

A Journey with Charlotte

The World of Multidisciplinary Artist Charlotte De Cock

	Introduction	
	Foreword by Stefan Ashkenazy	9
	Introduction by Léon Lemahieu	17
1	Early Work	23
2	Thirteen Masters	41
3	My California	67
	Paintings Pt.1	69
	Documentary	87
	Paintings Pt.2	99
4	Barefoot Festival	109
5	Daze Trilogy	127
6	DAOUD	137
7	A Journey with Charlotte	151



Foreword

Stefan Ashkenazy

In a time when multi-hyphenated careers are commonplace and avant-garde movements have been smoothly co-opted by a process of commodification and commercialization, it is difficult to separate or tease out the actual threads of true creativity and grit. Where much of the art, music and entertainment worlds have combined and coalesced into a throbbing, teeming mass of pop culture, marketing, over-stimulation and over-consumption, Charlotte De Cock—painter, photographer, filmmaker, DJ and event producer—is a breath of fresh air.

Charlotte reminds me of an archaeologist. For starters, she documents a journey, a time and place, in nature. Using multiple media, she maps out a specific terrain, then painstakingly excavates it inch by inch, over years if necessary, obsessing over capturing a fleeting emotion, a spirit, for what it might reveal about our humanity. A second reason is simply that there is a great deal of dust and dirt in her work. Granted, her murals and portraiture are certainly not so dusty, but as a multi-hyphenated talent, one can be allowed some inconsistency.

In the current climate where social media reigns supreme, Charlotte's work raises questions about its place in the larger artistic world. When viewing both her body of work and her social media pages, one cannot help but to see them as commentary on the impact of our video age.



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It is tempting to think of Charlotte as a contemporary shaman, opening a portal to our hazily remembered primal motivations; or to view her work as a testament to art's mystical power pitted against the combined forces of electronic media and mass consumption.

Either way, it is important to retain a sense of critical perspective. After the inevitable PR tour and shout from the proverbial social-media roof top, it is not necessary to exaggerate the value of the work in order to bestow upon it the quality of a miracle. One aspect of De Cock's content exists in particularly telling relation to her style and situation. This can be seen with her more recent visual work, in her self-studies, and also in her music and event producing.

At the 2016 Bombay Beach Biennale, a clandestine renegade art festival located in its namesake, I met Charlotte De Cock. She was making her way across California, documenting her journey through the deserts of the American West for part 2 of her *My California* series, and she just happened to stumble upon our event. I was immediately taken by how eager she was to get involved, and when we met again several months later, and I learned more about her multi-faceted approach to life and art, I was even more impressed that such a young person could be so driven and multi-talented.

Charlotte is a woman who has forged her own path for her whole life. As someone who started expressing herself creatively from as young an age as she can remember, Charlotte is one of those rare humans compelled to create in any possible form available to her. From her initial opulent, yet uninhibited, *Marie Antoinette* series inspired by director Sofia Coppola to her *La Chasse* series of lush landscapes and nostalgic hunting iconography to her *The Thirteen Masters*, which features portraits of Antwerp icons, her scope is both broad and nuanced.

Self-expression is key to Charlotte, who also models for her own portraits, yet she likewise uses her beauty and presence as a form of self-expression in itself. The painting aspect of this can be seen in both her *Self-Portraits* and *Feathers* series, and her physical being is also used through the media of photography and filmmaking, both in short and documentary form.

For her aforementioned *My California* series, which highlights her affinity for American

literary iconoclasts from the Beat generation to the Gonzo journalism movement, she paints images based upon photographs she took during her journey across the American West. Many of those pictures are of off-the-grid people living in desert areas where they are free to live as they so desire. They do not exist within the normal societal structures—and yet Charlotte's work is still a vision of privileged access. She is an outsider whose gift is none other than observation. She observes the desert. She observes her subjects. There is, inevitably, some poignancy about the way her paintings convey a time and a place as a result of her photographic work.

This observational gift and power also shine through in Charlotte's music project: DAOUD. Much like her personal odyssey through the California deserts, DAOUD explores new experiences and places with an air of universal longing. Her music speaks to the awakened generation and enlightens the spirit.

In addition to visual arts and music, Charlotte is an organizer of the Barefoot Festival in Antwerp, which has grown exponentially in the last few years. It is a festival focusing upon music, self-expression and love, and it is a positive gathering of people that uses the event platform as a catalyst for social change. As a fellow artist who creates experiences and communities for a living, it is refreshing and vital to see this environmentally and spiritually conscious approach to the event world in practice.

It is an inspiration to see an artist generating such interesting and high-calibre content across so many forms of media. Hopefully this book showcases at least some of the vast talent of this remarkably fearless, thoughtful, and vibrant artist, whom I know we shall see, hear, and experience a great deal more from in years to come.

