amsterdam's Tropenmuseum—is renowned for its subtle, refined facial features, but they were not on display in the Stedelijk's show. Vulsma had turned the mask around, revealing the inventory numbers, labels, and stamps that it had accumulated on the back during its eighty-year journey through Western culture—markings that found a surprising echo in the Vitra label reading AUTHENTIC RAY EAMES on the base of one of the Eames stools. This move dispelled the usual warm, comfortable sense of manageable exoticism. Vulsma's exhibition made an unequivocal statement about authenticity, appropriation, context, and, above all, power—the power to decide what constitutes art, and the colonial power of the West over other cultures.

"A Sign of Autumn," curated by Kerstin Winking, also included digitally altered versions of photographs taken by Walker Evans at "African Negro Art," a 1935 exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, where the same antelope mask was shown, marking one of the first times non-Western art was prominently displayed in a museum of contemporary art. Yet after the exhibition, most of these objects were swiftly relegated to the relative obscurity of ethnographic collections. "A Sign of Autumn" appeared on the surface to be primarily a critique

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of this policy. Not only did Vulsma reclaim, so to speak, the antelope mask from the Tropenmuseum, but he also showed that the West, despite its admiration for "primitive art," is still grappling, not only with the status of an object that defies the Romantic paradigm of the unique, identifiable creator, but also with the fact that, by assigning new meanings to such objects over time, parties in the West can use them to make more money. The exhibition title came from the historian Fernand Braudel, who used the phrase "a sign of autumn" to describe reaping the fruits of financial expansion, as had happened in eighteenth-century Amsterdam.

Yet this exhibition's power lay in the fact that Vulsma did not become enmeshed in the familiar parties of postcolonial criticism. He emphatically included his own, still-youthful artistic career in his meditation on power and manipulation. Vulsma's "original" tapestries, for instance, are not merely enlarged versions of the textiles that were once a common form of currency in the Kuba Kingdom in Central Africa. They also display their origins in the world of photography; the fabric is black and white and so coarsely woven that viewers quickly realize they are looking at enlarged details of photographs. At the same time, Vulsma's appropriation of the stools and the mask served as a reminder of how Western art dealers, designers, and artists have been appropriating artworks from Africa for the past hundred years. For artists as much as anyone else, it is nearly impossible to have clean hands. But, as Vulsma shows, this complicity need not keep artists from asking critical, provocative questions about seemingly self-viding mechanisms in Western culture.

—Hans den Hartog Jager

Translated from Dutch by David McKay.

## LEUVEN/ANTWERP, BELGIUM

## Dirk Braeckman

M – MUSEUM LEUVEN/ZENO X GALLERY

Recently a Swedish curator told me that he learned a lot about Belgium by looking at Dirk Braeckman's work. If this is the case, there must be something rotten in the state of Belgium. His dark, gloomy photographs provoke an uncanny feeling. It is almost never clear what it is you see in the gray murk, and if you think you do know, a split second later you'll start to doubt it. With shows in Leuven and Antwerp and the publication of a vast monograph on his work, Braeckman seemed to be Belgium's unavoidable artist this autumn. And that's more than justified, since he is one of the very few who has created his own style with a recognizable signature. He refuses to use photography as a medium to capture or interpret reality. Although his subjects or models come straight out of his environment, the result seems totally unfamiliar.

Braeckman credits Luc Sante's book *Evidence* (1992), with its pictures of crime scenes taken by the New York police department between 1914 and 1918, with inspiring him to find or purify his own style. Like the nearly century-old photos Sante collected, Braeckman's



View of "Vincent Vulsma," 2011.