

Paul van Geert



An overview of some recent and representative works

Artistic approach

Since 1966, when I made my first oil paintings, my work has developed as a personal, painted life narrative that originated in close, but sometimes oppositional dialogue with my work as a researcher and scientist in the field of developmental and lifespan psychology (I earned my living as a professor of developmental psychology at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, from which I retired in 2015).

It started a long time ago with a spontaneous urge to narrate my life in painted form, which, over the years, has grown into a constant spontaneous reflection, enacted in the form of painted and wooden constructions, on a variety of themes, more particularly the relationship and tension between the utmost individual of a personal experience and the universalist claims of art; between the artist as a single actor and the personal, social and professional networks to which he belongs; between theoretical, scientific and ideological statements about persons (topic of my paid profession as a professor and researcher of human development) on the one hand and direct, non-discursive representations of them as in a painting; between embodiment and materialization of the work of art and abstract ideas and concepts that it is supposed to communicate.

In that sense, consistent with my view as a scientist on the nature of human life, I think my work must be seen in the context of its own development, in the context of the lifespan development of the significant persons from my life environment about which it gives evidence, and in the context of the freestanding paintings as a community of objects.

Between 1966 and 1998, my work consisted of standard-sized, typical paintings on-the-wall, representing myself, my wife, her pregnancies, my children as they grew up, my family. In 1998, my work underwent a typical, spontaneous “bifurcation”: I started to use waste materials that I got from reconstruction work in the farmhouse and barns that I bought in 1985, doors and shutters, planks and boards from demolished paneling and so forth (I have studied such sudden life-span changes in my research). The paintings became life-size, freestanding wooden constructions, that I made in my own carpenter’s workshop and that depicted persons that were significant to me from head to toe. Each object-painting is constructed as an individual personality in itself, with a particular focus on its embodiment in the form of materials coming from my life environment. They are mounted on wheels such that they can be easily moved and relocated, and brought in changing spatial relationships with other paintings in the collection. The paintings themselves are constituting a community of actors, acting on the physically present spectators who are literally walking around and within a particular spatial composition of the painted works. As a title for the collective work of paintings, I chose “Le

bois d'amis", a title in french as a somewhat ironical commentary on the fact that so many artists use English for their artwork titles, even if English is not their native language.

What I consider a unique aspect of my work is the — hidden — dialogue between on the one hand the works of art representing people from my life environment, family, friends and closest students, and on the other hand my work in contemporary theories of psychology, developmental and lifespan psychology in particular. In my own scientific work I have always, contrary to mainstream ideas, defended the idea that the individual and unique person should be the focus of psychology, not the narrow that are customarily imposed on persons, reducing them to fixed psychopathologies or personality types. In my artistic work, I have tried to show the uniqueness of the portrayed people, in their typical contexts or postures, as they relate to my own life context. Second, in contrast to mainstream academic psychology, which neglects the embodied, dynamic and creative nature of psychological life, my scientific as well as my artistic work puts embodiment, creation and contextuality to the fore.

My paintings are soaked in mild humor (which is often personal), irony, little stories and associations, which I see as my personal way to show my respect and affection for the people I depict.

I believe in the power and necessity of variation and the naturalness of change (which is also a lasting theme in my scientific approach to human development), and that is why I never wanted to appropriate a typical "style". Sometimes my work is highly detailed, sometimes it is more reminiscent of a cartoon drawing with black contour lines. Sometimes highly decorative elements emerge while painting, sometimes the background is absent, or realistic....Its style is what emerges during the making, and the dynamics are constrained by whatever it is in my person, skills, preferences, esthetic values that contribute to the activity of my painting in a nonlinear manner.

I believe that perceiving a work of art, like my paintings, should be a matter of directly resonating with it, an immediate personal understanding that should be accessible for everyone (it's reminiscent of Gibson's theory of direct perception). I have shown my paintings for an extended time in two major hospitals in the Netherlands, and I saw that visitors and patients alike found them comforting, funny, personal, mildly enigmatic sometimes. From written and verbal commentaries I understood that they were experienced as supporting the healing they were seeking in these places, which I saw as a major token of appreciation for my art, but also as a demonstration of the fact that seeing art - although experienced by the viewer as immediate and direct - is heavily formed by the context in which it occurs (a hospital, a gallery,, a museum, a workshop, a critical review of an artist in a newspaper and so forth).

