

The naughty altar boy

by Colette Noël

Amsterdam, Prinseneiland. It's snowing. Warehouses, moored boats, passers-by, they all willingly accept the silently falling snow. A drawbridge sits over a canal like in a dream. A goat bleats in the distance at a children's farm.

The art gallery of Maria Chailloux is housed here, away from the hustle and bustle of the centre of town. The owner enjoys exposing work that distinguishes itself by its honesty and pure artistry as well as its professionalism. Work rooted in today's world. The exposition at the moment is Jaap de Ruig's latest project. This artist, born in Zwolle in 1957, studied at the Minerva Academy of Art in Groningen. After leading a nomadic existence as a documentary journalist visiting India, travelling through France with a horse drawn wagon and living with gypsies in Rumania, he decided in 1992 to return to the visual arts. Photography and video remained an important medium in which the point of view of the documentary photographer is still clearly discernable.

In his work animals are a point of reference. Through them he explores the darker sides of existence and notices that what normally is considered repulsive (vermin, corpses, maggots, faeces and decaying matter) in fact contains great beauty and harmony. Beauty and harmony due to a certain order of things, a ruthless kind of order.

Mice

He took pictures of dead mice: *Mouse 1/∞ - 144/∞*. 144 mice, captured, found or bought. Neatly framed and each one supplied with a test-tube filled with the ashes of the cremated body. This presentation has something poetic, reminding us of a Vanitas still-life from the baroque era as we are confronted with a kind of holocaust.

Finding a dead swan during a walk with his wife, inspired Jaap de Ruig to create a new Leda. With one hand his wife presses the neck of the animal against her black lace dress, the other hand presses the abdomen of the swan against her own. Allegory of death and beauty, the death of the myth, the death of God. Leda or Pieta?

‘Visual art exists as entertainment but also as a medium to explore’, says the artist. He chooses to explore the deepest layers of our existence. Not that he’s a pessimist, but he just gets melancholic sometimes, like most people. What he tries to do in his work is to find a form in which that somberness is transformed into something more serene or humourous. Two ways of making things acceptable.

The 1999 video *Man* shows a close-up of the palm of a hand in which a smily faced little figure with pink limbs is flailing all over. On closer inspection we notice that the humanoid exists in fact of five maggots joined together with crazy glue. A perfect co-operation of art, nature and science. Repulsive and ironic, cruel and tender, the poetry of Jaap de Ruig seems related to Celine’s *Voyage au bout de la nuit*...

His latest project: a sort of artist’s chronicle of the year 2000. Fifty two video fragments - he forced himself to make one a week – that refer in one way or another to the homogenisation of our planet. One sees the antagonism between humankind and nature, and how the animal world functions as a metaphorical field to illustrate the urges, obsessions, loneliness and vulnerability of man. The impact of the most diverse visual images is enforced by the adding of acoustical layers. Natural and home-made sounds that enhance the undiluted dramaticism. The duration of the video-fragments varies from twenty five seconds to six minutes. The titles are simple: *2000 week 1*, *2000 week 2*, et cetera.

Naked

When I enter the art gallery it is empty. The walls naked, the space narrow and deep, and lit from behind by a high window. Two rows of chairs face a screen each. Headphones enable you to listen in private as you sit and watch. The art shown here, is for sale in the form of a videocassette to be enjoyed at home in a more relaxed way. But, what you experience in this naked space in this quiet neighbourhood, you cannot experience at home on your comfortable sofa. What you see here will test all the layers of your emotion and being. Your relaxed pose soon changes to a tense one, as you are riveted to your seat full of fascinated attention. You quiver, laugh, cry and sigh. You want to see everything. A hasty visitor would do good by not starting this journey.

When I leave the art gallery, I have the feeling I’ve visited a Cistercian chapel in which in all sobriety a service was held that presented life in front of a new kind of altar. A Requiem with its

Kyrie, Gloria, Agnus Dei, and Dies Ire, and with from time to time an eye-wink of the naughty altar boy, the artist.

Colette Noël is an art historian

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