

**JOHN
ROBINSON**

**PEOPLE
RUIN
PAIN
TINGS**



CURATED BY HANNA OUAZIZ
GHENT, 14 FEBRUARY - 28 APRIL, 2026

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CURATORIAL STATEMENT

He stands at the centre of a table covered in black cloth. He himself is wrapped in it, trapped within his own staging. Each time he turns, the fabric catches, threatens to pull the table down. The gesture is awkward, almost ridiculous. We laugh, but it's a nervous laugh. John draws cards from the tarot deck, asking each of us to choose three - the past, the present, and the future. He talks constantly, with that unstoppable, corrosive English humour. It seems improvised and absurd, yet every word lands with precision. What he reveals cuts close to the bone: love, betrayal, disillusionment, shame. The audience wavers between amusement and discomfort. He sweats, fumbles, grows messy as cakes and whipped cream are thrown at him. The black cloth becomes stained, the scene descends into chaos. And yet, something invisible holds. A truth rises out of the ridiculous. That moment when art stops being performance and becomes simply human. I felt both laughter and a strange tenderness - the kind that comes from lucid despair. I understood then that for him, painting begins where performance collapses: in the residue, the chaos, the impossibility of being anything else but a painter.

John Robinson is not a painter of faith or beauty. What matters to him is the act of painting itself - an act stripped of morality, belief, or consolation. He has sacrificed everything to it: seduction, logic, sometimes even sanity. For him, painting is not redemption but a vital lie, a necessary deception to stay alive.

His work is irreverent, yet never ironic. It disarms rather than entertains. He turns his own contradictions into method, transforming his weakness into clarity. Everything outside of painting - religion, morals, empathy, fairness - is merely adjunct, that which replaces the thing it references, a ghostly residue orbiting around the real act. He paints from that void, from the place where truth is both impossible and necessary. The artist becomes both illusionist and prophet, a grotesque clown whose stage is his own undoing. Beneath the black cloth, sweating and covered in cream, he reenacts the farce of the world - and from that farce, the painting is born.

In the Hermits series - Courbet, Basquiat, Blake, Smiley - the same figure reappears, now silent, frontal, transformed. These are not homages but incarnations. He paints himself through others, disguises himself to speak. He becomes Courbet the worker, Basquiat the martyr, Blake the mystic, Smiley the fool of modernity. Each portrait is a confession: a self-portrait of the impostor, declaring "I am all those who lie to survive." The tarot becomes painting; the laughter turns to silence; the awkward gesture becomes an icon.

The Hermits form a choir of fractured identities. Their stillness recalls the Flemish altarpiece, but emptied of belief - only fatigue, persistence, endurance. They are saints of an inverted faith, witnesses to an art that promises nothing yet refuses to disappear.

In other cycles - Séance, Tarot, Leviathan, Dürer, The Woman - the same struggle continues. Grotesque and stain, sweat and residue become the substance of painting itself. What drips and collapses on stage becomes, on canvas, a surface of quiet revelation. But that calm is deceptive: each work carries within it the chaos of its own making, the despair of the gesture that preceded it. It is painting of the aftermath - after the laughter, after the shame, after the fall.

The exhibition in Ghent unfolds on this fragile line between laughter and grace. We enter through the performance - the awkward, comical body - and move toward painting, toward silence, toward something resembling the sacred. Everything happens along that edge: neither comic nor tragic, neither believer nor cynic. The beauty of John Robinson lies precisely in that impossibility of choosing between the ridiculous and the divine. His canvases are modern relics, haunted surfaces of endurance and exhaustion. He paints disaster as others paint light. And beneath the black cloth, beneath the laughter, beneath the layers of cream and dust, he goes on, obstinately searching - not for truth, but for the possibility of staying alive.

Hanna Ouaziz - February 2026 - DeNode Foundation



EXHIBITION STRUCTURE

This publication accompanies *People Ruin Paintings*, presented at the DeNode Foundation, Ghent, from 14 February to 28 April 2026. It is conceived as both an archival record and a structural extension of the exhibition: a document that renders legible, for readers who were not present, the exhibition's formal logic and the broader field of John Robinson's practice from which it emerges.

