

PASSAGES

## RAOUL DE KEYSER



Raoul De Keyser's studio, Deinze, Belgium, 2009. Photo: Christophe Vander Eecken.

**THE CUMULATIVE EFFECT** of experiencing Raoul De Keyser's work twice during the spring of 2001 (at the Renaissance Society, Chicago, and at David Zwirner, New York) struck me deeply. I was incredibly excited by Raoul's paintings but overwhelmed by them too, flooded by an intense longing to be an artist who could make a body of work like his. Here was a career's worth of art at play, a way of composing and building an image that was personal yet also utterly open and generous. It was plainly visible that this was something he had developed for himself, and over time. I wanted that. At seventy, he had the years; at thirty-two, I did not.

I went home to LA and painted a lot. I named one of those pieces *For R.D.K.* It doesn't look like Raoul's painting per se, but it has the spirit and the lean-styled confidence. It's a funny story—three years later, in 2004, I would meet his art dealer, Barbara Weiss, fairly randomly. When I learned she was Raoul's German gallerist, I freaked out. I felt very American in my unbridled enthusiasm, but she seemed charmed, and we connected. Later I began working with Barbara, and she bought *For R.D.K.*; it became a connection between the three of us. This painting was shown in the group exhibition "Ambigu" in St. Gallen, Switzerland, in 2010. Raoul's work was also in the show, and my painting was hung in a room with his, a moment I still savor. At the exhibition, I met his son Piet and grandson Niels; later that summer my now husband, Greg Kozaki, and I made a plan to visit Deinze, Belgium, and meet Raoul.

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The importance of this afternoon for Greg and me is unparalleled and stays with me still: the delicious lunch laid out on a bright blue-and-white-checked tablecloth, the monkey tree framed in a window looking out from the living room, the garden hose outside the house, the door handle that led to the garden path.

Raoul was very kind and showed us his new paintings hanging on the white brick wall of his studio, awaiting an upcoming show in London. During lunch, he kept sneaking off to bring us old catalogues and posters to take home as gifts. His graciousness was touching and inspiring. Frankly, it was all a little crazy for us.

Once again, I was struck by the daily practice and power of painting, its tremendous rewards over time. Seeing the location of Raoul's life, a new level of connection unlocked for me: I saw time itself. The years were here in this house, all around. The house hummed with this energy. I was reminded that you cannot fake the process of your own arrival as an artist. It's not a "look" to achieve in your work, and you cannot will it into being.

I think Raoul knew we had made a long trip to see him. I told him he had a lot of fans—many admirers in the world these days—that he was a "big hero." Piet told us Raoul enjoyed hearing this kind of thing and repeated it to his father a little louder in Dutch: "You are a big hero!" Raoul nodded in double time, acknowledging his delight at having heard it in both languages.

He turned eighty shortly after our visit. I was forty-one. We left Deinze feeling excited and buoyed, so glad for this amazing day and the chance to immerse ourselves in the generosity of Raoul's life and art.

*Rebecca Morris is an artist living in Los Angeles.*