

# Hauntings

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From top: My studio in the Begijnhof, *Interior*, Jacobus Vrel, 16<sup>th</sup> C., *Fall of Icarus*, Brueghel.

Displacement activity is a good thing. Yesterday was a quiet Saturday in Brussels, and I drove by the massive headquarters of the European Commission; my heart pounding, my brain spinning in a toxic mix of anxiety and melancholy. I spent the rainy afternoon trying to forget what was about to happen in a few days. In the curiously penumbrous shadows of the Beaux Arts museum (why don't they light their masterpieces properly?) great Flemish painting was deeply lovely to look at, if very hard to see. Memling, Van Der Weyden, Cranach, De Hooch, Rembrandt, Brueghel....magical, mystical, magisterial painters who cast long shadows over me.

I couldn't keep one of my favourite poems, W. H. Auden's *Musée des Beaux Arts* out of my head. This poem, inspired by Brueghel's *Fall of Icarus*, a treasure of the museum, was written in 1940, and is an eloquent, oblique meditation on war and the myth of Icarus - a subject that I have painted again and again all my life. It is about failure. Of humankind and of imagination. Indeed. In the poem Brueghel shows us life going on in rural 16th century Flanders. The sun shines. A ploughman tills his field. A shepherd tends to his sheep. A ship is in full sail.

At the moment I am working inside a Flemish painting. I am painting in a very small room that once housed a béguine - a religious, unmarried 17th century woman of

spiritual inclination. My “studio” has tiny leaded windows (I daily bless my huge, new light from Ikea) and is on the ground floor of a UNESCO protected Begijnhof or béguinage in a Brabant university town which was once home to the great 15th century painter Dirk Bouts.

The Groot Begijnhof Leuven was founded in the 13th century. It is very quiet. It is very dark. Only the sound of the odd bicycle rattling down the cobbled streets outside my windows disturbs the peace. If it weren't for the fact that this small town within a town was a religious community, one might feel that a girl with a pearl earring might pass by my windows in search of herrings and beer, or a mother might be hurrying by on her way to buy a de-lousing comb, or someone might be tating in a doorway. I might see De Hooch or Vermeer or Rembrandt walking by, deep in thought about their painting, as I often am on my daily constitutional. The carillons chime in the nearby church Sint-Jan De Doperkerk as they have done for centuries, presumably as a call to prayer and to mark out the day. I see ghosts. It's that kind of place.

It's a great privilege to be allowed to live and work here but it is also very challenging to try and be an artist in this place - so deeply imbued with history and so powerfully steeped in meditative practice. It's very hard to get used to the silence and lack of distraction, but I have grown to embrace the peace. It's a good place to concentrate on “the life of the mind”. It's very solitary. And what makes my life even stranger is that I am working on paintings that focus on my recent trip to noisy Indochina in this quiet corner of Flanders. The other side of an unknown and probably flat world to a Béguine. I find I am wearing a lot of red as it glows like jewels in this harsh northern light (it's no wonder early Flemish painting embraces red) but despite my delight in primary colour, I feel an odd connection across the centuries, to the person who once lived here. In her starched wimple and simple black tunic, she haunts me. Perhaps she reproaches me with my worldliness. Her presence is moral, austere, but benign, generous, and reassuringly timeless.

Which takes me back to Brueghel and Auden;

*“In Breughel's Icarus, for instance, how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster: the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.”*

After March 29, I guess the ship will sail calmly on.