Conceived as a survey of Robinson's work, the exhibition approaches that practice comprehensively rather than through the lens of a single medium. Painting is presented alongside live performance, video documentation, performance architecture, and the ritual and theatrical apparatuses through which actions are staged, mediated, and subsequently translated into images. Tables, drapery, masks, constructed viewing conditions, and other performative supports appear here not as ancillary materials but as constitutive elements of the work itself. What emerges is an account of Robinson's practice as an integrated system in which action, residue, object, and image remain structurally interdependent.





PERFORMANCE — Introduction

The opening sequence was structured across the exhibition's three floors as a tripartite passage through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, drawing on Dante Alighieri's cosmology. Developed in the aftermath of personal bereavements, the actions take as their subject the desire to communicate with the dead, even as they insist on the structural impossibility of such communication. Performed during the vernissage, they do not remain confined to that occasion. Their residues - material, architectural, and procedural - persist throughout the galleries for the duration of the exhibition, so that each work is encountered within a space already conditioned by prior action.





PERFORMANCE I — Ground Floor

HELL (OUIJA STRUCTURE)

A collective alphabet board composed of twenty-six letters and two additional cards - YES and NO - was activated on the ground floor. Participants placed rolled paintings over their heads, converting canvases into provisional masks that at once concealed the face and turned the body into part of the apparatus of address. Questions were directed to unseen presences while Robinson transcribed the resulting letters and responses onto a whiteboard, translating the séance into a public exercise in unstable notation. The work hinged on the tension between earnest invocation and evident failure: language appeared only in fragments, coherence remained perpetually deferred, and the promise of communication was sustained precisely through its breakdown. In this way, the ritual staged not revelation but the persistence of desire in the face of its own impossibility.



PERFORMANCE II — First Floor

PURGATORY (TAROT SESSION)

A long table draped in black cloth became the site of extended tarot sessions. Visitors selected cards corresponding to past, present, and future, which the artist read aloud in public. The format refused privacy: interpretation unfolded in front of the room, with embarrassment and exposure treated as structural materials rather than incidental effects. At the centre of the table, Robinson emerged through an opening in the cloth which also functioned as his robe, so that the performance bound body, costume, and stage into a single continuous surface. This arrangement was crucial to the work's logic. It rendered the artist at once enthroned and trapped, officiant and appendage of the apparatus he had constructed, lending the reading an unstable authority: part oracle, part spectacle, part self-imposed entanglement. Here divination operated not as prediction but as an apparatus for testing authorship and control - who was permitted to speak, who was rendered legible, and how a "reading" redistributed agency between performer and participant.





PERFORMANCE III — Second Floor

HEAVEN (JACUZZI BAPTISM)

On the upper floor, the performance shifted from divination to a deliberately abject bodily rite. The artist was subjected to a sequence of accumulations and degradations - egged, covered in flour, doused in chocolate sauce - so that the body was progressively transformed into a surface of excess, slapstick, and humiliation. The scene moved with a kind of disreputable theatricality, in which camp, farce, and violation became difficult to separate. Robinson then entered the bathtub in a staged act of baptism, only to be struck with inflatable swords and bananas, extending the action's unstable oscillation between mock-ritual and ordeal. Nothing here resolves into purification or transcendence. Instead, the performance drives the body toward exhaustion, leaving behind residue rather than redemption.





PERFORMANCE ^{AND} PAINTINGS

The performances presented during the opening night establish the conditions from which the paintings emerge. They are not events to be remembered but situations that leave traces - material, psychological, and symbolic - which later reappear within the painted image. In John Robinson's practice, performance operates less as a medium than as a method. It establishes situations in which control becomes unstable and meaning remains provisional. Participants, devices, and spatial arrangements generate a temporary structure whose consequences exceed the moment of action.

What matters is not the event itself, but the conditions it produces.

