

Museum make-over

REBECCA BENOOT

Antwerp's contemporary art museum adds to its collection but drops a vowel

The Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, or Antwerp Museum of Contemporary Art, might find itself forever being referred to as "the museum formerly known as MuHKA".

The huge centre in Antwerp's 't Zuid neighbourhood closed its doors last April for some serious spring renewal, and this month opened its doors with a new look, new exhibitions and a (sort of) new name: M HKA.

Because the "u" was never anything more than an aid to make the museum's abbreviation pronounceable, Flemish artist and designer Christophe Terlinden, hired to re-create the logo, decided to get rid of it and bring the name back to its essence. Although everyone will keep on pronouncing it the same way, visually, the "u" is a thing of the past, as is the case for a lot of things in the new M HKA.

The original plan was to redo the infrastructure and add a coat of paint here and there, but in the end M HKA's make-over has been more radical, particularly externally. Formerly a largely unremarkable beige building (part grain silo), it has now become a landmark worthy of its reputation: light and breezy colours and giant, black letters clearly marking its territory.

It also houses art on the outside now: London-based Italian artist

Enrico David, nominee for this year's prestigious Turner Prize, decorated the facade with simple line drawings punctuated by bright, yellow dots. Even the museum's little brother, MuHKA Media, got a make-over, and this voyeuristic venue a few houses down, home to art-house and classic films, is now called Cinema Zuid.

The social fabric

During M HKA's renovation project, its entire collection was divided between several cultural centres in Belgium rather than tucked away in storage. They also lent art to the *All That is Solid Melts into Air* exhibition in Mechelen, as well as to the *Story of the Image* exhibition of Antwerp art in Singapore. Next, they will collaborate on exhibitions in Havana and Charleroi.

This means that a majority of the museum's permanent collection is on tour, which has cleared up its wide, open internal spaces for a couple of excellent temporary shows. On the ground level, we find *Textiles: Art and the Social Fabric*, which focuses on how the use of textiles reveal complex socio-political undercurrent in modern societies – in clothing, certainly, but also more overtly, in flags and banners.

Textiles is big and bold, to say the least, filled with vibrant colours and huge, occasionally bombas-

tic, pieces ranging from 20th-century flags from various progressive Flemish political parties, to American artist John Dugger's "Chile Vencera" banner to Sheela Gowda's sculpture made from exquisite Indian fabric.

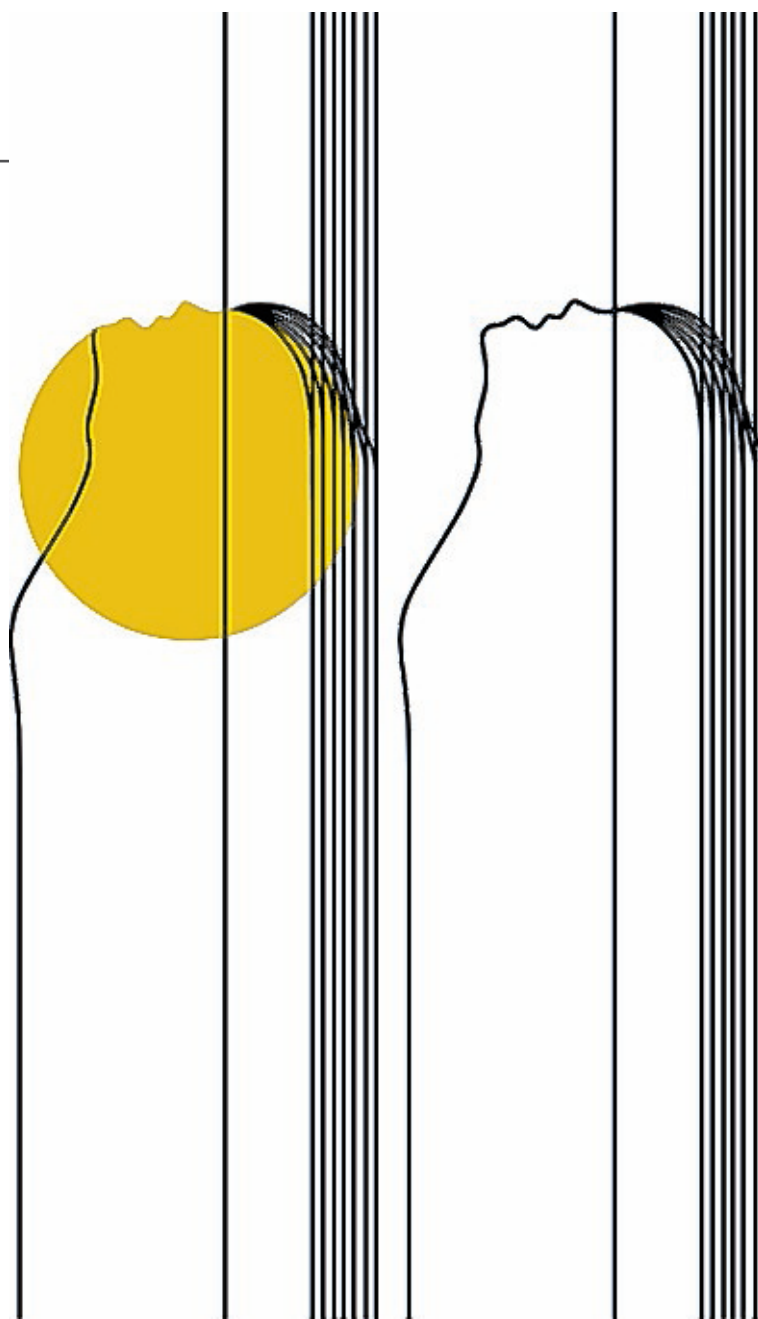
One of the highlights is "On the Nature of the Beast" by Polish artist Goshka Macuga. Her large-scale carpet (which she made here) combines a press photo taken in the Whitechapel Gallery in London showing Prince William with Picasso's "Guernica" in the background. Not only does she emphasise that political intentions often fade into the background in deference to the razzle dazzle, she also links in the royal history of the textile industry in Flanders, which flourished during the Middle Ages. (Flanders is still a renowned expert when it comes to handling fabric.)