I have never wanted my paintings to be sold or presented in commercial galleries. My ideal is that they stay together in smaller or bigger communities of objects, and that they are accessible to the public... I wish them to be “published”, similar to what I did with my scientific work which I also “published” for everyone to see and judge. But then, similar to what happens with one's children, there must be a time that they take their independence, move away from their parents' house and find their place in the world. I am not entirely sure if that will ever happen with my work... If my work never extends the perception of a purely personal painted diary, of no particular value for anyone except the diary maker himself, they will perish together with their maker when the time comes (which I hope, of course, lies still far ahead in the future). The reason that I submit my work to the Luxembourg Art Prize is that it might help my work to “fly out” and to reach a greater audience, and eventually interested buyers who are willing to keep some of it together, in the forms of small but coherent communities of paintings.

General comments on the works presented

Since my work represents a community of people in the context of an extended life narrative, I find it difficult to present my paintings as single works that can be isolated from the others. When I show my work at an exhibition, I always show a group of paintings that make sense together (like one exhibition at a church for which I selected all the paintings of friends and family with their children and pets). For this reason, I prefer to present my works on this webpage in groups of a few paintings that are closely related.

I shall begin with a presentation of four paintings of my wife and one of the dogs of our daughter, Partagas, as Partagas is now 16 years old, suffering from old age and preparing for his departure from this world of dog cookies, walks, cats and hours of dozing in the sun...

I then present two paintings of a former PhD student and friend, Marieke and her son.

The next presentation consists of two paintings of our son David, wearing a plastic viking helmet, which I also used in other paintings I made of him (and others).

It is followed by two paintings in the form of a triptych of two families.

I continue with two paintings of my sister Paulette, who had Down syndrome in addition to visual impairment, one with her and my father. Both died a couple of years ago.

The list goes on with two paintings of our daughter Liesbet and her dogs Monte and Partagas.

4 stages in the life of Leen and Partagas

This series of four paintings represents my wife, Leen, and one of the dogs of our daughter (the dog's name is Partagas). The first painting is from 2003 when Partagas was still a young dog. The work has been painted on oak planks from a windowsill that was removed after a redecoration of the living room. The second painting dates from 2012 (in the meantime, I have painted Partagas several times, mostly with my daughter Liesbet). The panel is a box made of MDF board, which I shaped in the form of a sitting cat (cats are Partagas' most favorite animals to chase after). Young children immediately notice that the painting has the form of a sitting cat. The third painting is from 2016 and this is painted on board taken from a wooden paneling removed after reconstruction of the kitchen. It's based on a small photo made with a smart phone, which produces the interesting but very unnatural perspective deformation of the dog and my wife's hands. The last painting is from 2018 and represents Partagas after a swim in the swimming pool (he lives in Spain) and Leen dries the



perspective deformation of the dog and my wife's hands. It is decorated with two pieces of silver leaf that I inherited from Leen's grandfather who was a painter and decorator. The last painting is from 2018 and represents Partagas after a swim in the swimming pool (he lives in Spain) and Leen dries the

dog with a lavender blue towel, which shows a highly salient folding. In this last painting, Partagas is an old dog, with all the symptoms of what would be called dementia in people, and the motor and

sensory problems that come with old age. Also for Leen, fifteen years have passed since the first painting.

Dimensions of the works: 250x108x65;
215x165x70; 233x113x75; 210x137x75



Marieke and her son Ede

These are two paintings of Marieke and her son Ede, the second also with their dog, Uk. Marieke is a friend and a former PhD student of mine, she now works as consultant in mental healthcare. The first and most recent painting (2018) is painted on three pieces of MDF board. It's based on a small photo Marieke send me through Whatsapp, where she teaches her son to shoot with a bow and arrow (which had a soft rubber ball at the end). I changed it into a branch with 6 young swallows, ending in elderberry leaves. The elderberry provides the wood for magic wands.... One young swallow has fallen on the ground, and has a broken wing... The whole is a somewhat melancholy image of educating a child, which is like teaching the child to shoot an arrow that finally flies away. But it's an arrow that carries life and unexpected appearances like young swallows or elderberry leaves....



The second painting (2015) represents Marieke in the pose of the Virgin Mary as originally painted by the Flemish Primitives. Marieke is wearing high-heeled shoes, and looks fashionable and modern, which is consistent with the fact many of those medieval “madonnas” were heavily inspired by the beauty ideals of their time and they were shown as much more earthly than heavenly figures. Her son Ede poses as the Holy Child, holding the world globe with the cross, which is actually just the ball he’s playing with. The dog Uk lies at her feet, as the classical symbol of fidelity, but also as a representation of the dog’s preferred position.... The richly folded cloth is copied from Flemish Primitive paintings (it’s mirrored on the left). The ornaments left and right have been cut in the oak panel on which it is painted. The background is the typical decorative honorary cloth of the Sienese and comparable Virgin Mary paintings. The form is reminiscent of an altarpiece. The whole is an ironic comment on the representation of women and children in religious art.

