

Frits Van den Berghe

Beings / Floating figures
Circa: 1932
1932

Oil on canvas

116 x 89 cm (45 $^{5}/_{8}$" x 35")

Framed: 143 x 116 cm (56 $^{1}/_{4}$" x 45 $^{5}/_{8}$")

Signed and dated lower right: FVBerghe / 32

Frits Van den Berghe (1883-1939) is among the most influential Belgian artists of the interwar period. His versatile oeuvre, which ranges from his academic work, Luminism and Expressionism to Surrealism, testifies to a continuous search for the expression of the human psyche. This quest culminates in the 1932 painting *Beings* (also known as Floating Figures), which focuses on existential themes such as alienation, spiritual exaltation and the complex dynamics between man and woman.

Around 1930, the conflict relationship between man and woman took centre stage in Van den Berghe's oeuvre. Whereas his friend Gustave De Smet often depicted harmonious marital cohabitation, Van den Berghe focused on the subcutaneous tensions between the sexes. In *Beings*, this duality is unmistakably present. The central figures - a nude man and woman - hover above an abstractly

rendered city. The man, petite and with his knees drawn up, appears to float in a kneeling position. With closed eyes and an outstretched arm, he points the woman to something outside the picture plane, as if to guide her to an unknown destination. The woman, robust and almost Permekian in stature, follows his gesture with her gaze, but her massive body radiates doubt and resistance. Her head is depicted in profile, while her torso is painted frontally, emphasising her inner conflict.

The strength of *Beings* lies in its complex composition and the play of tensions between the figures. To the left of the central pair is a stoutly built man dressed in a white monk's habit. Although he is positioned lower in the picture plane, he too follows the lead of the hovering man, his face full of astonishment and devotion. On the right, by contrast, stands an enigmatic figure, cloaked in an earth-coloured robe. His gaze deviates from the other characters and rather addresses the viewer. This figure, with a weathered and expressive face, breaks the internal dynamics of the scene and introduces a new tension: is he a witness, an outsider or an alter ego of the artist? The earthy tones - ochre, brown, grey and deep red - reinforce the work's raw character. Van den Berghe applied a pasty painting technique, applying thick layers of paint and then partially scraping or wiping them off. This gives the surface a grainy texture and emphasises the transience of the depicted figures.

Beings raises existential questions about leadership, spirituality and human relationships. The gesticulating man seems to assume the role of a spiritual guide, a Christ-like figure, although he bears no stigmas. The composition suggests a resurrection, but ambiguity remains: is this a moment of enlightenment or, on the contrary, of alienation? The woman seems caught between her earthly instincts and the call to transcendence. The monk embodies devotion, while the enigmatic figure on the right represents a more critical or sceptical presence.

This layering of meanings is characteristic of Van den Berghe's work from the early 1930s. Unlike his earlier expressionist canvases, where strength and colour predominated, here he seeks a deeper psychological charge. His figures are no longer mere bearers of emotion, but complex symbols of the human condition.

Frits Van den Berghe has earned his place in international art history with works such as *Beings*. His ability to combine expressionist intensity with surrealist alienation makes his oeuvre unique. The influence of European avant-garde movements resonates in Beings, but the work retains a distinctly personal signature. The theme of alienation and existential struggle places him in the lineage of artists such as James Ensor and Edvard Munch, while his plastic experiments are akin to the work of Oskar Kokoschka and George Grosz. *Beings* is not just a painting; it is a visual essay on human drives, spiritual quest and social isolation. It remains a powerful and intriguing work of art to this day, aptly depicting the complexity of Van den Berghe's vision of man.

Exhibitions

- 1999, Ostend, PMMK, *Retrospectieve Frits Van den Berghe*, 16.10.1999-13.02.2000, cat.no. 139.

Literature

- Baronian, J.-B., *Dictionnaire amoureux de la Belgique* (Paris: Editions Plon, 2015).

- Boyens, P., *Laethem-Saint-Martin L'Art du Symbolisme à l'Expressionisme* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1992), p. 528 (ill.).

- Boyens, P., *Frits Van den Berghe: catalogue raisonné* (Gent: SD&Z, 1999), p. 318-319, 461, no. 762 (ill.).

- Boyens, P. & G. Marquenie, *Retrospectieve Frits Van den Berghe,* exh. cat. (Ostende: PMMK, 1999), p. 168-169, no. 139 (ill.).

