

## L'imagination à rebours

### An interview with Jacqueline de Jong

By Margriet Schavemaker

Jacqueline de Jong's work forms a highly hybrid oeuvre, ranging from the abstract, *art brut*-like works of the 1960s to the cinematographic paintings of the 80s, to her recent series, *Pommes de Jong*, inspired by the sprouting potatoes of her country estate in France. And then there is the ominous *The Situationist Times*, the journal that De Jong published in the period 1963-1967 containing catchy collections of images (from labyrinths to buttons and spirals), followed by her politically engaged posters as part of the Parisian student protests of 1968.

With a selection of five series of works, the exhibition *L'imagination à Rebours* offers a mini-retrospective of De Jong's development from the 1960s to today. Visiting her at home in the centre of Amsterdam, we discussed the various series in terms of their style and content and origin, with De Jong's life in Paris and Amsterdam as the constant backdrop.

Before the interview gets underway, we briefly discuss the title of the exhibition. De Jong asks whether I like it. And I do, since much of the work exudes a certain defiance. It is critical (consider the radical Situationist philosophy and its disdain for western capitalist society), and the many styles that De Jong employed are indefinable and out of step with the time in which they were developed. So definitely 'à rebours' – against the grain.

De Jong is also satisfied, and with her remarkably deep voice affirms: 'I do revolt against the mainstream with my work. But it's not entirely out of step with the time in which it was made. I do absorb things from the contemporary world, through the computer, television, by looking out the window, by walking the city streets. And then I let my imagination run free, and it can head in all sorts of directions. I'm always open to returning to styles from the past, too.'

#### *How did that work with the series Accidental Paintings & Suicidal Paintings from the 1960s?*

I created them in Paris, where I lived from 1961-1971. That's when the *nouvelle figuration* movement started, and I was surrounded by the work of other artists. In the Netherlands I was only familiar with the older painters but after moving to Paris I met lots of artists of my generation. Remember that, as a self-taught artist, I never really had formal instruction. I worked at the Stedelijk Museum for three years and studied art history at the same time. The only real art education I received was in Stanley William Hayter's graphic studio in Paris. I had already learned a lot about colour through Asger Jorn and Theo Wolvecamp, but I learned about form in Hayter's etching course, in the period 1961-1962. That's when I started developing a language of my own. Etching is something you learn by doing, and it's through the material and by experimenting with the medium that I started getting more grip on form. I started on the series *Accidental Paintings* in 1963. The work was actually inspired by death, after I saw a dog get run over near my home in the Rue de Charonne. One of the works in the series has the title *C'est rarement*

*que les chiens écrasent les voitures* (1964) – meaning, that it happens only rarely that dogs squash cars. All the works in this series contain distorted creatures with eyes, limbs and crude fingers, but also machines such as cars with outsized wheels.

*What about the series Suicidal Paintings?*

I started this series in 1964-65. I had already spent years working on my journal *The Situationist Times*, which had nothing to do with my paintings. My work rhythm was to spend the mornings on the journal, then to have lunch right across the street, and to spend the afternoons painting. One day I was typing away in front of the window when I first see a hat drifting down, and next thing I hear this massive thud. And that was such an intense experience, so hugely significant, that this gave rise to the *Suicidal* series. If there's a skeleton on the canvas, in whatever shape or form, then it's part of this series. Like a signature.

*Let's fast forward to the 1980s now, when you started on the Série noire. Here the imagery is completely different: much more stylised and realistic. So less fragmented and abstract.*

All of these paintings are based on thrillers from the *Série noire* – slender black books with yellow letters, and never any kind of illustration. The series was published by Marcel Duhamel, a very avant-garde kind of man whom I greatly admired. He also published Henry Miller's work, for example. All of France read the *Série noire* detective stories, and at a certain point I started using the titles of the books as a trigger for my imagination. So I was actually making illustrations for the books.

*You used the titles as a kind of instruction, or musical score.*

Exactly! It was great fun to do, and in the end it became quite a large series. Some of them are entirely fictitious, while others are inspired by actual events such as *30 March 1981 (Série noire)* (1981) – the day of the attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan. The paintings are also very narrative. You could actually call them that: 'peinture narrative'.

*They are almost like stills from a movie.*

I really loved that spooky quality: the suggestion of suspense. But of course I set myself quite a challenge with these works. So when I was making these series, what usually happened is that I would get bored at a certain point, and then I would turn to making graphic work instead. I was often asked to make graphic work in that period, and for these lithographs or screen prints I would use the same themes as in my paintings, but in a more free-wheeling way. One example is *Quasy Modo and Queen Kong* (1981): it's a large screen print that was partly printed with transparent ink. It was a very special method at the time. Friends of mine had rented a house on Elandsstraat, here in Amsterdam, and they asked if they could hang it in the window. I think it hung there for maybe one day until someone threw a rock through the window.

