

Roland d'Ursel (Brussels, 1926 – Brussels, 2006)

Composition, 1995

Acrylic on canvas, 41.5 x 34 cm

Monogrammed (*RU*) and dated lower right

Composition, 1995

Mixed media on canvas, 42.5 x 32 cm

Monogrammed (*RU*) lower right

Countersigned and dated on the back

Roland d'Ursel was known for his photographic portraits of Belgian and French artists from the mid-20th century. But from 1978 onwards, he abandoned photography for painting, as evidenced by these two works inspired by the avant-garde.

Roland d'Ursel (Brussels, 1926 – Brussels, 2006)



Count Roland Charles Marie Gérard d'Ursel was born in Brussels in 1926. He was the son of Antoinette de La Trémoille (1904-1996) and Duke Henri d'Ursel (1900-1974). The latter frequented the surrealists and avant-garde filmmakers in Paris in the 1920s. He even had a role as an extra in a Man Ray film¹ and participated in the founding of the cinemathèque. He himself would be the author in 1929 of a dreamlike film, *La Perle* (The Pearl). Undoubtedly inspired by his father's example, Roland d'Ursel was also interested in the image. He began as an employee at Gevaert, a producer of photographic materials, in Antwerp, before becoming a professional photographer in 1947. He then admired the work of British photographers Cecil Beaton (1904 - 1980) and John Vinckers (dead in 1976)², with whom he worked as an intern in London in 1948.

From 1948 to 1952, Roland d'Ursel produced his masterpiece, a series of black and white photographic portraits of Belgian and French artists in their homes or studios. He came into contact with many of them through Belgian abstract sculptor Nadine Effront (1901 - 1974)³, a friend of his father. He produced portraits of men of letters like Boris Vian or photographers like Robert Doisneau, but especially portraits of painters and sculptors (fig.1). We find the patriarch James Ensor, the expressionist Constant Permeke, the surrealists René Magritte and Paul Delvaux, but also younger artists like the members of the *Jeune peinture belge* (Young Belgian painting) movement that he frequented at the time and with whom he exchanged his

¹ *Les Mystères du château de Dé*.

² John Vickers began his career working as an assistant to photographer Angus McBean in the 1930s. From 1939 until his death, he ran his own studio. After the war, he became known as a theater photographer. After: National Portrait Gallery, London, online catalog (npg.org.uk).

³ She had a relationship with architect Claude Laurens, the son of sculptor Henri Laurens. She was photographed around 1958 by Man Ray (print at the MNAM Centre Georges Pompidou).

photographs for works. Also worth mentioning are Pierre Alechinsky, with whom he collaborated⁴, Marc Mendelson, Jan Cox, Louis Van Lint or Anne Bonnet. These portraits now belong to the Museum of Photography in Charleroi, which exhibited them, along with a catalogue, in 1990 (fig.2).

In 1959, Roland d'Ursel opened his own photography studio on the Avenue Louise in Brussels. He then specialized in fashion and advertising, working for *Femmes d'Aujourd'hui* and *Vogue*, among others. He also produced still lifes and female nudes (fig. 3). In 1977, he closed his studio and, from the following year on, he lost interest in photography to turn to painting⁵. Initially, he created lacquer tables and screens decorated with various motifs. In 1981, he painted surrealist-inspired architectural motifs in grisaille and from the following year on, he began to exhibit his paintings in various Brussels galleries, including *Chapitre XII*. At the same time, he settled in Provence for a few years, where his painting became more colorful. Initially marked by the surrealist spirit, his painting would tend more and more towards abstraction (fig.4). This taste for abstraction also appeared in some of his photographs, such as when he photographed two eggs against a neutral background in contrasting lighting in 1970 (fig.5).

The two paintings presented here date from 1995. These two abstract works combine different color planes in a cold range for one and a warm range for the other. It is possible that this abstraction results from a simplification of reality. Indeed, in the blue work, the association of the different elements could result from the simplification of a portrait, while in the work with warm colors, the succession of three lines and the circular arc seem to have the value of a sign. The painters of the *Jeune peinture belge* movement that Roland d'Ursel frequented in his youth also practiced referential abstraction. Moreover, we find in Roland d'Ursel's work paintings where the subject can still be clearly distinguished (fig.6). The association of color schemes also clearly evokes the avant-gardes, one thinks of synthetic cubism, and more particularly the work of Belgian painters such as Victor Servranckx (1897 - 1965), Marthe Donas (1885 - 1967) or Pierre Louis Flouquet (1900 - 1967) (fig.7). Roland d'Ursel also worked for a time for a magazine directed by Flouquet.

⁴ Roland d'Ursel illustrated "*Les Poupées de Dixmude*" by Pierre Alechinsky (1950).

⁵ Information on the evolution of his painting comes from: *In Memoriam : Roland*.

Roland d'Ursel, described by his relatives as discreet, humble, reserved even, died in Brussels in 2006⁶.

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Illustrations

In the text : Roland d'Ursel, *Selfportrait*, 1958 (detail).