Dimensions of the works (left to right): 235x198x78; 258x178x75





David and the Vikings

These are two paintings of my son David, wearing the plastic Viking helmet that I have used in several other paintings, while he uses a leaf blower that I transformed into a pigeon gun in the left painting, and a smoke producing gun in the right. As my son is a natural talent in interactions with animals and young children, the painting on the left shows him in the midst of a group of animals in peaceful coexistence. On the left and below are the dogs of our daughter Liesbet (Monte and Partagas), on the right are the cats of my brother in law Guy. They are surrounded by sparrows, blackbirds, tits, pigeons, seagulls, a mole and two badgers, one of which is a smoking a hand rolled cigarette. It's an image of paradoxical peace. On the left of the painting, the animals' names are written in Flemish (including some typos). The painting on the left grew out of a question of a nephew, Simon, who is an aficionado of Scandinavian history and mythology, and who asked to be photographed with a plastic Viking helmet on his head, which he remembered from a party we had many years ago. He is wearing a cape with Celtic ornaments. I posed on the right as a sort of Motley Viking chieftain, also with the plastic Viking helmet, and with two blue earrings which are in fact the string on which I hang my reading glasses. I completed the picture with the standing warrior, my son David, who is holding a leaf blower that is now spouting an eerie cloud of poisonous fumes. The text, referring to the names of the people shown in the painting, the painter and the year of painting, are all in rune script, which I got from one of the many sides that "translate" whatever text you wish into rune signs... The real theme of the two paintings are the complexities and winding roads of life, but it is hidden under a layer of theatrical and rather absurd pose and play.

Dimensions of the works (left to right): 275x112x70; 285x153x78





Two family triptychs

When I paint pictures of families I preferred the form of the triptych altarpiece, which in medieval times was considered the summit of painting, and which was revitalized in the twentieth century by various modern painters, such as Grosz. Although in medieval times the construction of the panel and the frame was done by other craftsmen than the painter — who was a craftsman man among the others — I construct the panels and frames myself, which, particular in the case of these big triptychs is quite a lot of work. Both are made of oak wood that comes from trees that grew in my neighborhood and that were cut into planks and beams by a local sawmill. I then saw the beams into thin planks that I glue together to form the separate panels. I then sand the wood into a smooth finish, after which it is prepared with a sealer (simply water thinned wood glue).. The procedure is quite similar to the production of most of the panels that I make out of planks and boards from local trees.

The idea of the triptych is that it represents a central figure, which in the medieval triptychs were pictures of the Christ, the holy Mary or of saints. The side panels were used for the commentary pictures, and they often contained portraits of the rich donors of the altarpiece. In the two triptychs represented here, the central panel is — on the left — the oldest girl of the Vedder-Kook family carrying her younger sister on the back, and — on the right — the oldest son of the Breeuwsmma-Adema family peeing in the water of a small pond

in their garden. In both cases, the parents, with the other child, are represented on the left and right panels. On the central panel of the painting on the left I used a so-called mille-feuille technique to paint the background, a decorated technique that was often used in Flemish and French medieval tapestries. It's basically a way of covering a background with patches of color, which in this particular case consist of flowers, but which can also consist of geometric color patches (like in the first and second painting from the left of the Leen with Partagas paintings), or color patches resembling those of the pointillists or those occurring in the paintings of Gustav Klimt. These are basically just ways of enjoying the painting activity itself and the work of other painters throughout the ages.

Instead of using the explicit triptych format, I often construct my panels with reference to Italian Renaissance altar pieces, which often have a pointed central panel (such as the first painting on the left of the Leen and Partagas group, or the painting of marieke, Ede and Uk. I have lots of such panels in my work, and they sometimes emerge out of the materials I'm using. In the first lane and Partagas painting, for instance the pointed central panel arose as a consequence of my using planks from a windowsill, by rotating the planks that originally met in the corner. This form was augmented in the second painting of this group of four, resulting in two points, which then led to the resemblance with the silhouette of a cat.

