



**MICHA KLEIN:
ARCHITECT OF A VIRTUAL PARADISE ...**

By: Nico Burssens (originally published in Dutch by Snoeks, 2000)

The Dutch artist Micha Klein (1964, Harderwijk) is a happy man. His computer art has become extremely popular with dancing youth in the nineties and his works are gradually trickling in at museums and art collectors. Klein has become, because of his art and his positivism, a recognized pioneer of the new millennium.

When you visit an artist's studio you imagine a penetrating scent of turpentine, as well as dried out brushes, loads of empty paint pots, stained ceilings, walls and floors. And empty bottles of liquor are usually also included. But when entering the white beige workspace of Micha Klein, on the Herengracht in Amsterdam, we are

introduced to a spotless studio in which four monitors are arranged in line behind their keyboards. Furthermore, a tower of video equipment, shuttles, betacam players and recorders, editing tables etcetera is clearly noticeable.

There is no easel with a stretched canvas here, but there is a fortune worth of soft- and hardware. Micha Klein - an athlete with blond styled hair, two earrings in the left ear, purple painted nails, black clothing, black platform shoes and beautiful blue eyes (this athlete never sleeps alone) - sits in a correct orthopedic posture facing the screen and directs the mouse from the Silicon Graphics to the bits and bytes that, in his eyes, deserve coloring. Three people work full time and are fully at the service of this - for many - new art movement. Micha is doing well. The telephone never stops ringing and the electronic mailman is busy. Micha shines. Where does the troubled man in him reside, we wonder?

THE GREATNESS BEHIND KLEIN

"Hi, I'm Micha." Firm handshake. "Fancy a cup of coffee?" We get a delicious foamy espresso. It's a nice place here for sure.. Excited, the conversation starts. "I'm fine, yes ..." No, he wasn't born in a golden cradle. However, the stars stood good. Father was a sculptor, brother Onno attended the academy as well and young Klein was allowed to go his own way. He painted, played guitar in a would-be punk group and kicked - as it was then - against everything and everyone. In 1983 he enrolled as a young boy of 18 at the Amsterdam Rietveld Academy, to study painting. He did not find a lot useful in the way it was taught. The dialogue between master and student only came about later. "I was already an artist when I came to the academy and did not have to become one there. They didn't understand that. I had to redo my first year, I had not assimilated the subject material as it should be. Two teachers who did not let me pass bought some works. Then something dawned on me. "

Worrying and feeling wronged do not belong to Micha's character, nor does painting still lifes and fruit. He painted, photographed and filmed at great speed - mainly figuratively and direct - and was inspired by graffiti. He brought his art away from all conventions and rules. The academy was not an immediate pool of inspiration ... The debate about postmodernist painting and photography was largely ignored by the teachers. Not entirely satisfied with this Micha, never the less, studied, painted, photographed and made music at a rapid pace, until one day he discovered a computer - one of a ancient kind, an Amiga - in the basement of the academy. It is strange that an institution that should be considered creative and innovative was hiding this computer in the basement. (maybe so it wouldn't fall victim to students who would break it with their punk attitude!). After a year of scrolling with the mouse, accompanied by unceasing acid house music, he was satisfied with the images he created. Via via, he came in contact with Ad Degen, director of the Souverein photo

laboratory. This man encouraged Micha and sponsored his high-tech and well-received photo work and video for his final exam exhibition.

MICHA DA VINCI

Computer art was not, and to a certain extent still isn't, regarded as art. The first graphic images were made by scientists and computer technicians. They made the technology possible, but the imagination was still missing. The first pioneers in the field of computer art were dismissed in artistic circles as uninspired and slavish. In the eyes of the critics, computer operations were not art.

Rarely has an innovation in art been so violently tackled and almost slaughtered. Fear for the unknown? A conservative reflex? The harder the criticism, the more Klein got fed up with the traditional art world and its critics. But Micha he couldn't care less and continued to work steadily. In the meantime he worked at the Souverein photo laboratory, where the first graphic paint box in the Netherlands was installed. Micha was the first who could and was allowed to manipulate this 'expensive device' (\$400.000.-). He had already decided that his artistic future lay with the computer. The work at Souverein was an ideal combination for him to learn to master both the visual language of photography and the computer. There wasn't a lot of time to play during working hours. The artist in him slept during the day and without really wanting it, he became the operator who had to complete one assignment after the other. He did everything in advertising that could be done: retouched cars, cigarettes 'reworked' into delicious tobacco sticks, make beer foam and ladies blush ... In all this he was flanked by the wealthy from the advertising world that quickly paid thousands of euros per day for this. All this seemed nice, especially in the beginning, but after the tenth car he kind of seen it. It was good for the 'métier' and he didn't complain. He gradually realized that these ultramodern computers were not used solely for the sake of it of the creative possibilities but especially because of their speed. The speed of processors doubles every eighteen months but the creativity in the advertising world is never doubled in the same time span...

