



View of "Raoul De Keyser: oeuvre," 2018–19, SMAK, Ghent, Belgium. From left: *Oefeningen met eerste linnen doos* (Exercises with First Linen Box), 1967; *Linnen doos II* (Linen Box II), 1966–67; *Gampelaere-omgeving* (Gampelaere Surroundings), 1967. Photo: Dirk Pauwels.

Raoul de Keyser

STEDELIJK MUSEUM VOOR ACTUELE KUNST (SMAK)

THE PIANIST CRAIG TABORN described how, observing the venerable Art Ensemble of Chicago as a young man, the group's five members would warm up, practice, and start playing backstage before the show, so that "by the time the concert began the music had already been happening . . . they were simply bringing it out with them." Likewise, Raoul De Keyser's art gives the distinct impression of having been carried from somewhere upriver, of having coalesced long before taking form on canvas—and of lingering in the air even after you've stopped looking at it. When De Keyser began to gain a reputation as an artist, following his careers as a sports journalist and civil servant, he started keeping a catalogue of his completed work—opening not with opus one but with number four. The beginning is not really the beginning.



Raoul De Keyser, *Untitled (Suggestion)*, 1995, oil on canvas, 27 1/2 × 19 3/4".

“Raoul De Keyser: oeuvre” was the first retrospective of his work to take place since the artist’s death in 2012, at age eighty-two. The show, curated by Martin Germann and Bernhart Schwenk, surveyed the Belgian painter’s work on a generous scale, with more than one hundred paintings as well as works on paper, displayed mainly in chronological order. The time line was broken at the center for an unusual presentation of primarily smaller paintings from across the artist’s life, a synoptic *mise en abyme*, in a setting designed by the architects Robbrecht and Daem, who often worked with De Keyser on his exhibition spaces. “Oeuvre” included that first-or-fourth painting, which is called *Z.t. (Rand)* (Untitled [Edge]), 1964, and which already seems to contain, in nuce, the entire “abstract realist” aesthetic that De Keyser would stubbornly, and yet with an almost disquieting non-chalance, unfold over the next five decades. The painting’s modest scale—8 1/4 × 12 3/8”—is belied by its forceful presence; the work is not tentative but rather is oblique in a way that suggests an artist quite sure of himself. It seems to be a fragment of something larger, an arbitrary sample, yet one that is replete. Clearly based on a landscape, the image can also be experienced as an abstraction.



Raoul De Keyser, Z.t. (*Rand*), (Untitled [Edge]), 1964, oil on canvas, 8 1/4 × 12 3/8".

Later in the 1960s, De Keyser would temper his paintings' implicit naturalism with a Pop tinge; his handling would become less painterly, his colors a bit brighter and less inflected, with shapes sometimes bordered by a thick black outline. *Gampelaere-omgeving* (Gampelaere Surroundings), 1967, shows the twisted bristle of barbed wire, rendered in white with black outlines, against a green-and-blue background. In these years and throughout the early '70s, De Keyser also made freestanding works, which were painted on both sides as well as on the three visible edges, and paintings that lean against the wall, à la John McCracken's planks. In both bodies of work, De Keyser seems to consider not only Pop but also Minimalism, and both of these in relation to everyday life: The white lines marking three edges of the otherwise green *Zevende linnen doos* (Seventh Linen Box), 1971, are a motif in his work of the time, standing for the white lines marking out a soccer field next to his house in the Belgian town of Deinze—and of course it is probably not irrelevant that he had only just given up his job as a sportswriter.

Both Pop and Minimalism had been useful in helping De Keyser see how to draw real consequences from the most economical means.

In the end, De Keyser never fully committed to Pop art's importation of graphic devices into the realm of painting or to Minimalism's quest for the authority ("undeniable and unavoidable") of what Donald Judd had called the "specific object." By the late '70s, he had returned to a more intuitive painterly aesthetic rendered in oils rather than acrylics, embracing a far more intimate and subjective approach than Pop or Minimalism could allow. And yet both had been useful in helping De Keyser see how to draw real consequences from the most economical means: say, some ruddy smudges across a field of powder blue, seeming and then not quite seeming to conjure the reflections of trees in a rippling surface or to evoke something or someone swimming underwater (*Untitled [Suggestion]*, 1995); or scraps of green—jungle green below the rectangle's midpoint, artichoke above—jutting like angular bits torn from the cream-colored field on which they are scattered (*Retour 2* [Return 2], 1999).

Whatever we glimpse in such paintings remains poignantly elusive. Schwenk, in his catalogue essay, sees in De Keyser's work a "rescinding of the authoritarian gesture of showing." I wouldn't have thought of mere ostension as domineering, but on reflection, Schwenk is on to something: Compared to De Keyser, most other painters seem pompous and heavy-handed in their effort to make us see this or that, while he, with consummate delicacy, merely allows us to notice what we will. The beauty of it is that, once you've embarked on that elusive pleasure of noticing, it never has to stop.

"Raoul De Keyser: oeuvre" travels to the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, April 5–September 8.

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—Barry Schwabsky