

I do not paint nature, I am nature.

by Robert-Jan Muller

'I do not paint nature, I am nature'. This statement by Jackson Pollock could just as well apply to the artistic attitude of both Wieske Wester and Jacqueline de Jong. The two artists, each with their own life lines, which in the exhibition at Dürst Britt & Mayhew cross each other, nevertheless take on such different forms in their work. One life line is long: De Jong understood during her work at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in the late 1950s that her calling was not in the museum. She enters the international art world, and in particular through her encounter with the painter Asger Jorn, she begins to paint and make graphics in her self-chosen home town of Paris. That time around 1960 is a foreshadowing of the revolutionary movement of 1968 in Paris: the International Situationists promise an ongoing social revolution and Jacqueline de Jong dives into it.

'My work is absolutely not autobiographical', she recently said in an interview in a Dutch newspaper. Not if you describe autobiographical as a record of your life. But De Jong's visual work, in all its varied forms that it will adopt in the following decades, runs as a commentator along many political, social and artistic changes. Her gouaches from 1964, painted as with a primal force ('I am Nature'), hold the middle between monsters from the evil childhood dreams of the post-war experimental movements, and the antagonism of the revolutionary promise, which propagated Situationism. Two periods connected, not as a rational conclusion, but with a direct feeling that says: 'This has to happen now, and it has to come from me'. In 1968 – and De Jong will say that it is not part of her artistic work – she makes posters with the same self-evidence during the Paris student uprisings in a local print studio to support the students' call. Her instinct says that she has to do that, even though it removes her from her beloved Asger Jorn.

The eighties bring a different environment: her contacts with fashion designers such as Frank Govers and Frans Molenaar seem to be reflected in her work. The fast-paced world of fashion is echoed in her paintings, which, just as powerful as her first work, have been painted with a more volatile touch. They are still representations of struggle and pain, but now almost oil sketches, with even the unpainted linen showing here and there. Gradually however in this stage of her work, the frightening images of monstrous creatures (human and animal alike) start to give way to a more contemplative world: the so-called Dramatic

Landscapes. In 1984 during a fashion show by Sophie van Kleef she paints the wall-filling landscape 'Le Jour des Montagnes Philosophiques' on a stage in front of a live audience. Painting for a live audience: an act of great daring which few painters would like to imitate and a testimony to de Jong's autonomy in life: indeed a 'force of nature'.

The Jacqueline de Jong life line is long and her current series of work, 'Potato Blues', stems from her experimenting with, as she says, 'colours and products in the vegetable garden'. 'In 2003 I found some old potatoes in the cellar of my house in France with these crazy sprouts growing all over them', she tells in an interview, 'they looked a little bit like long-haired cats: they were absolutely weird. I thought: this is art; I have to do something with these!'. 'Potato Blues' introduces photography in her work. The photographs capture the seeded potatoes, strange forms with outgrowths, and are subsequently printed on canvas and stretched onto a frame, ready for further reworking. De Jong first started working with potatoes in 2003: 'I used them to make an installation at the Van Abbemuseum when I was invited by [the young Dutch artist] Jennifer Tee to participate in her show there. I called it Potato Language because it reminded me of the Inca knot language that I had used in issue three of The Situationist Times.' Time seems to slow down in De Jong's potato paintings. Meticulously she works her photographed crop over with oil-stick in different colours and thus creates a new life under her hands. No longer as the warring figures from her earlier work, but more serene as amoebas and water creatures, floating in the deep sea with their wisps and strings, just like the Inca knots she mentions.

Wieske Wester has a shorter line than Jacqueline de Jong, but she also has the ability to turn the mundane into an uncanny reality, a world of unsettling feelings accessible through a door only the artist has the key to. For both artists the primary, physical act of painting and drawing is the starting point in their work. Not the 'what' we are going to make, but the 'how' is paramount. That she takes fish, corn, shellfish or bananas as her subject: is that important? Yes, it seems, but even more how she sees drawing and painting as a physical process. She herself says: 'The physical act of painting and drawing is important to me, because I believe this equals the language of nature.'

