

# Comic book artist Serge Baeken and his rock 'n roll comics “Evoking nadirs is right up my alley.”

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Serge Baeken (42) is an all-round graphic designer hailing from Antwerp, Belgium. He crashed the Belgian comic scene in a big way in 2005, with his debut “The No Stories”. His latest piece of work, “The Grief of Turnhout” (Het verdriet van Turnhout), has just been released. Hence a conversation between auteur and amateur, plus a motivation and ambition inquiry.

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BY JULIAN DE BACKER

**ANTWERP - A frisky cat parades through the living room, while his master offers a drink: “Coffee? *Combu*cha ice tea?” Serge Baeken welcomes us into his home filled to the brim with wonderful sketches and drawings.**

*You’ve got a few so-called “patrons”, i.e. clients that depend on your work on a weekly or monthly basis, like the Belgian weekly “Knack” or the newspaper “De Tijd”. What’s the difference between working on your own and working for a patron?*

“There’s a lot more pressure, because you’re dealing with a deadline. Panic overwhelms me after a phone call. But with panic comes a feeling of complete engagement. The combination of enthusiasm and panic makes for a very creative mood.”

*And the artistic satisfaction?*

“Just as big! I used to be more concerned about content, nowadays form is my main focus. Composition, clarity, colours are the key ingredients.”

*“The No Stories” is no ordinary comic: it’s a graphic novel. Was it always conceived as a graphic novel?*

“Yes, I always make graphic novels. Even my very first comics were poetic and literary. “The No Stories” is the first story I reckoned “good enough” to be published. I was 35 at the time, but even then, it took me a year of fears and doubts. Independent publisher *Bries* immediately liked it, but I didn’t want to rush it. I did change a lot in post production: frames, thought bubbles etcetera.”

*Certain “The No Stories” scenes are incredibly detailed, others are very rough. A conscious choice?*

“The story starts out with a lot of attention to detail, but things get more and more rough. I started using different drawing materials halfway through production. A pencil, a brush, a sharpie. That evolution improves the story: the initial attention to detail lures the reader into the story, but after a while he tends to regard it as ballast or dead weight.”

*You are a David Bowie fan, an artist who reinvents himself every decade. Do you notice his influence in your own creations?*

“He’s on 24/7 during inking. There’s an analogy between the way guitar players use their instruments and the way a brush reacts to paper. But apart from that, I love to make infantile, stupid drawings and I don’t think Bowie ever relegated to that. Truth to be told, he made some stinkers in the 80’s, but those are in my playlist as well. I plan to adapt Bowie’s entire oeuvre into a comic called “Tin Machine”. The bad songs have to make an appearance. Evoking nadirs is right up my alley.”

*You’re a mentor to a few apprentices. Do you recognize some of the ideals they have?*

“It strikes me that they don’t have a single clue on how the professional reality works. Belgium is a horrible country for artists: very few people buy art, there are no Maecenas or backers and only a handful of art directors scouting for talent. Belgians don’t read or buy that many comics. I shared the same idealism when I was younger.”

*You too hoped to conquer the world?*

“Yes, but I haven’t given up on that. I just need more time (chuckle).”

*You’ve done the layout for “The Years of the Elephant”, Willy Linthout’s groundbreaking masterpiece. What does “layout for a comic” mean, if you were to explain it to us laymen?*

“Layout differs from comic to comic. For “The Years of the Elephant”, I scanned all the pages and looked out after the greyscale. The cover is a major factor (colours, font etcetera), as well as the publisher’s imprint.”

*Jan Bosschaert wants to make a full-length comic with just sketches, when time and money permit. What’s Serge Baeken’s dream?*

“I always pretend I have *carte blanche* and I’m never worried about financial problems. I can get by with very little: I’ve got one pair of jeans, a few pairs of shoes and five identical shirts. My work has always been my priority.”

*Do you sell your original drawings?*

“Hmm, I’m not very fond of that. It happens occasionally, when I know the work will be in good hands. I still have most of my original drawings and they are not insured. When my house burns to the ground, I’m broke.”

*Bill Watterson, the author of “Calvin & Hobbes”, flatly refused merchandising. What’s your stance on that?*

“I’m a big supporter of merchandising. I’d love to see action figures, t-shirts, hats and more of my new series *Inki, Pinki & Stinki*. One should not lose his or her sleep over artistic integrity. Merchandising is for the masses and they may not even read comics. The critics, the people that do read, don’t care about a t-shirt.”

*You entered the Focus Knack Stripstrijd (a local competition, ed.) with your creation Phil Frontal. Do you hype your entry?*

“We set up a *Facebook* Group to vote *against* Phil Frontal. I loved that idea (chuckle). I don’t care about the possible award, but I like the opportunity to publish in *Focus Knack*. A weekly episode fuels my creativity. Comics are and will always be a very strong medium with few boundaries. I never say never!”

**“Het verdriet van Turnhout” has been published by Xtra and is on sale since 1 June 2010. Get yours today.**

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