Artist description:

Frits Van den Berghe was born in Ghent on 3 April 1883. At that moment, his father Raphaël was secretary of the Ghent University library and his erudition was famous among the professors. Beginning in 1898, the young Frederik would perfect his skills at the Ghent Academy for the Fine Arts. His classmates included Leon De Smet and Albert Servaes, with whom he moved into an atelier on Rasphuisstraat in 1902. Already the same year he stayed in Sint-Martens-Latem, together with his bosom friend Robert Aerens. Together with Servaes, we find him again in Latem for a time in 1904. Only in 1908 would he take up residence in the village. Van den Berghe lived in the village during the summer months, spending the winters in Ghent. He was appointed professor at the academy in the same year. In the meantime, he had met Paul-Gustave van Hecke and André De Ridder in Latem, who would remain his friends for life.

Shortly before the First World War, Van den Berghe underwent a crisis. Together with a girlfriend, he went to the United States. However, he returned-disappointed-after a few months. War broke out shortly thereafter, and he fled to the Netherlands together with Gustave De Smet. The Dutch painter Leo Gestel looked after his Belgian companions for a time in Amsterdam; André De Ridder also followed in his friends' footsteps. Both De Smet and Van den Berghe were quickly noticed in the Amsterdam art world. The Larensche Art Shop showed interest in their work already in 1915. The first major exhibition of their work on foreign soil followed in May of 1916. Under the impulse of De Ridder, the Heystee, Smith & Co Gallery presented an extensive exhibition of their work. Amsterdam could not seduce them, however, and already in August, they departed for Blaricum. Still in the same year, Van den Berghe was a noted guest at an exhibition of Belgian exiles in the Amsterdam municipal museum. Afterwards, the Belgian exiles would come together in Het Gooi, and together with De Smet and Jozef Cantré, Van den Berghe formed a 'miniature Ghent' colony in exile.

While he only returned to Belgium in 1922, Van den Berghe played a decisive role in the coming to be of the Sélection gallery. The artist was under contract to the gallery from the start of the movement in 1920; later, Walter Schwarzenberg contractually bound him to the Le Centaure gallery.

After a short stay with Permeke in Ostend, in the summer of 1922 Van den Berghe went to Bachte-Maria-Leerne. One year later we find him-together with De Smet-at the Villa Malpertuis of Paul-Gustave van Hecke, a place he would regularly return to in the coming years.Le Centaure honoured him with a personal exhibition in January 1927; he was again the guest there in April of the same year. Van Hecke continued to support his disciple, among others with an individual exhibition in his Galerie L'époque in November of 1928. Even in times of crisis, Van den Berghe was supported by his Brussels' patrons. Le Centaure organised an individual exhibition of his work again in March 1931; during the course of the year,Sélection dedicated a theme number to the artist.

When his most important employers went bankrupt in 1931-1932, 10 years of history were squandered in only a few months time. The collections of De Ridder, van Hecke and Schwarzenberg, and the collections of their galleries, were auctioned off without limit. Van den Berghe-together with De Smet and Hubert Malfait-was among the worst affected. No less than one hundred and six top works by the artist were auctioned for a trifle.

In fact, the conservative press used the economic crisis and the bankruptcy of the modernistic galleries to announce the end of expressionism, the prevailing movement of the 1920s. As a result, the modernists of the 1920s, with De Smet and Van den Berghe at the top of the list, suddenly fell into disfavour. Van den Berghe thus withdrew from the fickle life of an artist. To earn a living, van Hecke

introduced him to the socialist publisher Het Licht in Ghent, where he was able to work as illustrator. Van den Berghe would passionately devote himself to these assignments in the coming years. Illustrative work appeared in the newspaper Vooruit; he also brought a humorous, sometimes satirical, look to leading figures in the contemporary cultural and political world in the weeklies Koekoekand Voor Allen.

Van den Berghe seldom appeared in the limelight in the 1930s. In 1933, the Ghent Socialist Study Circle organised a double exhibition together with Jozef Cantré; in the same year, Emile Langui had the first monograph of the artist published. In 1936, Alice Manteau organised a small exhibition of his work.

Official recognition of his work finally came in 1939, when he was nominated for the directorship of the Ghent Academy. Van den Berghe's sudden death on 23 September of the same year made this recognition impossible.