

Leiden Pearls

On my way to the exhibition *Pearls in the Arts, Nature and Dance*, I have met a girl called Gonya. We engaged in conversation when I accidentally stepped on her feet in the train – I did not see her standing there. She was not complaining at all, rather, she got enthusiast and treated me as an unexpected gift of Fate. She told me about her speciality: she could live in the skin. «When I am there», she said, giving me an excuse at the same time, «I am almost invisible.»

Then she told me how it happened: slowly with the years her skin was growing ever thinner until it felt transparent. And there came a day when she could see the sausage going in at one side of her and appearing on her other side. The only difference was that what she saw “inside” was not the sausage itself but her mother quarrelling with uncle Paul. Uncle Paul lost his half stomach due to excessive drinking and was forbidden to eat sausage and got nervous every time when he sniffed it out. Gonya also told me that beyond such small distortions, due to personal memories, there were identical lands on both sides. It did not matter much at which side she was looking at. Out of curiosity, I touched her skin: it felt silky, even, and intensely warm.

The train stopped, we took off and headed together towards the museum building. A grey thick fog, hardly penetrable for the light of the street lamps, blanketed us benignly. As we advanced in the mist, I heard the sounds of a far-away drum. The pale lights of the street lamps disappeared and we were surrounded by reddish-brown darkness. The drumming became louder and faster. It reverberated in my stomach, plucked the strings inside my bones and evoked deep remembrances of a onetime tribal existence. Drawings appeared, of women lost in the fervour of accelerated dance; their bodies disappearing in the swirl, letting see but a few arms and legs, each adorned richly with pearls. All was made of tightly placed curling lines.



*Kinke Kooi: Eternal Dance (2003) 37*53 cm, copyright Kinke Kooi*

Then we saw the young Aboriginal girl, Siluce, floating in the sea. She went to pearl hunting with her friends but swam astray when a fish enticed her. A sudden tropical storm hit the waters. Huge waves, sized of a three-storey building, carried her away from her beautiful home. Like a pearl torn out from the shell, her body floated unintentionally in the sea.

Siluce was brought finally to the faraway, cold and cloudy Northern Low Countries, inside a pearl shipment. She was sad and lonely, stripped of her youthful innocence, more beautiful than ever. She got placed in a jewellery box, just like the Barbie of Marlene Dumas.



Marlène Dumas: Barbie (1997), copyright Marlène Dumas

After some time, Siluce looked around in the jewellery box, and bit by bit began to discover the contents of the partitions. The more she saw the more astonished she became. New jewels turned up at every corner; gold necklaces with

ruby beads, earring sets studded with pearls, emerald bracelets, diamond brooches, gold filigree cameos... She found herself engulfed with a lust for wealthy objects, enslaved to a love for luxury. She would put a handful of pearls in her mouth and let them slowly rolling down her youthful body. Just like in *Chasing Pearls*, a film of *Michael Schumacher* (2012).

By her thirties, Siluce gradually overcame all the decadent extremes. She expanded to a big two-story house, gloriously enlited, which emitted a welcoming air of warmth, comfort and stability. She got populated with children and found her place in the vicinity of other houses; on her left stood a sombre-looking house, with just a few windows lit, on her right we saw a little coquette, with curly ornaments and a pigeonaire, while further away we found several shy, always-locked houses. No doubt: Siluce was by far the most attractive among them.

Siluce invited us into her realm of utter feminine beauty.



*Kinke Kooi: Digging (2011), 80*57 cm, copyright Kinke Kooi*

It was made of densely curling pencil lines which embraced us within their feminin world, enmeshed in the double realm of inside and outside. We looked behind the rich curtains between the thumb and the index finger and admired the myriad of little wonders.

We left Siluce, promised her to return soon and climbed to the upper floor. I soon forgot about my promise as I looked around. Great enthusiasm filled me. At first I thought that we went astray and bumped into a nature history museum depot. I strongly hoped I had enough time to look around before a warden chases us off.

The first thing I saw was a pod of dolphin skeletons and a bale of preserved sea turtles swimming in the air. It looked so weird but also enthralling. Often skeletons appear as mute remainders of a one-time organism, as silent mementos to death. (Beyond doubt, the sight of a few skeletons scattered in a vast sea of sand dunes is quite depressing. Especially, I heard, if one's water/diesel reserves are running low.) However, these flocks of skeletons swimming above my head were not depressing. They were the Form, more precisely: the many individual forms that the invisible entity called bottlenose dolphin creates. They created wonder and respect in me.

Further away, I saw several collages of paper cuttings. The carefully arranged small pieces of paper, through their form and arrangement, reminded of bones bleached white in the sun. They evoked an ancient, totemistic effect. As if – acknowledging our inability to understand the complex natural order- we would create a new, simplified, esthetical order.

