

Interview

The spirit of Magritte

Why did you decide to move to Belgium? How did you prepare?

Two years ago I found out about an art school (Sint-Lukas) in Brussels that offers masters programmes in English. Within days I was scheming for a way to attend. The admission process and timing is quite different than in the US, so I had just three months to get the necessary paperwork in order. I was somewhat prepared for this situation, though, as I also studied in Leuven seven years ago. Other than the paper trail you're forced to follow to come here as a US citizen, I didn't prepare much. I should have done more. It took nearly two months to find a place to live once I arrived. It all worked out, however; now I have a great apartment in Saint-Gilles.

So you used to live in Belgium and now you're back. Why Brussels?

I hear that question a lot. It's a difficult thing to explain to folks who've not lived here before. I adore the diversity, pragmatism and quality of life. It's not a city for everyone, but there are all kinds of people here. On top of that, it's quite affordable, especially for a European capital. The food, culture and social life are all rich. Plus, you can be in London, Paris or Amsterdam in a matter of hours.

How does your life differ in Brussels compared to the States?

I find life in Brussels much less predictable. Not knowing all of the cultural nuances, holidays and customs means unexpected events happen quite frequently. Being able to rely on the ample public transport and walkability of the city are also big changes. The food here is significantly better, too, as is of course the beer.

You're in school but you're also working part-time in Brussels. What's that like?

Busy. Balancing grad school and work is a challenge wherever you are, but adding the

language barriers and differing systems of education and work make it more complex yet. I hadn't expected to find work right away, but I landed a job with an NGO and the experience has been eye-opening. There's none of the hierarchy I've experienced working in the US, and I've been able to offer my insights outside of a confined set of tasks. The Belgian education system is quite different too. The goal seems to be for students to find their own way and as long as the goals are met, they will succeed. It's a very hands-off approach, but then that seems to be part of the culture as a whole.

As an artist, how has Brussels influenced you visually?

The structure of the city is wonderfully mismatched and surprising. I heard somewhere that no two façades in Brussels are allowed to be the same, and I can see evidence of this. I especially enjoy Brussels at night. There are far fewer people around, and the streets are lit with a subtle, soft glow. This is a quality I'm always drawn to in a city, and Brussels has its own unique light. The surrealism underlying this city is another thing you see everywhere if you tune in. Magritte's legacy is still alive here, and it gives you plenty of things to be both amused and perplexed by. Brussels isn't an open-air museum like Florence or Vienna; it's more like living in an avant-garde art piece. I love it; it's a constant source of inspiration.

Bio

John Ryan Brubaker is an American-born photographer who recently moved to Brussels. He currently follows the Master in Fine Arts programme at Sint-Lukas College of Art, works for a 100-year-old Belgian NGO and spends most of his free time exploring the city on foot. You can find his photography at www.jrbrubaker.com & www.brubakerportraiture.com

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Interview by Kimberly Trathen

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