

# Fake Barok

Narcisse Tordoir

29.Nov.25

3.May.26

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#FromTheCollection



Painting forms the core of Narcisse Tordoir's (b. 1954, Mechelen, Belgium) multifaceted practice. From this, his work branches out into related genres, such as drawing, printmaking, photography and installation. The artist compiles nearly all his works in archive books, which loosely divide his oeuvre into different periods.

Tordoir foregrounds perception and explores the tension between romance and reality, and between history and current events. Artistic collaboration is also a source of inspiration. Since the 1980s, he has immersed himself in the history of painting while simultaneously positioning himself outside the traditional boundaries of the medium. He often quite literally exceeds the limits of the classical canvas, realizing his paintings in the form of installations.

A subtle thread running through Tordoir's oeuvre can be linked to the philosophy of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), which emerged around 2000. This builds on the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras' idea that 'man is the measure of all things', but takes it further. In OOO, 'man' is no longer the sole point of reference; all 'objects' also function as reference points. Each object exists independently of how we perceive it, with its own autonomous presence and equal value.

The British philosopher Timothy Morton introduced an ecological dimension to OOO by considering not only objects but also natural phenomena – plants, animals, stones – as 'objects' in their own right. In his view, they are equal to humans, prompting us to reconsider how we see and relate to the world around us. Many of the works Tordoir presents here alongside the installation 'Fake Barok' can be understood from this perspective. They are less like 'paintings' in the traditional sense and more like autonomous 'objects'.

## 1 Fake Barok, 2016-2017

Narcisse Tordoir's 'Fake Barok' refers to the 17th-century Baroque movement. In Tordoir's view, Baroque art did not conceal the political and social crises of its time – such as the Reformation and the religious wars – but revealed them in all their dramatic intensity. In 'Fake Barok', he similarly lays bare the horrors of today's refugee, war and climate crises. He combines found photographs with his own shots and reworks them in pastel, creating a striking panorama of the contemporary world.

Tordoir confronts us with a world in crisis, but also with the power of imagination. Behind the dramatic scenes lies a human need to understand and to feel – just as in the Baroque era. The artist invites us to look, and to look again: not to escape, but to face the reality of our time.

Tordoir often refers to well-known works from art history, yet his work remains firmly rooted in the present. He draws inspiration from his own life and from the world around him: migration, war, climate change and political unrest. His art lays bare the complexity and disorientation of our globalized age.

### 1/1 Refugees

The first part of 'Fake Barok' refers to the refugee crisis. Tordoir began with a press photograph from the period 2012-15 – the height of this crisis – which he reinterpreted and adapted. His reworking of the image functions as a personal commentary on both the photograph and its subject. In one of the panels, we see a man carrying a child. This image, staged by the artist, recalls the *pietà* from Christian art: the dead Christ held in the arms of Mary. The 'pietà' conveys love, pain, reverence and farewell. The journalist who took the original press photograph also appears to have deliberately drawn on this art-historical motif.

### 1/2 War

The second part depicts the devastating force of war: explosions, rubble and people caught in violence. Here, Tordoir alludes to Francisco Goya's (1746-1828) painting 'El tres de mayo 1808' (3 May 1808), which portrays an actual event: the brutal execution of Spanish civilians by French soldiers in retaliation for an uprising the previous day. For 'Fake Barok', however, Tordoir did not depart from Goya's painting directly, but from a photograph of a reconstruction in the wax museum in Madrid. What you see, therefore, is a reconstruction of a reconstruction. Tordoir also inserts himself into the scene: he can be seen among the raised bayonets. Elsewhere, his camera appears – a reminder that he is reflecting on how images of war are made and disseminated.

### 1/3 Climate

The third part shows a flooded landscape glowing in the light of a setting sun. A larger-than-life man and woman appear to leap through the air. At first glance, the scene seems lighter, yet an underlying tension is palpable. The warm colours recall oil spills and hint at pollution and global warming. This section addresses the threat of the climate crisis – and our role within it.

The artist donated this monumental installation to S.M.A.K. in 2024. Before this, it was shown as a frieze of photo collages more than 27 metres long. Tordoir dismantled the frieze into irregular sections to suit this gallery space and developed a new arrangement. Here, he presents 'Fake Barok' together with mostly recent works, many of which function as 'objects' rather than traditional 'paintings'. Together, they form a cross-section of Tordoir's practice and create a unique hybrid between a collection display and an artist-curated solo exhibition.

## **2 Z.T., 1999**

Like many of his works, Tordoir titled this piece 'Z.T.' ('Zonder Titel' in Dutch, meaning 'untitled') in order to direct attention to the act of looking. It consists of a large aluminium panel to which he has attached aluminium slats that form a geometric pattern. The entire surface is painted in a single colour. 'Z.T.' (1999) is one of Tordoir's most abstract works from the period 1993–2000.

Around this time, the artist began making models. What started as scale models of artworks evolved into fully fledged, large-format works. These often took the form of 'object paintings': flat, painted surfaces to which Tordoir attached various materials. They function as sculptural works that hang on the wall.

Tordoir continues to work in this way today. He also created a model for this exhibition.

## **3 Z.T., 2020**

Between 2018 and 2022, Narcisse Tordoir created smaller, more two-dimensional works on panel. In some cases, he mounted them against a larger, abstract mural painted in acrylic.