Within these situations, gestures oscillate between ritual and improvisation, sincerity and absurdity. Communication appears fragile, interpretation remains contested, and the role of the spectator is never fully secure. The work unfolds through this tension between exposure and uncertainty.

Painting enters afterwards, not to represent what occurred but to hold its aftereffects.

What emerges is an image shaped by prior events yet resistant to narrative closure - a surface that carries the memory of action while refusing to stabilise its meaning.

In this sense, Robinson's paintings do not resolve performance; they prolong its instability.



PERFORMANCE IV

HEMISPHERE OF THE EARTH

The fourth performance extended the Dantean scheme beyond the opening night. Participants were seated around a table, blindfolded, with drawing materials placed in front of them. Deprived of sight and held inside a dense ambient soundtrack, the group settled into a suspended, trance-like attention, directed only by the artist's voice.

What the participants did not know was that they were not drawing on blank sheets. The supports beneath their hands were Robinson's own works. Every mark, correction and hesitant contour was added to a finished painting, so that the session operated at once as an act of making and an act of damage.

The work thereby performed the exhibition's title rather than illustrating it. Ruin was not staged as an accusation but delegated: the audience was placed in the position the title describes and occupied it without recognising it. Authorship was neither shared nor surrendered but quietly redistributed, and the works left the table carrying the record of hands that could not see what they were doing.



PERFORMANCE V

THE SPHERE OF THE MOON

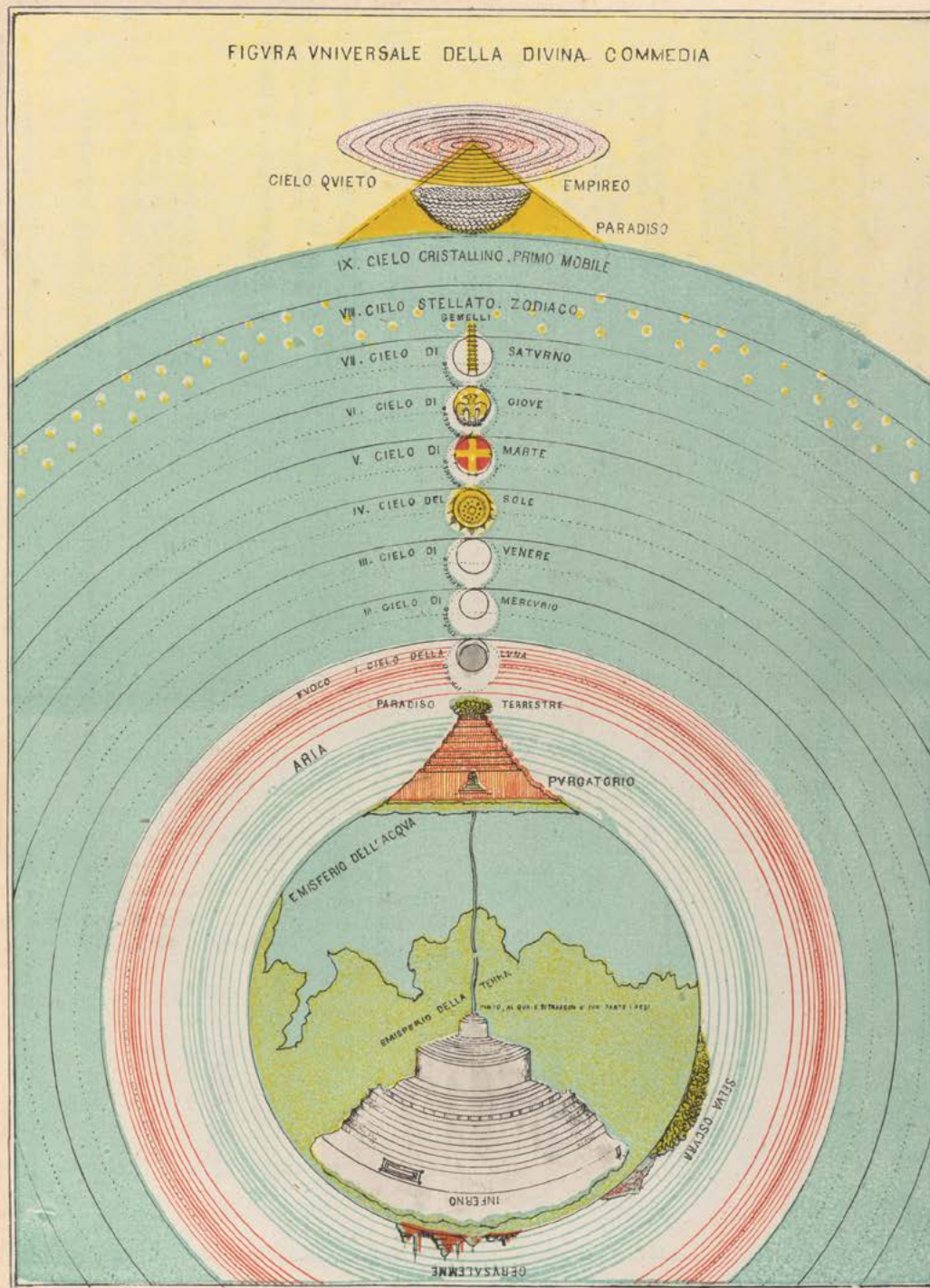
In Dante's cosmology the sphere of the Moon is the first and lowest heaven, reserved for those who proved inconstant in their vows. The fifth performance took place at the close of the public conversation with Professor Freddy Decreus, with the audience still seated among the works.