Stefan Ashkenazy is owner of the Petit Ermitage Hotel in Hollywood, founder of the Cirque Gitane Member's club, a private community comprised of dreamers from all over the globe who create for a living and who support the creative arts, and is co-founder of the Bombay Beach Biennale.

Thirteen Masters

In her *13 Masters* series, Charlotte painted 13 male artists representing the voice of a generation through arts, music, acting, writing and photography. Several of these artists are internationally successful, but like De Cock choose to stick to their home base of Antwerp.

The original idea was to make a series about the local café-culture threatened with extinction. This international port once was the proud owner of a café on every corner; pub crawling being the local sport for centuries. So, she started with making pictures of her favorite painters in their favorite café, for all of these artists, being good denizens of Antwerp, are fervent barflies. However, soon their personalities overtook the cafés to become purported subjects onto themselves.

It became a fascinating challenge for this young painter to portray these masters of their trade, the creators behind their creations, freed from the demands of their audiences or the claims of their collectors, and to paint them with her sober black-and-white palette. As a result, of course, it gave her career a nice boost.

Not unlike one of her so-called "masters", Fred Bervoets, the focus in her paintings is on herself. Eventually one could perceive these portraits of artists as self-portraits: Charlotte (painted) as Luc Tuymans, as Fred Bervoets, as Koen van den Broek, as Guy Van Bossche. As these are all men, and most of them of a fatherly age, one could consider them also as self-portraits being her father, the father she never really knew, painting herself in the skin of possible, or desirable, father figures; reason, perhaps, why the eyes are never really alive....

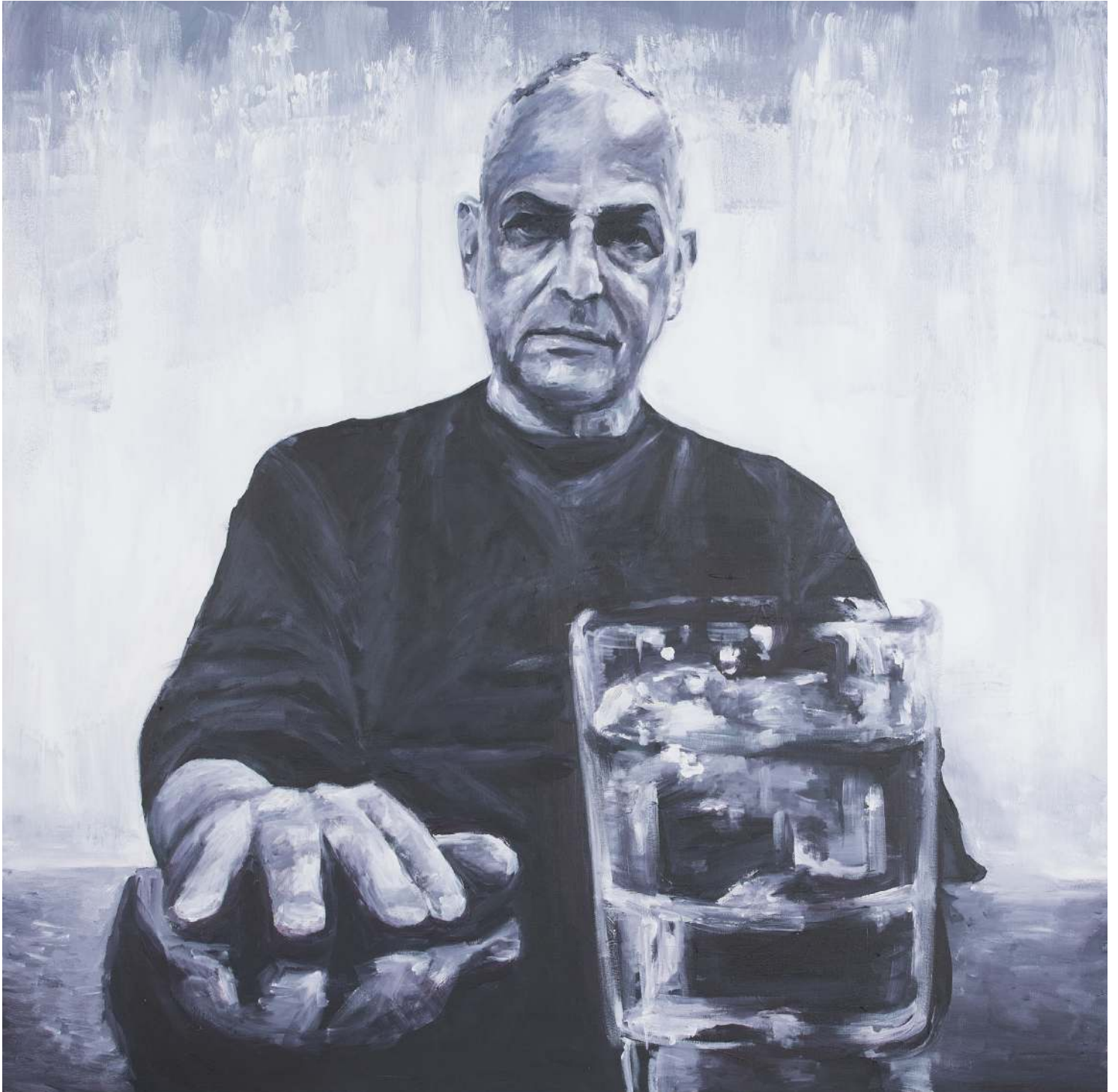
(LÉON LEMAHIEU)