**Why? Was it too offensive?**

It was considered too misogynistic! So then they hung up a photo of me with the caption: “made by a woman”.

*There is a growing realisation that women’s contributions to art history have been ignored, even suppressed. How do you view this suppression? The recognition you receive today – do you feel that you should have received it much earlier?*

I don’t have much to complain about. I was never one to go banging on museum doors, but always felt that things would take care of themselves, once the time was right. So I never took much initiative in this respect. On the other hand, women are underrepresented in many of the movements that museums focus on. Consider, as an example, the experimental ZERO network. But it also depends on how you look at it: lots of women were involved in Fluxus, which might not be evident for today’s museum visitors.

*Looking at your work from the 1990s, it seems as if you returned to your imagery of the 60s. The distorted figures in these works also remind me of Francis Bacon and Max Beckmann.*

In that period I liked to work on large pieces of canvas and on wooden panels, such as the three works in this exhibition titled *Disturbed 1995*. It is not a series, the works are separate. And indeed, Bacon does pop up here and there, also in the erotic layer present in many of the works.

*Very different again is your 2013-2014 War Series. We see tanks, figures with gas masks and skeletons in a cartoon-like style: first on paper in light pastel colours, then in black and white, and after that in paintings.*

It had fascinated me for some time how we were able to follow the Gulf War in Iraq in full-colour on our television sets, in the early 90s. But I started this series around the time that chemical weapons were first used in Syria. That prompted me to investigate the history of chemical warfare, which led me back to the First World War. It all started with the Jewish chemical engineer, Franz Haber. Thanks to his inventions, mustard gas and chlorine gas became part of the battlefield early on. Haber was very patriotic and proud of the fact that his invention was used against the French. This resulted in a rift with his wife, the chemist Clara Immerwahr, who eventually committed suicide because she couldn’t stand living with the gruesome impact of his inventions. It’s such a dramatic story, and only his wife realised how horrible the consequences of his work would be. And then the horrific fact that these weapons are still used today, first in Iraq and later in Syria as well.

As you say, I started the *War series* with black and white drawings and pastels. I like to work with my fingers to rub out the pastel, it’s such a wonderfully soft material. After that I wanted to incorporate that fluid character in my paintings, to give them more structure.

*Right now you're working on a large series of works titled Pommes de Jong. It's a rather crazy idea to create work inspired by the potatoes you grow in France. I had put potatoes to dry in the cellar of my house in Bouan. I then made photos of these potatoes, and for an artists' book published by OnestarPress in Paris I printed them out and started drawing on these prints with a black marker. This resulted in an extensive series of larger mixed-media paintings, for which I had the potato photos printed on linen. I then continue to work on these images with various materials such as coloured paint markers and charcoal, and also the pumice that I used for the War series.*

*On the one hand it reminds me of your Serie Noire in which you set yourself an assignment: a found object or score to serve as point of departure. But it's also reminiscent of your editions of The Situationist Times, in which you show a great passion for collecting certain typologies. Here, the potatoes are a jumping-off point for a huge collection, which is then followed by a variety of versions and modifications.*

It was completely unintentional: it simply started with potatoes that started sprouting because I kept them in the cellar too long. I used that idea of the potatoes, and new ideas just kept sprouting out of that. Of course there's a strong relationship with the earth and soil and everything that goes on underground.

*Do you have any idea of what you're going to do, when you start working on one of these potato photos?*

I just start. The material I work with gives me such a kick – the small crumbs of pumice and the painting markers. The photos partially remain visible, as they are photographs after all, but adding the other materials adds weight to the work. It is a transition from one medium to another, you could say a modification of a modification.

*How do you think the public will interpret your work? They might think they're visiting a group exhibition!*

You mean I don't have a consistent signature style? My drawings are mostly more or less the same. But for the rest I work on the basis of themes, and indeed, the form of the work changes. I don't have a problem with that. A person doesn't stay the same throughout his life either, right? There are of course some basic elements that remain the same, for instance that I always just let my imagination run free, regardless of what is considered contemporary or proper. So indeed: *L'imagination a rebours*. The title fits perfectly!

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Margriet Schavemaker studied Art History and Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam and defended her Ph.D thesis 'Lonely Images: Language in the Visual Arts of the 1960s' at this university in 2007. After an academic career in Art History and Media Studies, she is currently working as Head of Education, Interpretation and Publications at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.