The black cloth from Purgatory (Tarot Session) had been cut into thirty-one pieces, each matched to the dimensions of a painting in the exhibition. Three men in black Adidas jackets with white stripes moved through the rooms and covered the works one by one. The fabric that had served as table, robe and stage in February returned as shroud.

The paintings remained hidden for the remainder of the exhibition. Visitors arriving in the final days encountered the architecture, the hang and the labels intact, and the images withdrawn. Having passed through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, the sequence closed not in ascent but at the lowest of the heavens — and the exhibition ended by removing the thing it had been assembled to show.

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THE FINTER METHOD

A Brief Instruction for Automatic Writing & Delineation (c. 1912–1920)

I. ASSEMBLY

Let no fewer than three, nor more than seven, gather about a table in a well-lit and calm room. Conversation must cease once the sitting begins. As in certain Masonic observances, composure and mutual trust are essential.

II. THE VEIL

Each participant shall be blindfolded, thereby quieting the dominion of sight. Paper and pencil are placed before each hand.

III. THE PASSIVE STATE

The hand is to be surrendered to motion without conscious design.

Do not strive, nor attempt invention.

Allow line and word to arise unbidden. This condition, termed the passive threshold, is the foundation of the Method.

A Brief Instruction for Automatic Writing & Delineation (c. 1912–1920)

IV. THE MARKINGS

Permit the hand to wander freely. What emerges—script, figure, or sigil—is to be regarded as the expression of the deeper faculties, stirred by collective attention.

V. THE UNVEILING

After a suitable interval, the blindfolds are removed. The works are then compared. Participants may note curious correspondences of form or phrase, as one might study symbolic tracings within a lodge.

VI. ADMONITIONS

Do not break the sitting abruptly, nor indulge in levity or disturbance. Prolonged or excessive practice is discouraged; accounts speak of fatigue, unease, or confusion when moderation is neglected. Maintain clarity, restraint, and regard for one another at all times.

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN JOHN ROBINSON & PROFESSOR FREDDY DECREUS, EXCERPTS

DeNode Foundation
25 April, 2026

During the closing event of People Ruin Paintings, John Robinson and Professor Freddy Decreus engaged in a public conversation around ritual, mythology, painting, performance, death, and the instability of images today.

The exchange moved between art history, spirituality, the politics of the gaze, and the role of painting in a world increasingly governed by systems of control and abstraction.

What follows is an edited selection of fragments from this discussion.

THE GAZE

Freddy Decreus

"All your works have to do with the eyes. We are constantly looking around us — trying to understand what is real, what is dangerous, what can be trusted. Yet we remain blind to so much."

