I give house culture a face;Interview with computer artist Micha Klein

Artist Micha Klein (33) gave his girlfriend five digital sisters by blending her photo on the computer with that of other photo models. "My work does not fall under the art of art and is not on the fringes of society. It's in the middle of it. "

Micha Klein: Artificial Beauty. Bloom Gallery, Bloemstraat 150, 1016 LJ Amsterdam. Up to and including 8 February.

o Arjen Ribbens   January 9 , 1998

Like a plastic surgeon, Micha Klein describes the features of his girlfriend, the photo model Afke. "A beautiful, hard jaw line and a classic straight nose." The computer artist is himself a well-built young man with bleached hair and blue lacquered nails. Klein is sitting in his studio without windows in the Jordaan in Amsterdam. Around him a witch circle of computer screens and other digital equipment. He presses a key and on one of the screens Afke makes way for another photo model. "Look, this girl has a nicer forehead and great cheekbones," he says. "Imagine that these two women would have a daughter together. If that child gets the best features from her mothers, it results in an incredibly beautiful woman. A super model that doesn't run around anywhere. "

In search of the ideal beauty, Klein photographed seven photo models. He scanned the portraits and on the computer he drew lines around the most important facial features. He then blended two heads into a special program. "I don't stick a nose and a mouth together," Klein explains his digital breeding method. "With morphing software you can manage in a very focused way and get a perfect average. You no longer see where one girl starts and the other ends. "

From tomorrow, Klein will be exhibiting five 'cybergirls' in the Amsterdam gallery Bloom. Large, colorful cibachrome prints of 1.50 meters high, glued to wood and protected by plexiglass laminate. The cybergirls are sisters apart, because Klein always 'crossed' his girlfriend Afke with a different model. With a dark woman, a Japanese, a blonde. "If all goes well, it will pinch the exhibition. The five girls look alike, but not like that either. It is very noticeable that something strange is going on. "

Asked for her opinion, 'mother' Afke, dressed in a T-shirt with the text Socio-genetic experiment, says: "They are just a bit too beautiful. This is beyond the competition. "

Klein calls his portraits illusionistic and identity less. "I wanted to lift the beauty ideal over the top. Beauty is so clichéd. The same things are always experienced as beautiful. I noticed that myself. For example, if I made pupils a little bigger, I immediately got a completely different feeling for such a girl. "

"Beauty is also so tempting. How often does the advertising fool us with beautiful girls? I want to address that. Just like the pursuit of beauty through plastic surgery. The struggle between nature and culture fascinates me: Michael Jackson who makes a sculpture of his own body. But it is also hysterical to go to a plastic surgeon seventeen times. To take a new nose when you are bored with the last one. I want to drive that process to a logical conclusion. The beauty cult eventually cancels itself. Some people will want to be ugly, just to be different. Of course, my cybergirls also seduce, but it is synthetic beauty that is separate from reality. That is why she hopefully raises questions. "

What Klein shows in the Bloom gallery is just the beginning of what he has in mind. The next step is to cross the cybergirls. He will show the results of this in September at a retrospective exhibition at the Groninger Museum. "Then I mix a head from four original sources. That must result in a totally new type of portrait that no longer refers to anything. "

Veejay

As an artist, Klein is not dependent on exhibitions in the serious art circuit. "I was looking for a broader platform after my academy," he explains. "A gallery attracts no more than two hundred visitors a month. And there are hardly any of my peers from whom I receive feedback. That is why I started focusing on magazines and clubs, on direct communication with my own generation. "

Klein changed the distribution process. For fashion-sensitive magazines such as Wired, Wave, Face and Blvd, he made reports that he later printed as free work. And in nightclub Mazzo in Amsterdam, he started mixing homemade video animations and image samples in 1993 with the tones of house music. With a video team, veejay Klein projected his hearts, flowers, smilies and cartoon characters onto the wall . "I have given house culture a face. Visually, house was not such a happening. There was a stage full of musicians in rock culture. At house, a few people turned some knobs. "