These works form a connection with his early practice of the 1980s. They followed a long pause after the completion of the monumental installation 'Fake Barok' (2016–2017), during which Tordoir updated his archive books and revisited his work from the 1980s onward.

At the same time, the artist himself nuances this connection. Whereas his work in the 1980s was primarily concerned with the medium of painting, these later works draw more directly on contemporary events. By engaging with a reality he experiences as alienating, restless and threatening, Tordoir involves the viewer more immediately in the image. The use of photographs in these works also reflects the impact of digitization on his visual thinking, which has become more rapid.

## **4 Constellatie 2, 2023 Constellatie 5, 2023 Constellatie 10, 2023 Constellatie 11, 2023**

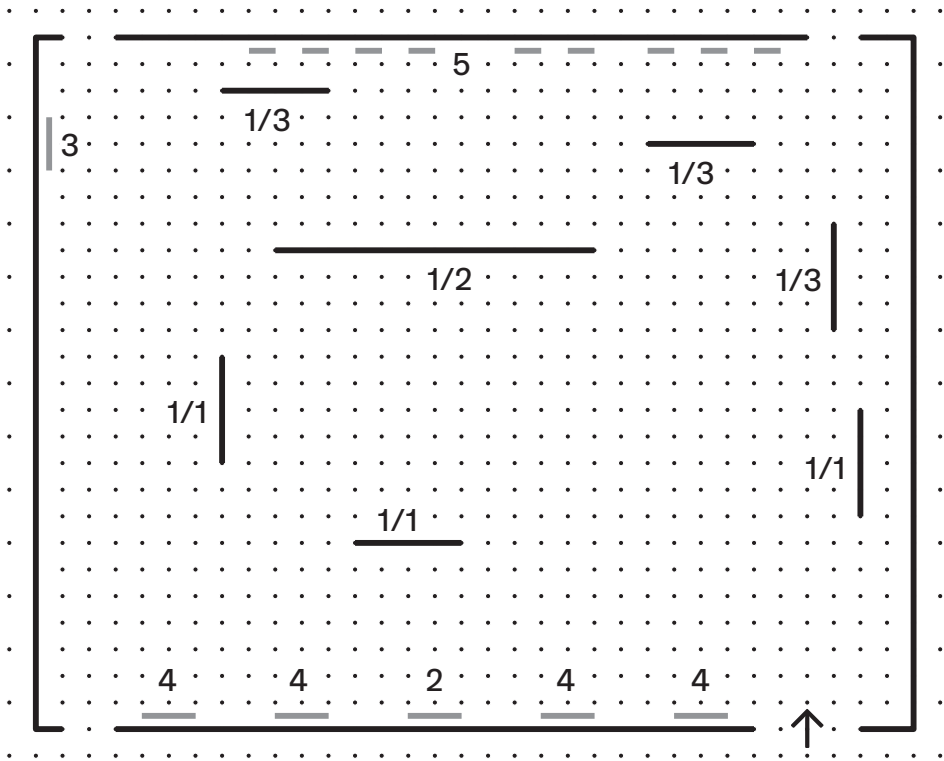
Narcisse Tordoir has long collaborated with other artists, friends and acquaintances. In doing so, he challenges the idea of the artwork as the product of a single author.

In the early 2000s, Tordoir worked with artist friends on large 'paintings' that sometimes developed into full installations. The 'Constellations', begun in 2023, continue this approach, but the nature of the collaboration has shifted. The contributions of others are now more distant and passive. Tordoir assumes the role of curator/director: he gathers works by other artists and arranges them in compositions that are partly intuitive and partly calculated. Each 'Constellation' includes a label indicating, in schematic form, which object belongs to which artist.

## **5 HOE (How), 2023 All People, 2023 Water, 2024 Manzoni, 2024 Where are you, 2024 Look 2, 2024 Newton & Blake, 2024 Wachten (Waiting), 2024 Beit Lahia, 2024**

These small, seemingly simple works in oil stick on canvas were made in 2023–2024. Their linear, abstract and figurative motifs appear intuitive and spontaneous. The choice of colour is also incidental: Tordoir used whichever oil stick happened to be within reach.

Many of the works have concise titles that only loosely relate to the depiction. Next to some of them, there is a poem by the artist drawn in coloured pencil on the wall. In his sketchbooks, Tordoir connects most of these works to the ecological vision of Object-Oriented Ontology. As outlined above, this philosophy does not ask *what* exists, but *how* things exist. This explains titles such as 'HOE' and 'Where are you'. The poems, too, occasionally echo this way of thinking.



**Narcisse Tordoïr** (b. 1954, Mechelen, Belgium) is known for his drawings, prints, paintings, photographs, and installations. His work emphasizes perception and explores the tension between romanticism and reality, history and current events. Since the 1980s, Tordoïr has immersed himself in the history of painting while simultaneously positioning himself outside the boundaries of the medium. He often ventures beyond the limits of the classical canvas, realizing his paintings in the form of installations.

### Agenda

Discover the programme of lectures, guided tours, workshops, and more activities related to the exhibition at [smak.be](http://smak.be).

**Special thanks to:** the artist, Sigefride Bruna Hautman, Lief Meeus, Yvon Tordoïr, and the entire S.M.A.K.-team.





S.M.  
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