John Robinson

"When I put a mask in front of a face and leave only the eyes visible, identity becomes unstable. Everybody starts looking like everybody else. The face becomes reduced to something almost primitive — like an emoji."

Freddy Decreus

"Eyes are perhaps the most sophisticated survival mechanism we possess. We recognise ourselves in the gaze of others. That is why the eye appears everywhere in your exhibition."

John Robinson

"When we look at a face, we are looking at another person who is also going to die. There is something strangely comforting in that."

"REPRESENTATION IS ALREADY A FORM OF BELIEF. TO MAKE AN IMAGE REQUIRES SOMEONE WILLING TO ACCEPT THAT THIS IS A REPRESENTATION."

Freddy Decreus

RITUALS, SÉANCES, AND THE HERMIT

Freddy Decreus

"We are all longing to see something beyond what is visible. Rituals and séances exist because human beings continue searching for what escapes them."

John Robinson

"I'm attracted to séances because they create a structure where something can happen — psychologically or spiritually. Whether it is 'real' or not almost becomes secondary."

Freddy Decreus

"The figure that returns constantly in your work is the Hermit. Not a heroic figure, not someone fighting the world violently, but someone retreating inward."

John Robinson

"The Hermit has always been more of a feeling than a concept for me. A gesture toward withdrawal, toward beginning again."

PAINTING, FAILURE, AND SURVIVAL

John Robinson

"If a painting cannot survive without explanation, then perhaps I have failed as a painter."

Freddy Decreus

"Making paintings is one of the ways human beings survive. Even if only temporarily."

John Robinson

"Paintings are like lifeboats. Escape pods. Places we enter to survive the world around us."

Freddy Decreus

"We need artists because they allow us to imagine new beginnings."

John Robinson

"People ruin paintings when they reduce them to systems of money and power. What matters is the possibility of still experiencing the world through another mind."



ON THE HERMIT DEEP WITHIN US

Em. Prof. Freddy Decreus

With John Robinson, no new myth emerges in the classical sense of the word. No hero rises to overcome chaos, no divine order is restored, no narrative heals the fractures of time once and for all. What appears instead is something far more fragile: a hesitant re-enchantment of a disenchanted world.

As if myth can no longer exist as a closed and sovereign system, but only as a flickering trace, an echo wandering through a hollow landscape of signs. Within this transitional world, ancient figures return - Death, the Star, the Moon, the Hermit - yet they no longer carry the certainties that once surrounded them.

They emerge as spectral remnants of cultural memory, detached from their original context, drifting through spaces of emptiness and silence.

Their presence does not clarify; it unsettles. The myth is not reconstructed but broken open, stripped of its ideological armour until only a vulnerable core of existential experience remains.

At the centre of this renewed mythological space stands the figure of the Hermit. Not as a wise master who knows the path, but as a liminal being, suspended between disappearance and appearance, between culture and inwardness, between life and death. The Hermit withdraws from the oversaturated world of images and slogans, from the exhausted language of progress and identity. His solitude is not an escape, but a necessary gesture of resistance.

In an age where collective meanings crumble away, retreat becomes a spiritual act: an attempt to listen once more to whatever still breathes beneath the ruins of culture.

And yet a disturbing question continues to echo through Robinson's universe: Is this all we can do?

To become hermits, tragic figures wandering through a world 'Ohne People', stripped of communal certainty and abandoned by the narratives that once sustained us.

Never trust the images of the world, the works seem to whisper, for every image is temporary, every representation already entangled with power.

The stage becomes a field of broken mirrors in which consciousness itself falters, where all of us discover that we “cannot keep our stories straight.” Identity fractures. Continuity dissolves. Human beings lose their grip on the narratives that once organised reality.

In this sense, Robinson’s figures seem caught in a state of existential backtracking. A movement not forward, but inward and backward at once, toward retreat, toward silence, toward the dismantling of certainty.

The Hermit becomes kin to the wandering outcast, the Herzog, the Thug, the displaced soul moving through the ruins of exhausted meaning.