When seeing her mussel paintings and drawings of fish, I had to think irresistibly of the painting by Kokoschka 'Fishes on the Beach of Djerba' from 1930 (in the collection of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam).

There the painter seems to come to the essence of that pile of wet dead animals with his paintbrush, while at the same time wanting to recognize his own tormented spirit in these splashes of paint. In the ruts that Wester draws with her thick paint, you see an action that has to do with her own feelings rather than with her subject of vegetables or animals. 'I do not paint nature, I am nature': her paintings and drawings evoke it. In an interview she looks back at her pregnancy: 'I looked at a shell during the growth process in my womb in 2009'. Apparently, Wester here identifies herself with the shell, which accommodates life in its inner. Can she explain why she then includes such a shellfish as a subject in her work? "It comes from within," she adds, explaining the instinctive side of her work that determines both her drawing and painting, and her choice of subject.

In 2016, the Georgia O'Keeffe retrospective in London showed the voluptuous floral paintings, where every observer saw female genitals. O'Keeffe herself always denied that association during her lifetime. In Wester's drawings 'Oyster' and 'Cabbage' (both 2015) this association is also obvious, and the artist will in turn confirm this. In an interview, Wester stated that she has a friendship with Rory Pilgrim, the artist who makes everyday life into rituals with text signs and self-designed ceremonies. A very different expression than that of Wester though. But just like Pilgrim, Wester is able to make the commonplace of her fish and vegetables, with a compelling hand and an intensity of the paint stitch, into a mirror of her inner self. Like Kokoschka with his fish. Perhaps it has to do with a time of upheaval (although Wester, as far as I know, does not make any statements about it) and an inherent current uncertainty of the individual.

It is remarkable that artists such as Francisco de Zurbarán and Adriaen Coorte in the religiously turbulent seventeenth century with their precise 'portraits' of simple vegetables managed to evoke a, in their time, spiritual atmosphere. Wester probably refers to a same sort of context when she says: 'I explore my subjects in their visual appearances as well as in their biological, organic and spiritual state. I try to uncover the essence of the world that goes on behind the façade'. Wester has a different handwriting than these two painters from another era: sinuous, sometimes aggressive, as in the series of four drawings 'Mothers, babies and wrestlers' (2016), or in the painting 'Wood, tits and legs' (2015). There is an inherent threat in these works, which mainly comes from the act of drawing or the brushstroke itself. And to emphasize that it is mainly the act, she says in an interview with

Louwrien Wijers: 'This has to take place during the action of painting'. Subject choice and artistic action go hand in hand with Wester, both driven by the question of what the essence is behind the facade, as she mentions it. Eroticism, sensuality and death, executed in an artistic handwriting which is vitally guided by the power of nature and at the same time exposes that natural force.

In this exhibition the lines of Jacqueline de Jong and Wieske Wester meet at the crossroads of fish and chips. But eventually it is about something more fundamental for both: the role of the artist in unveiling nature. De Jong is an alchemist in this aspect, transforming the humble potato into a work of art. Wester fulfils the role of shaman, opening up the way into an inner and spiritual world with portraits of food, acting through a vitalistic ritual of painting and drawing. The 'Potato Blues' reminded me, through the suggestive forms, of the Rorschach test: the shape of a blot as a stimulus for free association. Much earlier Leonardo da Vinci noticed this phenomenon in his notebook: 'It should not be hard for you to stop sometimes and look into the stains of walls, or ashes of a fire, or clouds, or mud or like places in which you may find really marvellous ideas'. For De Jong as well as for Wester, these kinds of associations seem essential. They open up the way, whether through a potato or a cabbage, to an inner process of discovery and self-knowledge in both themselves and the viewer. Eventually Wester's and De Jong's at first uncanny world appears to offer nothing less than emotional and spiritual insight.

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