

**Série Noire:
an Interview with Jacqueline de Jong
by Juliette Desorgues**

Juliette Desorgues: Perhaps we could start with what brought you to working on the theme of these post-war French crime novels, also known as ‘Série Noire’ for this body of work?

Jacqueline de Jong: When I was living in Paris [1960-1971], I was reading the ‘Série Noire’. On every corner of the street, there was a kiosk where you could buy them. Anyway, I read a lot of ‘Série Noire’. In Italy you had the ‘Giallo’ series [crime novels similar to the ‘Série Noire’]. I very much liked the layout of these books which was completely without images at that time. That was the main challenge I thought: to illustrate them. Not at that moment, but years later, much later, I just bought a bunch of ‘Série Noire’, read the books and made paintings, in my funny fashion. It’s interpretation. Some however are actuality. But then why not bring a bit of actuality into some of them, like the painting *30 maart 1981*, which refers to the attack on Ronald Reagan.

Juliette Desorgues: What is it about these books that interested you?

Jacqueline de Jong: It was the history behind the ‘Série Noire’ that I found fascinating. The founder of the series was an actor, playwright, translator and I believe also a surrealist: Marcel Duhamel. His publisher, Gallimard, was one of the very big publishing houses in France and was very intellectual. For example, they published the series ‘La Bibliothèque de la Pléiade’, a collection of literary world classics. But this series of books [Série Noire] was extremely popular. Everyone in the street was reading ‘Série Noire’. Instead of being an intellectual game, it was the opposite. Duhamel was an avant-gardist – particularly when you think of his film scripts – who decided to have Anglo-Saxon or American detective stories translated into French just after the war! First in 1945 with his translation of the work of the English writer Peter Cheney [*La Môme Vert-de-gris* and *Cet homme est dangereux*].

Juliette Desorgues: It’s quite ironic when you think about how intellectual Gallimard is as a publishing house.

Jacqueline de Jong: It’s very ironic and clever even! Boris Vian actually translated certain titles from the ‘Série Noire’.

Juliette Desorgues: I am interested in the artistic context you were working in, in the late 1970s and ‘80s when you were making these works. Previously you had been immersed in the Situationist International and expressionism but were also close to the Gruppe Spur and the Fluxus movement. I wondered which other artistic circles you felt an affinity with at this time?

Jacqueline de Jong: I belonged more to the Nouvelle Figuration movement, who themselves were influenced by artists from the Figuration Libre in France who were emerging at this time. I was close to people like Eduardo Arroyo and a lot of members of the Nouvelle Figuration. I was also influenced by the painter Peter Saul. Of course, I've always been interested in the work of other people. I left Paris around 1971. I didn't leave France at once, because I didn't want to leave Paris, so I left slowly, and I wanted to bring artists I knew in France and Germany etc. to be exhibited in Holland. But it was difficult. There were however one or two galleries that did show them.

Juliette Desorgues: I wonder also about the work of other artists of the late 1970s and 1980s such as Enzo Cucchi from the Italian neo-expressionist group Transavanguardia? Did you find an affinity with his work for instance?

Jacqueline de Jong: Definitely, yes. There is very much a similarity. People do influence each other. But you know, I'm an autodidact as I didn't go to the academy. So to me it was a sort of a challenge to create figurative paintings at this time. I like challenges, but it was sort of a bit risky. For example, in this particular work *La Clique au Bassin* [1981], I think I go a little too much into surrealism.

Juliette Desorgues: It's interesting you say that. This work to me is quite key to the whole series in a way as you find elements that emerge throughout your work – the stoicism and boldness of composition and colour which is then disrupted through the movement of the hand. As if hovering between the expressionism found earlier in your career and the realism you explore from this period.

Jacqueline de Jong: Yes, absolutely.

Juliette Desorgues: There's a lot of variety I think in style in this period, more maybe than any other period, which is what makes this series so interesting I think.

Jacqueline de Jong: Oh, really. Not confusing?

Juliette Desorgues: Not at all. There is also a very clear lineage, from the 'Billiard' series which you did in the late 1970s where you also experiment with figurative realist painting.

Jacqueline de Jong: Yes. *Elvis (3 generations)* [1978] is in a way a transition to the 'Série Noire'. But, yes in the 'Billiard' series I started to be figurative and that was a challenge.

Juliette Desorgues: With the 'Billiard' series you see a clear shift towards a more hyperrealist form of painting associated with the likes of Gerhard Richter perhaps, compared to your previous work.

