

Herr Seele & Kamagurka

Cowboy Henk

March 8th – April 26th, 2025
17 rue Martel | 75010 Paris

opening reception with the artists
on Saturday, March 8th starting at 6pm

book signing session
on Saturday, March 8th starting at 3pm



From a discussion in Ostend in 2016:

"The future belongs to total absurdism. Satire no longer works today, you know, everything moves too fast, politics moves too fast. Pure, more abstract absurdism—like Ionesco, Buñuel, Beckett—that's what people are hungry for... and simply for laughter, too. Laughing at nothing. And real laughter means laughing like a madman at nothing. So absurdism is part of real laughter as well. If you need something to laugh at, it's already not real laughter anymore. Everyone laughs, right? Even animals, I believe. Everything that lives laughs. At least, I think so... I'm not sure about plankton. (Laughs)."

What we do know about plankton is that it is incapable of moving against the current—unlike Herr Seele, who does nothing else. His books and exhibitions are events; he is the last heir to a Belgian school of painting that dates back to the Flemish Primitives.

Born in 1959 in Torhout (West Flanders) under the name Peter van Heirseele, he is separated by 570 years from Jan van Eyck, slightly less from Rogier van der Weyden, 434 from Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 382 from Rubens (his favorite for skin tones), 99 from James Ensor (his fellow townsman), 61 from René Magritte (his hero of peinture vache, exhibited in 1948 just 2,500 meters from the future Galerie Martel in Paris), and 52 from Georges Remi, aka "Herr G," with whom he not only shares the first letters of his pseudonym but also the creation of an iconic blond quiff.

And extremes meet. According to well-founded theories, it is Herr Seele himself who posed for the famous full-length double portrait *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) by Jan van Eyck, housed at the National Gallery in London.

He lends it his aristocratic grace, his ham-like complexion, his baldness, his dandyism, and his Doc Martens-stamped babouches. Since Ostend is only twenty kilometers from Bruges, he visits his elder regularly to endlessly probe the secrets of his pictorial technique. For Herr Seele is in constant dialogue with the masters of the past, but also with Belgian surrealism, Dada, Golden Age comics, and the American underground.

Moving away from easel painting, he is internationally renowned for the cult comic Cowboy Henk, which he created in 1981 with the brilliant Kamagurka (the pseudonym of Luc Zeebroek, born in 1956 in Nieuwpoort, West Flanders), his lifelong accomplice—they met at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent. Very quickly, Cowboy Henk embarked on an extraordinary publishing adventure, appearing in *Raw* (the legendary magazine by Art Spiegelman), *Hara-Kiri*, *Psikopat*, and *L'Écho des savanes*. The character, a massive blond cowboy with a square jaw and an abyssal vacuity, follows his own deranged and unhinged logic, making anything possible. One day, he forgets his arm at a restaurant but only notices the loss of the phone that was at the end of it; the next day, he eats an ice cream, fuses with it, and shares its fate; elsewhere, cowboy and horse swap their living conditions.

Just as "Kamagurka," his writer's pseudonym, seems to evoke the 64 sexual positions of the cucumber, so too does "Herr Seele" (literally: "Mister Soul") suggest asceticism—an existence freed from the body and its earthly appetites. Kamagurka and Herr Seele are indeed as complementary as body and mind, the Auguste and the white clown. By striking a delicate balance between the rational and the instinctive, their absurd and scathing humor poses a serious threat to well-structured minds. As true duettists, they not only share *Cowboy Henk* (both in comics and paintings) but also cabaret performances (the latest, *Return of the Comeback*, is still touring), cinema, and radio.

Beyond his work as a visual artist (mostly co-created with his partner, but sometimes solo), Herr Seele has a passion for antique pianos, working as a piano tuner while amassing a museum-worthy collection of about 300 instruments. It just goes to show that, when poorly accompanied, a piano tuner can quickly turn into a mind un-tuner. And he certainly has the tools for that...

Dominique Radrizzani

Art historian

By Herr Seele and Kamagurka, available in French (selection)

- *Cowboy Henk : l'humour vache*, Frémok, Cowboy Henk collection, 2013 (2014 Heritage Award at the Angoulême International Comics Festival)
- *Histoire de la Belgique (pour tous), racontée par Cowboy Henk*, Frémok, Amphigouri collection, 2014
- *Cowboy Henk : l'art actuel*, Frémok, Cowboy Henk collection, 2015
- *Cowboy Henk et le gang des offreurs de chevaux*, Frémok, Cowboy Henk collection, 2017
- *Cowboy Henk : la nouvelle blague*, Frémok, Amphigouri collection, 2024

By Kamagurka alone, available in French

- *Bert et Bobbie*, Les Cahiers dessinés, 2013