One senses within these works the afterimage of a post-Covid consciousness: a world marked by isolation, interrupted rituals, mourning, and the sudden fragility of all human structures. Death no longer appears as abstract symbolism, but as an intimate and collective wound carried silently beneath the surface of everyday life.

This is why Robinson’s rituals carry within them a strange and trembling tension. They resemble spiritual séances, gestures without fixed belief, movements that are at once empty and charged. And yet, despite everything, they bring people together; a sense of unity hangs in the air, but is it genuine and trustworthy?

As though the performers were slowly peeling away the hollowed symbols of Western culture in order to recover a deeper inner resonance. What matters is not the restoration of a shared truth, but the experience of uncertainty itself, the dwelling within a liminal condition where old certainties die before new forms are born.

At times, Robinson’s work even suggests an iconoclastic impulse: should paintings themselves be ruined because they are only representations of a world we must abandon? Should images collapse so that perception itself may begin again? The destruction of representation here is not merely nihilistic; it becomes preparatory, almost ritualistic, a clearing away of exhausted symbolic systems in order to reopen the possibility of another beginning.

This liminality reaches a particular intensity in Thangka, where a new in-between space comes into being.

A place where the old “Leviathan” dies: the rigid structures of power, identity, and cultural self-evidence.

What remains is not a triumphant rebirth, but an open field of possible transformations. A fragile terrain in which beliefs become fluid once more and the individual must reinvent the self before the immensity of life and death.

Robinson’s new metaphors, the Mosquito, the crumpled heads, function in the same way.

They are not stable symbols within a new mythology of the ego, but symptoms of a world that has lost its fixed meanings. Yet precisely therein lies their power. For by refusing to conceal the void and instead rendering it visible, they open a space of humility. Not a heroic mythology of the self, but a vulnerable existence learning how to dwell within uncertainty.

And thus the Hermit ultimately becomes the central figure of these transitional times. Not because he possesses answers, but because he has the courage

to withdraw into the silence between old and new worlds.

He guards an inner space in which human beings, stripped of their cultural masks, are once again confronted with the elemental questions of mortality, loss, and transformation.

Perhaps this retreat is not the end of the journey after all. Perhaps it marks what the Tarot calls the Zero Position, the Fool, archetype of potential. The figure who stands at the edge of the abyss carrying almost nothing, stripped of certainty, identity, and destination.

Not the triumphant hero of classical myth, but the fragile traveller of a shattered age. The Fool steps forward without guarantees, beginning again precisely because all previous worlds have fallen apart.

In Robinson’s universe, withdrawal is therefore not an ending, but a necessary threshold: a darkened place where meaning and existential orientation may arise in entirely different ways, where, after the collapse of exhausted representations, the soul may once more dare to begin.



BIOGRAPHY

John Robinson (b. 1981, Worcester, UK) studied Fine Art at Falmouth College of Arts, where he was mentored by the painter Robert Lenkiewicz, developing an early engagement with the chromatic potential of grey and an enduring interest in occult literature.

Awarded the Richard Ford Scholarship by the Royal Academy of Arts, Robinson spent a formative summer in residence at the Museo del Prado before remaining in Madrid for a decade, interrupted by an MA at Central Saint Martins, London.

His work is held in collections including the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the Wellcome Collection, the British Council Collection, the Focus-Abengoa Foundation (Seville), and the Coldwell Banker Collection.

Robinson's practice centres on the self-portrait as a problem of disguise, and as a contemporary inflection of lineages associated with Velázquez, Goya, and Rembrandt.

Each painting originates in performances that are not published but translated into oil.

The artist describes the works as

"EQUAL PARTS ART HISTORY,
PART PERFORMANCE,
AND PART HUMILIATION CULTURE."



PEOPLE

ABOUT DENODE FOUNDATION

The DeNode Foundation supports contemporary artistic practices rooted in research, process and transmission. Through exhibitions, research programmes and international collaborations, the foundation accompanies artists whose work engages with materiality, space, the body, narrative and temporality.