Jacqueline de Jong: Yes, definitely. You know these types of figurative

paintings fascinated me mainly because I wasn't able to make them properly. Then I just tried.

Juliette Desorgues: **So what pushed you into this particular direction?**

Jacqueline de Jong: **Well, that's quite simple in a way. I was creating Pin Ball machines in a very figurative way, and I was also working with figurative graphics. Then, Hans Brinkman, my partner, was playing billiard all the time which brought me to this series. It's as simple as that, you know.**

Juliette Desorgues: **Another work that stands out from the 'Série Noire' is the work *Magic* (1981), of a pink Warholian pistol.**

Jacqueline de Jong: **Yes, but this is a joke. I was joking actually with the printer, and then I was saying, let's make a gun. I don't remember why I called it *Magic*. I had probably bought a little gun, a plastic gun, which was called magic. The magic gun is an erotic object of course. It's a silkscreen print that wasn't actually commissioned but just made as a joke at the printer's. Then people started liking it. We had fun making it. That's one thing.**

Juliette Desorgues: **This is why I see it as key in a way, as it seems to touch on some of the crucial interrelated themes in your work such as violence, eroticism and humour.**

Jacqueline de Jong: **Of course. I think I've been using that from the beginning. Perhaps it's the drama-side of me. Probably just to save myself or something. A way to get some humour in the work, to be a little bit ironic. I always say that if you want to recognise my paintings, you just have to search for the eyes. Like the peeking birds in some of my little drawings. So there is no real drama, I think.**

Juliette Desorgues: **Drama is then always undermined through humour.**

Jacqueline de Jong: **I hope so and that goes on in the 'Série Noire'.**

Juliette Desorgues: **You play with this also in the titles of your paintings. These are often very humorous such as *Quasy Modo* and *Queen Kong* [1981].**

Jacqueline de Jong: **Yes absolutely. Titles are very important. Though some of the titles are not mine. They are from the books.**

Juliette Desorgues: **Text is indeed key to this body of work. The covers of the original books are in black and white and without imagery. But your translation of text on canvas is through colour.**

Jacqueline de Jong: **Yes and this actually brings us to the Situationists, because the Situationist posters from 1968 are like the covers of the books. They are without images. They are black and white and typographical. The posters which I made from 1968 contain very colourful imagery. They are absolutely the opposite.**

Juliette Desorgues: I was interested also in the idea that the crime novel is the quintessential symbol of storytelling and narration where there is a very clear, linear representation of time through cause and effect, and yet you are completely going against this in your paintings. The fore- and backgrounds completely disappear. The figures float on the canvas. There is no context.

Jacqueline de Jong: Absolutely. Yes. There is invention in my paintings. But some are of actual crimes that were committed like in *Le professeur Althusser en étrangeant Nina K*, [1981]. Althusser was a Marxist professor who killed his wife. On the same day, Nina Kandinsky got killed by a burglar who stole her suitcase with jewellery. So there is very much a narrative.

Juliette Desorgues: Yes, indeed, but you have also taken these two narratives and conflated them through your own interpretation and imagination, in this particular painting.

Jacqueline de Jong: Yes, the painting *Matt Helm sans guitare* (1980) actually refers to Roman Polanski's film *Chinatown* [1974]. The figure is wearing a trench coat – the iconic detective outfit.

Juliette Desorgues: In *Bleu Black Noir* [1981], possibly the most gruesome painting of the series, the figures appear to be killing each other in an elevator. Where was that taken from?

Jacqueline de Jong: No, well nothing is taken from anything! Or anything from nothing?

Juliette Desorgues: This has actually been a common thread throughout your work. A sense of continuous reinvention. And perhaps this is then an apt point to finish on!

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Juliette Desorgues is an independent curator, writer and editor, living and working between the UK and France. She previously worked as Associate Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, where she curated a number of exhibitions, commissions and events including 'in formation' (2017); 'Helen Johnson: Warm Ties' (2017); 'The Things that Make you Sick: Loraine Leeson and Peter Dunn' (2017); 'Everything is Architecture: Bau Magazine from the 60s and 70s' (2014); 'Bloomberg New Contemporaries' (2016 and 2015), 'Yuri Pattison: mute conversation' (2014). Prior to this Desorgues has held curatorial positions at the Barbican Art Gallery, London and Generali Foundation, Vienna.