Until February, you will also find M HKA's contribution to the country-wide Europalia China festival, but the museum has wisely purchased the works by Yang Fudong, Xu Zhen and Yang Zhenzhong to add to its permanent collection. *Useful Life* is a reconstruction of the exhibit that in the year 2000 played a key role in the development of contemporary Chinese art. Shown during the first year international artists were allowed to take part in the Shanghai Biennale, M HKA's intention is to spotlight this crucial moment in China when a shaft of light entered the darkness of censorship and government-controlled art events.

With video art, photography and installations, *Useful Life* is filled with subtle aesthetics and tranquillity and yet is often confrontational. Yang Zhenzhong's film "I will die", for example, is poignant even when political. The artist asked random people to utter the phrase: "I will die". Hearing these three simple words over and over becomes utterly unnerving, particularly when being said by the elderly or the military.

Bigger is better

Collection XXIV, meanwhile, incorporates M HKA's latest additions. They have widened their take on art from a historic point



Enrico David's elegant illustrations decorate M HKA's new façade

of view to a more global one with an expansion into contemporary Eastern art, such as sculptures by India's Boran Handa and the politically charged collages of CK Rajan.

European art has not been ignored, however: Dutch artist Hans Eijkelboom's "Fotonotities 1992-2007" consists of groups of photographs of people wearing similar types of clothing – the ways in which the famous image of Che Guevara have infiltrated fashion is a wry visual commentary on the consumerism of politics. Dutch artist Job Koelewijn's "Boys and Girls" also takes on fashion and the artificiality of everyday life: life-size, Barbie-shaped doll packages will be inhabited by real people during several upcoming performances.

Although the collection boasts the biggest changes at M HKA, there are other alterations to be

noted. The roof-top terrace and M HKAFE, which houses a mural by iconic American artist Keith Haring, are also now accessible to the non-museum-going crowd. On your way up to the fourth floor lies a small retrospective exhibition that shows the past 20 years of M HKA (and it has been quite a journey).

The fifth and sixth floors, finally, are used for the ongoing *Lonely at the Top* series, which this season is subtitled "A Larger Europe", focussing on art and culture from regions little known to western Europe. Russia and former USSR republics are on until 8 November: the late Moscow conceptual artist Dmitry Prigov's remarkable installation "The Transcendental Descent of the Bear" make it well worth the climb. ♦

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Boy and Girls: appropriate gender presentations, courtesy of Job Koelewijn



Everybody dies: Yang Zhenzhong's film is simple and terrifying