Video has taken off as a medium and Klein has had many followers in recent years. There is no house party without video performance anymore. Klein founded a cattle hunting company with his brother Onno and colleagues REL and Daniëlle Kwaaitaal. In the Amsterdam club Chemistry, they mix almost every Saturday from noon to seven in the morning. But also in Ibiza (the international capital of the house scene) and in Cannes, Barcelona and Istanbul, party visitors have become familiar with Klein's mascot Pilman, a dancing ecstacy pill. "Veejay is part of a visual culture for the electronic generation. It is becoming an international trend. The rest of the world was lagging behind, but this summer we made a good start in Ibiza for an international jump. New York is on the program soon. "

Pilman is his biggest hit in the club circuit. Visitors often request the video of the dancing red and white pill and Klein even receives fan mail for him. Even though he flirts openly with forbidden pills, he does not want to encourage anyone to use drugs. "The music and the videos are enough to get into a kind of trance. You can use alcohol or drugs with it, it is not necessary. But I don't want to be hypocritical. I learned a lot from drugs myself. I am from a generation that chooses its own intoxicants. I am not allowed to impose state-approved behavior. Getting drunk in the pub, as if that is so cool. My Pilman is a symbol, an icon of house culture: fight for your right to party. "

House

Klein's oeuvre is a homage to house culture. "I am part of it. Who would have thought that house would still exist after ten years? It has really become a culture. With own music, visual language, fashion. House mutates and evolves, it does not break down. It is a techno culture for youth who has become familiar with new media and thereby creates completely new things.

"Musically, house is a revolution. The monopoly on Anglo-Saxon pop culture has been broken. In record stores in Chicago I saw bins full of Dutch and Belgian house CDs. The boundaries of pop music have been crossed in an exciting way. Radio numbers of three minutes no longer exist. The text is no longer the most important carrier of information. And how many new sound sources have not been discovered? "

Klein wants to break through so many boundaries with his computer art. He distributes his drawings via the Internet and his veejay performances were also shown on the Amsterdam cable network. He made a watch for Swatch. "Mine does not fall under the art category and is not on the fringes of society. It's in the middle of it. Saturdaynight! Fifteen hundred people experience my work in the club. "

Turpentine

Spectators and critics often did not get a grip on Klein's contemporary palette. His hyper-stylized computer drawings of paradise scenes full of plastic flowers and cartoon characters were often found to be too smooth and too mechanical. Klein: "When I had my first exhibitions in 1991, the response was: what is that, what is it about? Viewers got stuck on the skin of my work. They only saw the technical perfection and thought that I had stolen my images of Walt Disney.

"I strive for a combination of flat and deep. You don't have to read a story first to understand my work. It immediately appeals to the imagination. After that, it depends on the viewer's luggage how many things he can still read in my

work. To get attention, you have to know how to seduce, otherwise you will be powerless against the visual violence of the other media. With a sensitivecharcoal drawing you can't beat that. That is why I like to use the same language as the advertisers. "

Klein likes the established art order a bit, Klein likes that. At the last KunstRAI he and Daniëlle Kwaaitaal set up the stand of the Flatland gallery from Utrecht. In a white box, fifty club dancers and models dressed in white were dancing to loud house music. "The art fair is such a sleepy thing with all those things in front of the couch. We wanted to import something from our club culture there. It was like coming from another planet. There was nice friction. Gallery owners from Wassenaar were grumbling that we were complaining. "

Klein has long ago declared death traditional painting with brushes on canvas. "That is no longer relevant. I have also painted myself and I have a passion for painting. It can be beautiful, but it is old-fashioned, not cutting edge. Computer graphics are the revenge of painting on photography. Painting used to be a technique in which you manipulated paint in such a way that an image was created. The invention of photography made painting partly unnecessary. But since photography has become digital, you can manipulate it in such a way that it is actually painting again.

Klein regrets that most museums mainly look back. "It is a shame that the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam still often smells of turpentine. In interviews, Fuchs says that the Stedelijk no longer needs to be a gauge of the time. He thereby declares the museum to be a mausoleum. Give me the Groninger Museum. That is alive, at least it has its finger on the pulse. "