STRONG "DRIVE"

Good operators get to sit a lot. They can spend hours, days and even continue for months in the same seat with all possible assignments. Micha choose consciously to work only part-time in the laboratory. He preferred a little less income to enjoy his artistic freedom in his spare time. At night and on weekends, he was allowed to celebrate his private ideas on the device. The computer art that he then produced was in stark contrast to the glaring publicity results for his clients. They were impressionistic, large dark print collages that originated in experiments from the dark room and consisted of unused and rejected image residue. It is without doubt

commendable that Micha continued to work and is not prey financial temptation. He has been able to see for himself how talented colleagues were absorbed by the industry and their creativity lost. Klein proved to be a smart guy and managed to convince his 'boss' that more time needed to be invested in research. Together with his brother, who had also come to work in the company, he scoured the world looking for newer, better graphic software to get better results from the computer. Everything went well until the Gulf War came to throw a spanner in the works. Clients kept the cut and used commercials were republished after freshening up. This blow came hard. The company closed the department and it seemed that the playing time for Micha had ended. His head was bursting with fresh ideas but he did not have a suitable computer. Together with Daniëlle Kwaaitaal, he purchased himself his own Silicon Graphics in 1993. For this they spent almost 20,000 euros. With the same money you could buy a nice car at the time. It hurt but it was a much-needed investment. Four years later, this computer was only worth one-tenth of its original price ... The new device worked got used a lot and new computer art was quickly displayed. Not a lot of money was made, the exhibitions cost the young artist a handful of money. This made him almost obliged to accept other than creative assignments. He gave lessons and demonstrations at home and abroad. He was never too bad to do a job, which raised enough money to 'keep up' and then create free work for himself. More and more companies like KPN, Mustang, Philips, Marlboro ... came to him. Since then he has an agent for this work.

GIVE LOVE AND BE ABLE TO SELL

Micha Klein remained a 'positivo'. Was nothing sold during an exhibition? No worries, he went furthermore, knew it was good. He has no head that can hang. His state of mind is the perfect reflection of youth culture, which in turn has a strong influence on the content of his computer art. Micha Klein: "The current youth culture is joyful and happy. Young people enjoy themselves with their own music and in their environment. Their feeling is more open than in previous generations. This is also caused through the use of XTC. Cocaine and speed are anti-social drugs, they are ego-stimulating. Only the "I" counts with these users. XTC arouses the opposite feeling, everyone talks to everybody. It clears the barriers and the hesitation. When this drug entered the dance temples, there was talk of the 'second summer of love'. "

Klein is not ready for his drug test. He is neither avoiding it nor dependent on it. His preference goes no doubt to XTC. It has changed the youth culture of the nineties - that of the visitors of the dance temples -, made it more open and tolerant. Klein has also seen the adolescents who almost literally went crazy because they had swallowed five tablets. That is not possible. That has the same effect as a liter of spirit, that will break you. We certainly don't promote the use of alcohol and drugs, but we do understand Micha. The eternal argument that alcohol kills more than XTC. A tablet

XTC, dancing to the (almost) endless repetitive music, and the house atmosphere are a homogeneous whole.

Those who fully enjoy this, behave completely 'cool' and are honest with themselves and others, and do not go down on drugs. They have their pills tested for purity and do not pee in mailboxes, do not demolish cars, houses or people. Micha also has a leading position in this environment. At a time, it did not go well with computer art, he started making short video clips that he showed as a VJ during parties and dance parties. VJ is the abbreviation for video jockey, a colleague of the DJ, disc jockey. Micha had observed that during his student parties videoclips were very much liked. He put together new films himself and together with a few colleagues (Maarten Ploeg, Kaap, vj REL and others) he ensured a rapid distribution of this new animation art form. This was very successful, one applause brought another and so followed Dutch television. Experimental VJing is primarily a Dutch matter. Once shown on television the success followed: you only become famous when you have been on the tube. Being known from TV causes a familiar deja-vu feeling. Klein's art became more desirable because of it. Suddenly people woke up and took notice here and there. One museum had already from the start seen something beautiful was going on: the Groninger Museum. Collectors are now visiting Micha who emphasized with pleasure his computer art wasn't real art at the bourgeois meetings a few years ago.

" It's crazy how the tables turn, isn't it?" a fellow once spoke ... The great thing about the combination of computer art, VJs, and the entire house and acid scene is that it happened spontaneously. Micha Klein's creations stem from his personal observations and reflect his reality. Yet this cheerful art belongs everywhere. For the elderly it is strange to see how the works come into their own in the dance temples, that - even if it is just a little bit – take over the role of a gallery.

Art critics consist largely of ladies and gentlemen of a respectable age. They cannot be expected to become part of the youth culture. They have just not seen what came after postmodernism. Visionary Klein can laugh about it: "Oh, keep the spirit high and the juices flowing. " He is more than right.