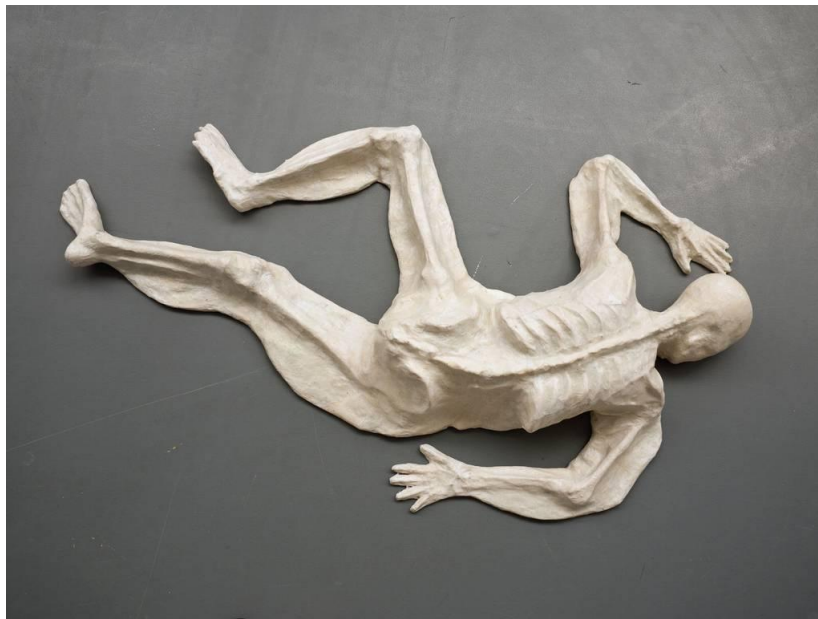


Sea scene (2012), Decoupages on light box. Courtesy Willem Barentsz galerie.

In the far left corner, little carved idols were lined up on a shelf together with jarred sea animals. Such jars, containing the murky remains of some animal

specimen, are usually very sad to look at. Dispossessed of their original context and meaning, bathing in liquid preservative instead of seawater, the colourless, swollen bodies are trapped for ever in the process of decomposition. This installation, however, looked harmonious and created positive excitement and I did not know of it was for the smile of the little idols or the pairing of the innocent beauty with the beast.

On the right side of the room I saw a series of sculptures representing humans. I saw a flattened body, positioned like a victim of the 76 A.C. Pompeii eruption, the fleshless skin dried to the bones: what a perfect material for studying the bony structure!



Atelier Joep van Lieshout: Emaciated (2009), Cradle to cradle, copyright AVL

Next to it, an absurdly contorted female body standing on all fours ruffled my feathers: the abdomen was cut open and its content: intestines, uterus, bladder, ureter -still connected to the body- were solicitously exposed. It may have been for their whitish color and facelessness that the above sculptures were dwarfed in awfulness by two monstrous diving suits hooked on the ceiling. Heavy and cumbersome, the suits were hanging like water monsters and exhaled an air of annihilation. All of these objects were glorious examples of the analysing extremes of the Western mind.

Further to the right I found large show-cases filled with ceramic objects. Peacefully and in huge quantity rested the ceramics there, like amphorai in the hold of an ancient shipwreck - quite unaware of the rest of the room.

I was wandering around fervently, filled with excitement by the myriad of impressions. I might have left the path of Siluce and Gonya had definitely faded away. I found myself among historical objects: it was one of the rooms of the permanent exhibition. I saw two huge canvases on the subject of «Leiden's ontzet»,

the siege of Leiden. It occurred during the Eighty Years war when the Dutch revolted against the Spanish rule. During the siege thousands of inhabitants died of starvation. At a critical moment Mayor van der Werff inspired his citizens to hold on by offering his body as food (they did not eat him). Finally, on the 3rd of October, 1574 Leiden was relieved and ships carried provisions to the inhabitants. (The first food that got into the city was herring and white bread. Ever since 3 October is the biggest festivity in Leiden when the municipality distributes free herring and bread.)



Mattheus Ignatius van Bree: Mayor Pieter Adriaensz. van der Werff offers his sword to the people, (1816-1817), collection Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden



Erwin Olaf: Liberty – Plague and Hunger during the Siege of Leiden (2011), collection Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden

I was looking at the two pieces hanging in each other's proximity: the historicizing painting of *van Bree* created between 1816 and 1817 and the 21st century's photomontage of *Erwin Olaf*. One thing struck me deeply. There was an obvious difference in the behaviour of the citizens. A strong emotion was depicted on *van Bree's* painting; I could almost see that all the surrounding houses had been emptied, that the community was suffering together, as a whole, and I saw that its leader was ready to die for it. On the contrary, *Erwin Olaf's* work depicts many individual stories, many independent unities. Nothing, but the common space they happen to occupy keeps the people together. There is no big drama, just many small dramas. How true!

I kept wandering for some time. I saw the wonderful winged altarpiece from Lucas of Leyden and many other great artworks. And I went back, again and again.

Pearls in the Arts, Nature and Dance was a very successful exhibition designed by choreographer *Karin Post* who combined dance, visual arts, literature and natural history in one display. Temporary exhibits were superbly combined with elements of the permanent collection; individual artworks got often placed in a wider dramaturgical context. The exhibition took place in the Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden, The Netherlands, between 15 September 2012 and 13 January 2013.