

TWO BY DESIGN

The Dress in His Painting? She Designed It

In Antwerp, the fashion designer Charlotte De Geyter and painter Ben Sledsens have created a fantastical world of their own.



Ben Sledsens and Charlotte De Geyter in their Antwerp apartment, where she has set up her office space. *Eva Donckers*

By Amy Verner

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The artist [Ben Sledsens](#) and the fashion designer [Charlotte De Geyter](#) met three years ago, while both were students at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp. In the time since, the couple has become virtually inseparable — and their work, which shares points of inspiration and a bright sensibility, has become increasingly intertwined. De Geyter has carved out a small atelier in their airy shared apartment in Antwerp's Harmonie neighborhood. Just a few buildings down is the studio where Sledsens paints.

Arriving at his workspace means navigating an outdoor passage cramped with building materials and climbing an uneven flight of stairs that leads to a light-filled space brimming with artist-studio hallmarks — shelves stacked with monographs, a floor speckled with color drips à la Jackson Pollock and a table so caked with paint that it could be its own assemblage. The scene stealer, though, is a portrait of a young blond woman seated in front of a window at nightfall. A still-life arrangement occupies the foreground, but the picture's focus is unmistakably the blonde, whose serene stare and relaxed hand placement are electrified by a neon green dress. The painting depicts the very same woman who is seated a few feet away, on the sofa across the room. The resemblance is uncanny, right down to the dress, which De Geyter designed and is wearing on this gray Saturday afternoon.



Hanging in Sledsens's studio is an uncanny depiction of De Geyter wearing an electric green dress of her own design. [Eva Donckers](#)



Sledsens often paints in a jumpsuit once worn by his grandfather. Eva Donckers



De Geyter has been readying her fashion label, Bernadette, for its debut on Net-a-Porter in November. Eva Donckers

Neither De Geyter, 26, nor Sledsens, 27, seems distracted by the doppelgänger hovering on the wall. “It’s super cool, actually,” De Geyter says. “I like the way Ben sees things — and also his colors.” She also enjoys being able to decode some of the messages in the paintings. “There are these little details that I can recognize from our life,” she explains. Scattered throughout the room are several of Sledsens’s canvases ready to be hung for his solo show at Tim Van Laere Gallery. They contain references to the couple’s inside jokes and imagine their fantastical transformations into animals or fairy-tale figures. In one, De Geyter appears as the fish to Sledsens’s bird, a nod to “How to Catch a Fish,” the title of her final school collection from 2016. Her pieces’ ample shapes and tactile botanical motifs earned her the MoMu Award, the prize from Antwerp’s fashion museum. She was also offered a six-month internship in London by the fashion designer Simone Rocha, who was a guest judge.

De Geyter’s wonder-filled, sensitive vision now informs her clothing label, [Bernadette](#), which she named after her mother. Starting in November, the line will be available on Net-a-Porter — its first major retailer. Her mother already has a label, Made by Bernadette, consisting of handmade poufy mohair knits that can be found at the local boutique [Graanmarkt 13](#). The younger De Geyter has opted to focus on body-grazing, boudoir-inspired dresses made of Italian silk printed with hand-drawn floral motifs. She wears her own designs with hulking Fila sneakers as well as ladylike mules. “I like making life simple — and that’s what I like in garments as well,” she says. “Women used to wear such beautiful dresses to go to sleep. I want to bring those back for day.”



Girls with rounded faces and apathetic features are a trademark of De Geyter's sketches.
Eva Donckers

Despite the difference in their chosen fields, Sledsens and De Geyter seem to tune into the same aesthetic wavelength. Sledsens recalls discovering this shared reality when he first met De Geyter. “I saw in what she was making a lot of flowers and animals — all the things I like — and the colors she uses,” he says of their art school days. “I could recognize myself so much.”

Together, their affection is palpable, infused with admiration. They note their mutual understanding of each others’ work habits — and they derive motivation from each others’ rhythms. “She’s working all the time, and it’s hard for people to understand that I like to work so much,” Sledsens says. But when asked whether they would consider creating as team, they brush the suggestion aside. For now, they’re sticking to mutual inspiration over official collaboration. “Every painting is a memory of a specific time,” De Geyter says, now standing directly in front of the green dress portrait. “So maybe when I’m 80 and I see this again, it will be very special.”

Ben Sledsens’s exhibition “Two Trees” is on view at Tim Van Laere Gallery in Antwerp through October 20, timvanlaeregallery.com.