Dimensions of the works (left to right): 315x185x85; 305x183x85

My sister Paulette and my father

My sister Paulette had Down syndrome and lived for the most part of her life with my parents. She died at the age of 61. She always carried pieces of string with her, and she used it as a mediator between herself and the world. In 2015, the painting at the left was used in a dance performance, and the dancer attached a piece of string to the painting, which is now part of it. At the end of her life, Paulette was almost totally blind, but she enjoyed riding in the car with my father, who took her out on Sunday afternoons. My father, who had a prosthetic nose as a consequence of a melanoma, was her first and foremost protector, as I tried to show in the painting on the right, where he has his hands on her shoulder. She is holding the inevitable string in her hands on which she has attached a white plastic bag, which never contained anything (she traveled light). While I was making this painting, a colleague from the University of Utah was visiting me and he made a striking comment, which I wrote on the right-hand side of the painting. The painting is made on an abandoned front door, with the mailbox slot still in place. I didn't want the bead molding of the door go through their faces, and so I painted their faces on a separate piece of wood. The cover plates of the keyhole and the door handles were painted in various colors. The painting on the left shows her sitting on the beach with her inseparable piece of string and a toy shovel in her hand that she never used. It's painted on rough unsanded planks and has a slight "Hopper-ian" feeling about it.



My daughter Liesbet and her dogs

These two works, the left from 2007, the other from 2016, represent the same theme, namely my daughter Liesbet with her dogs Monty and Partagas in a resting position, immersed in a landscape of imagination and fantasy. The left panel represents Liesbet reading a book, with in the background figures and images from her lecture (including the Sagrada Familia, as she lives close to Barcelona). The painting is based on a photo taken with a 2007 mobile phone, hence the funny perspective the formation of her protruding foot. The panel on the right is a combination of Liesbet resting on a couch, with Monte and Partagas. Below and behind her, there is a landscape taken from Bruegel's the return of the herd, which is part of his cycle of paintings of the months of the year (to reduce the workload, he painted two months at a time and this one is representing October and November). I replaced Bruegel's 16th-century cattle by the Friesian-Holstein black-and-white, which is a common cattle in my neighborhood. One of the cowherds is a German soldier from the first world war, about which I heard stories from my grandfathers (I am of Flemish descent). The others are copies of Bruegel's cowherds, but with a little twist (like the one carrying the long stick on which his socks hang to dry).



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Dimensions of the works: 260x128x72;
312x92x85





Henderien and Esther / Marijn and Sander

These two paintings represent colleagues (who are also friends, and former PhD students) and their child. On the left is Henderien with her foster daughter Esther, on the right Marijn with her son Sander... Henderien and Esther are carefully watched by the cat Torre (who drowned soon after the sketches for the painting were made). And Sander and Marijn are surrounded by pigeons. Henderien and Esther are painted on two doors of the abandoned piggery in my farm house... The doors still carry the rusty latches and bolts, and the holes of the wood worms, all taking part in the lush green of leaves and flowers in the background... Marijn and Sander are painted on elm wood, and the contours of the figures and pigeons have been grooved in the wood. The colored background has been divided into small, square tiles. After all the elms had died as a consequence of the elm disease, farmers who understood the value of the wood took them to the local sawmill, and I bought one of the trees. I have used the wood in a variety of paintings.... Elm is a particularly strong and tough kind of wood, with a beautiful texture....

Both children have a complicated history that lurks as a hidden narrative behind the surface and that is known only to the people who are directly involved...

The painting of Henderien and Esther is about looking at the viewer, and about looking away (the cat). The painting of Sander and Marijn is about looking to each other, and the somewhat thoughtless gesture of the mother smoothing the child's hair....

Dimensions of the works (from left to right): 230x178x78;
305x118x86



Take a walk through my painting studio and exhibition space with these youtube clips...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRY8ICZE3tY>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMyXgXc8ht8>

An overview of my paintings (the most recent ones not included) on my website

http://www.paulvangeert.nl/alle_schilderijen_pages/index.html

Here's an overview of previous exhibitions

http://www.paulvangeert.nl/schilderijen_3.htm

A short documentary that Regional Drenthe Television made of me and my work...

http://www.paulvangeert.nl/uit_het_hart/uit_het_hart_compleet.wmv

For a brochure (in Dutch) about the paintings representing people with their children

http://www.paulvangeert.nl/alle_schilderijen/LeBoisdEnfantsBeilen.pdf

And for a web-based version of this brochure

http://www.paulvangeert.nl/alle_schilderijen/PaulVanGeertRecentWork.pdf