Fred & Damiaan

"Artists aim high. Painter Fred Bervoets and actor Damiaan De Schrijver are critically acclaimed to the moon and back, but actually they're folksy people with both feet on the ground. I wanted to capture them not in their working space, but in their comfort space. Damiaan holding Fred is a sugar-sweet message of true friendship. This visual is what I brought back from a green field to my atelier."



Fred & Damiaan, 13 Masters series, acrylic
on canvas, 200 x 150 cm, 2015



Luc

"Imagine: one of your all-time heroes agrees to have his portrait painted? After the initial personal high, where do I begin? Luc Tuymans is one of the world's most respected painters, renowned from Chicago to Hong Kong, but I decided to meet him in his watering hole—back home in Antwerp. Little humor in his seriousness—yet if you know Luc, you would understand why. Big heart, strong man, no mercy. So grateful."

My California

Paintings pt. 1

In *My California*, De Cock, in order to find new sources of inspiration, traveled through the deserts, on the lookout for members of the Native American Culture, and stumbled upon those representing White American Counterculture instead, ending up in deserted holiday spots, a clandestine military field illegally claimed by guys building their own planes, in little towns made of trash, in scrapheaps turned into art or into a concert hall. Places that certain people would call rat holes, or worse: shitholes.

We're talking about places such as Slab City, near Salvation Mountain, CA, where the residents make a creative re-use of the junk the military hastily dumped in the ground when they left, or Bombay Beach, in the Sonoran Desert, east of Salton Sea, a place destined to become a beach resort for the stars of high society such as Marilyn Monroe, but due to climatological changes became deserted, desolate, with dead fish all over the beach, as we can witness in the video teaser for *Daoud*.

The names alone of these places, or what resounds of them, are sheer poetry. Ballarat, around Panamint Springs, a supply point for miners, once harbored 500 inhabitants, now only one: Rock. This solitary man is the guardian of this little ghost town.

In *El Rodeo* (200x120 cm), we find Rock posing before an old, rusty truck, mountains in the background. Despite the fact that the other paintings in this Californian series are pretty colorful, this one is, once more, mainly executed in whites and grays, perhaps in order to stress the situation: the loneliness of place and man. The truck was Charles Manson's escape-vehicle; the white splotches, the bullet holes...

These old guys are rebels, or rather: renegades. But whilst the official definition of renegade (Webster's) is: traitor, deserter, the etymology of the word indicates something totally different: re-negare: say no, again. Say NO!, again. Don't accept (the rules, the chains, the bullshit). Say "No" to it, over and over again.

De Cock (re)places these outcasts, these marginal peoples in their proper context: people who gave up urban comforts to (re)gain something more valuable: their freedom; which includes the freedom to be free of artificial needs, of all the artificial needs of an artificial world filled with artificial people; a *modus vivendi* she underlines in her notebooks, "...the less you need, the happier you will be, or quoting Bukowski: ... 'The less I needed, the better I felt' and 'adventure begins when comfort has left you.'"

Now, I don't think comfort has really left Charlotte, for as we can see in these pictures, even the sands of the Mesquite dunes, or the hard, cracked, sun-dried soil of the Californian desert receives her elegant naked body as a cashmere covered mattress.

Her trips through the Californian desert, up to Big Sur, where Henry Miller lived, (writer of controversial, forbidden books, being the first writer to contest the American Dream, especially with his "The air-conditioned Nightmare"), were no nightmare at all. But Miller is, or should be, one of her Masters nevertheless. His *Paradise Lost*, the third part of the Big Sur trilogy, would have suited Charlotte, and the old satyr would have welcomed her in his Californian residence with a large, satyr-ical smile...

There is one "selfie" painting of Charlotte giving the finger, a finger to norm and convention, political correctness and common decency, whilst unscrupulously using all the structures and facilities that conventional society has laid out (for her), like the smartphone, with its multifunctional facilities, one on them being making selfies: that is to whom the finger is meant for. This, too, would have pleased the old master.

(LÉON LEMAHIEU)



Regular John, My California series,
acrylic on canvas, 160 x 160 cm, 2016





El Rodeo, My California series,
acrylic on canvas, 200 x 120 cm, 2016

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