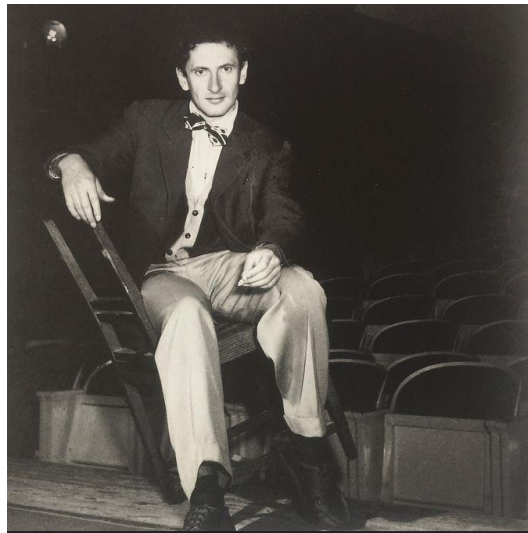


Fig.1 : Roland D'Ursel, Portraits of Boris Vian, Marcel Marceau, Robert Doisneau.

⁶ He is buried in Bornem, the commune of the family castle of Hingene. He married Marie-Rose de Meeûs d'Argenteuil (1926 - 1975) in 1947, from whom he divorced in 1974.

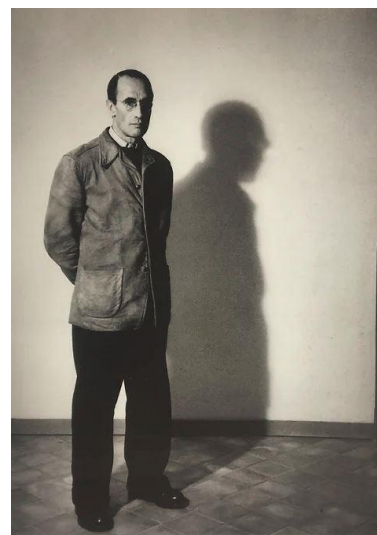
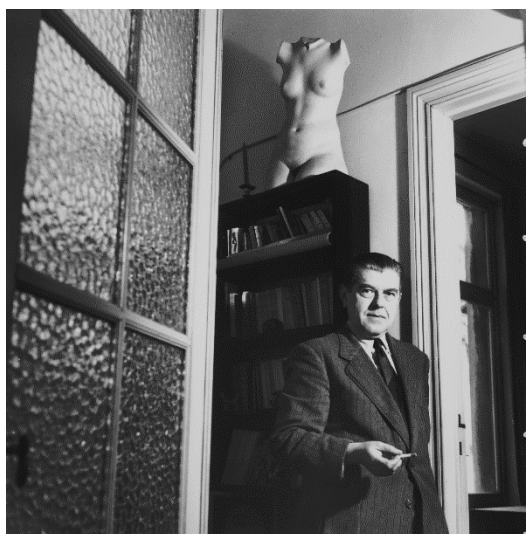
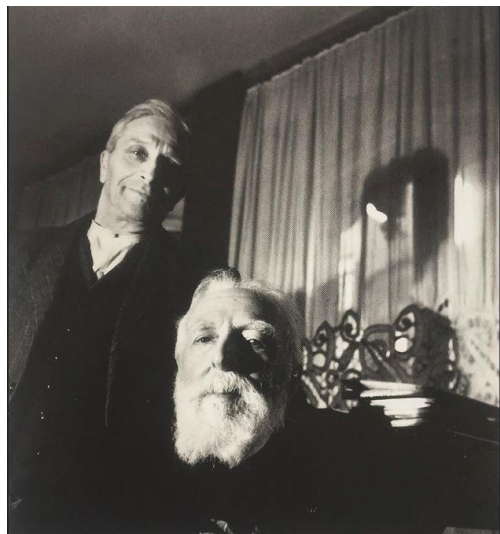


Fig.1b : Roland D'Ursel, Portraits of James Ensor, René Magritte, Paul Delvaux, Constant Permeke, Pierre Alechinsky, Anne Bonnet, René Guette.

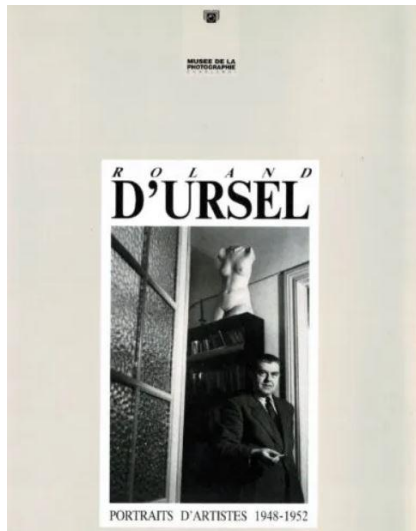


Fig.2 : catalog of the Roland d'Ursel exhibition : *Portraits d'artistes 1948 - 1952*, Charleroi, Musée de la photographie, 1990.



Fig.3 : Roland d'Ursel, 1969.



Fig.4 : Roland d'Ursel, paintings from the 1980s.



Fig.5 : Roland d'Ursel, Eggs, 1970.



Fig.6 : Roland d'Ursel.



Marthe Donas, Ittre, Musée Marthe Donas.

Resources used

We thank Yannick d'Ursel, the artist's son, for his help in writing this study.

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