The private foundation was established by Paul De Cannière and Mieke Van Loo. Artistic direction lies with Kristof VanderCruyssen, art historian and artist, who safeguards the foundation's course and accompanies the development of exhibitions and residencies. Hanna Ouaziz, curator and cultural strategist, leads the international programmes and editorial projects.



LIST OF WORKS

LARGE SEANCE (BIG SEANCE), 2022

Oil on linen - 250 x 200 cm

SWEDISH WITNESS TO A PERFORMANCE, 2023

Marouflage (oil on paper laid on canvas) - 45 x 41 cm

THUG, 2022

Oil on linen - 200 x 120 cm

WHITE, OR ALL GAKKED UP ON MARCO'S SHIT, 2023

Oil on canvas - 46 x 41 cm

BACKTRACKING, 2022

Oil on linen - 46 x 41 cm

HERZOG, 2021

Oil on linen - 46 x 41 cm

YOU CAN'T KEEP YOUR STORY STRAIGHT, 2021

Oil on linen - 46 x 41 cm

SEPIA FLOWERS

(LARGE ALLOTMENT HEAD CLOSEUP), 2025

Oil on canvas - 150 x 120 cm

I LOVE YOU, DON'T MAKE IT YOUR PROBLEM, 2026

Oil on canvas - 41 x 46 cm

RIMJOB, 2021

Oil on linen - 41 x 46 cm

THE ORIENTEER, 2022

Oil on linen - 196 x 130 cm

THE TRIUMPH OF DEATH (FOR PHIL ROBINSON), 2021

Oil on canvas - 160 x 200 cm

MOSQUITO, 2023

Oil on canvas - 250 x 200 cm

THE STAR, 2023

Marouflage (oil on paper laid on canvas) - 60 x 42 cm

THE MOON, 2023

LARGE SEANCE, 2022

Oil on linen - 250 x 200 cm

CRUMPLED HEADS, 2025

Oil on canvas - 180 x 150 cm

LEXICON SHED, 2024

Oil on canvas - 180 x 150 cm

SEANCE, 2022

Oil on linen - 146 x 114 cm

MODERN HERMIT (MAGRITTE), 2022

Oil on linen - 146 x 114 cm

LEVIATHAN THANGKA, 2021

Oil on linen - 200 x 320 cm

SMALL BEADS HEAD, 2025

Oil on canvas - 50 x 41 cm

SEANCE GROUP, 2023

Marouflage (oil on paper laid on canvas) - 60 x 42 cm

SMALL ALLOTMENT FLOWER HEAD,

CENTRED AND TINTED, 2025

Oil on canvas - 50 x 40 cm

WITH THE BEST WILL IN THE WORLD, 2023

Marouflage (oil on paper laid on canvas) - 60 x 40 cm

TRISTAN AND I SOLD HER, 2023

Marouflage (oil on paper laid on canvas) - 100 x 70 cm

THE QUEEN OF VENICE, 2023

Marouflage (oil on paper laid on canvas) - 100 x 70 cm

SUSANNAH AND THE ELDERS, 2023

Marouflage (oil on paper laid on canvas) - 60 x 40 cm

JENNY, 2023

Marouflage (oil on paper laid on canvas) - 100 x 70 cm

THE JUDGMENT, 2023

Marouflage (oil on paper laid on canvas) - 60 x 42 cm

COURBET (MODERN HERMIT), 2022

Oil on linen - 150 x 120 cm

BASQUIAT (HERMIT), 2022

Oil on linen - 160 x 120 cm

COLOPHON

JOHN ROBINSON PEOPLE RUIN PAINTINGS

14 February - 28 April 2026

Predikherenlei 4, B-9000 Ghent

ARTIST

John Robinson

CURATOR

Hanna Ouaziz, DeNode Foundation

CATALOGUE

Hanna Ouaziz, Kristof Vander Cruyssen, vrijeruimte.be

PHOTOGRAPHY

Jolien Chielens (performances)

Steven Decroos (paintings)



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