



INTERVIEW

# Visiting Velen: The Art of Chris Berens

Introducing Chris Berens' spectacular The Witcher art piece No Gods nor Masters.

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*We visited Dutch artist [Chris Berens](#) in his Amsterdam studio, to talk about his The Witcher painting No Gods nor Masters. A laborious work full of fantastic forest creatures in a clearing in the Velen forest; creatures that feel ethereal and grounded at the same time.*

It is a dry, hot summer day when I lock my bike in the high grass next to [Chris Berens](#)' studio. Situated at the outskirts of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, I find myself caught in a twilight zone between the bustling city life of the Dutch capital and the tranquility of nature, illustrated by bees zooming about and a butterfly landing on my bike bell.

It's this in-between world where the Dutch artist is at home, he says, after we choose the coolness of his studio over a sun-drenched outdoor bench for our interview. A studio based in a wooden "tiny house" that's crammed with the materials used for his craft, but could also double as a thrift store or some kind of museum: art books pile up high, and there's a phonograph with a large silver horn in one corner. A classic pendulum clock keeps track of the time for us, piercing this tranquil world with its soft bronze chimes.



Inside Chris Berens' studio, Amsterdam.

## **No man's land**

We sit down in this fabulous place to talk about Berens' new, The Witcher-inspired work, called No Gods nor Masters, a spectacular piece showing Geralt of Rivia in a forest clearing, surrounded by a large host of creatures. "I chose that title because of a line from the Witcher 3: Wild Hunt game," Berens says. He quotes, "'No gods nor masters watch over Velen. The land is no man's. He who wants to survive must seek his own protectors.' To me, this is The Witcher in a nutshell, as it introduces Velen as a place that commands respect from man, due to the mystic properties of this forest place."



Chris Berens. No Gods nor Masters (2021).

These properties really shine in Berens work. The forest clearing he painted holds dozens of characters that are only partly of this world: translucent gnomes that are half rock, a squad of floating swordsmen, or tall demons sporting antlers. Each character has a lightness to it, sometimes emanating light from within, and yet they are grounded too, visually connected to the dark trees, moss and rocks that surround them.

### **Germanic lore**

"To me, the Witcher is very much about the connection we have to nature and the respect nature commands," Berens says. "Whenever a village is plagued by an otherworldly creature, they count on a witcher to solve their problem for a few coins. Importantly, they fear him and respect him for this, in equal parts, for his ability to cross into this other realm is something well out of their reach."



Chris Berens. Photo Bénédicte Latipau.

This is very much in line with ancient Germanic lore that deals with hunter rites, which informs so much of the Wild Hunt narrative in the game, and of course in Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Witcher* books, Berens adds. "Lore that to our modern ears often seems brutal, but that always strikes a balance between violence and a deep respect for the forces of nature. A force you'd better accept, you know, or you will be shown your place in the world."

### Layered approach

It's precisely this deeper layer of meaning that pulled [Chris Berens](#) (Netherlands, 1976) to *The Witcher*. The artist is known for work that is luminous and ethereal--in most of his paintings, his characters float more than they stand, and are strangely transparent. This is largely due to his way of painting, that involves a layered approach in the literal sense: after deciding on a basic composition, he tacks smaller paintings onto the larger design, cuts out what he doesn't like, and piles on varnish and paint until he gets the desired result. It's a time-consuming method, but the results are striking, making Berens an acclaimed artist with solo exhibitions around the world.



Part of Berens' work method is painting characters on small sheets of paper, and pasting them onto the larger canvas later.

"I don't know how to work any other way," Berens claims. "When I work, I just keep going back and forth, hovering over a picture, listening to what it tries to tell me. The first idea I had for the Witcher painting was: a clearing in the forest, full of creatures. The end result of course is exactly that, but I first needed to figure out what story I was telling. What are these creatures doing? Where did they come from, where do they go? Like every good story, a painting needs a progression, a start, finish and ending, albeit a progression suggested in one, fixed image, and that takes time."

## Dutch Masters

Berens' background helped a lot to reach that image. An avid student of both the Dutch Masters (he used to school himself by painting over photos of paintings by the likes of Rembrandt, Jheronimus Bosch or Vermeer) and of Germanic lore, he was able to connect to the Witcher story in profound ways.





Oak forest. Barend Cornelis Koekkoek (1803-1862), 1856. Museum Boymans van Beuningen, Rotterdam.



Time-lapse video of Chris Berens' the Witcher painting, No Gods Nor Masters. Note the search for the right lighting of the forest clearing and the placement of characters.