

Raphaelites that had formed around Rossetti after the collapse of the original Brotherhood. Of all the Pre-Raphaelite painters Burne-Jones became the best known in Belgium. The reason for this lay not only in the indisputable quality of his paintings, of which a number were exhibited in Brussels in the 1890s. Burne-Jones also owed this popularity to the wholehearted admiration his friend the Belgian Fernand Khnopff expressed for him in several publications. Khnopff was an art critic and Symbolist painter. The Belgian Symbolists recognized a precursor in Burne-Jones; consequently there are clear similarities between the work of Khnopff and that of the Englishman. Both tried to convey an inner state with their creations and both, as Laurence Des Cars has pointed out, frequently show mesmerised figures staring into a mirror, *the symbol of introspection*. An interesting example at *British Vision* is Burne-Jones' painting *The Baleful Head* (1885) in which he creates a complex interplay between faces and their mirror images.

There are many other such incidences of cross-fertilisation between British art and that of the Low Countries that I could draw on, but it will be apparent from all of the above that *British Vision* is part of a rich tradition of mutual appreciation between these two cultures.

Nic Peeters

*Translated by Sheila M. Dale*

British Vision – Constable to Bacon. Observation and Imagination in British Art 1750-1950 is running in the completely refurbished Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent from 6 October 2007 to 13 January 2008 ([www.mskgent.be](http://www.mskgent.be))

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## **Perversity, Pleasure and the Boundaries of Our Order** The Art of Folkert de Jong

In the summer of 2006 the three-dimensional worlds of Folkert de Jong (1972-) went on show in two prominent venues in Belgium. Visitors to the Braem Pavilion in Middelheim sculpture park in Antwerp were met with a remarkable scene. They found themselves both drawn to and repelled by four human figures grouped around a landscape made of Styrofoam, polyurethane foam and silicon rubber. The landscape consists of a large mountainous plateau resting on two piles of pink and blue Styrofoam sheets. On the plateau and built of the same material is a little village of half-timbered houses, a water pump and an archetypal castle. The small blue buildings look reassuring and immediately conjure up associations with miniature worlds like the ones built for decades by the German toy manufacturer Märklin. The four human figures include a wild-looking man seated on a cube, pointing authoritatively to the landscape, his frenzied expression directed towards us. His left hand is clutching a model of Brancusi's *Infinite Column*, but that too is made of Styrofoam. Opposite him is what appears to be a rather smart gentleman wearing a suit, hat and glasses, standing stock-still on a pile of Styrofoam sheets, another little half-timbered house balanced on his outstretched hand. The skin of his face however is horribly ravaged. What might be a lumberjack is standing with one leg resting on a chair,

his dejected eyes downcast. His neck and upper body are streaked with red; the axe he is holding may have something to do with it. Then there is the gigantic female head, sporting fashionable sunglasses and a headscarf, but below a string of beads her body is in the form of a long pillar. Entitled *The Sculptor, The Devil and The Architect* (2006), the scene is a juxtaposition of a stereo-typical rustic idyll and horror. They even become interchangeable. The alarming bystanders give the charming little landscape an ominous air and yet their stilled ecstasy and attractive pink, blue and orange-red colours lend the solitary human figures a convivial quality.

Folkert de Jong, *The Sculptor, The Devil and The Architect* at the Middelheim Braem Pavilion, Antwerp (2006).

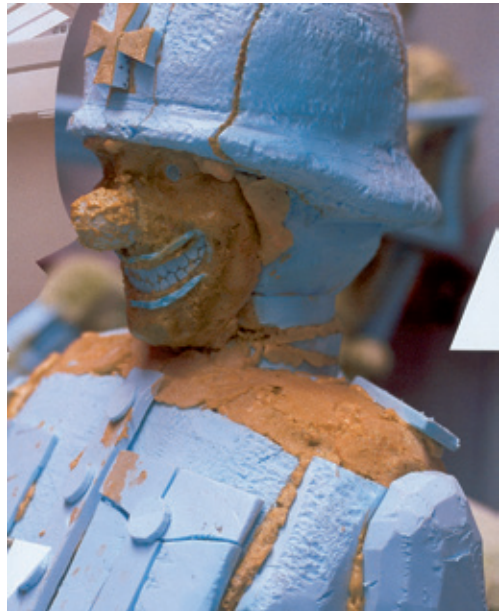
De Jong also made an installation with sculptures for the Watou Poetry Summer (2006) in West Flanders. A gigantic soldier, his back bent and his helmet pressed against the roof of the barn, looks with a frenzied smile to the right. He has one large blue and one yellowish eye, and he is holding castanets in his left hand. He is guarded by a couple of soldiers, their delirious eyes protruding from their pulpy and horribly pockmarked, grimacing faces. Their military equipment belongs to the eighteenth or nineteenth century rather than the twentieth. The drummer cum standard-bearer, who contemplates the spectacle with a superior laugh, also appears to be from another age. Everyone knows of the horrors that took place in the area around Watou during the First World War. This work by De Jong – *Shooting...at Watou; the 1st of July 2006* – refers to those events, but it also has an extra dimension. The two soldiers with rifles and bayonets seem to have been inspired by



Francesco Goya's famous painting *The 3rd of May 1808* (1814), (which went down in the history of art as the first 'journalistic' account of a political incident). It shows Spanish partisans being shot by French revolutionary soldiers. Here the concept of 'freedom' acquires an ambiguous overtone. Spaniards fighting for their freedom are executed by soldiers waging war in the name of enlightened thinking. Folkert de Jong claims not be looking to make a social or political statement with his works, yet here he seems to cast doubt on man's attitude to the notion of 'freedom'.

Here, too, the familiar cheap building materials in pink, blue and yellow form the basis for the partly turbulent, partly quiescent scene. As with *The Sculptor*, *The Devil and The Architect*, here too the spectator can walk between the sculptures and in so doing is also implicated in the events; he becomes a participant in the madness.

De Jong began working with Styrofoam and polyurethane foam in 2001. His breakthrough as a 'sculptor' came with his work *The Iceman Cometh*, shown at the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam in the spring of 2001. The *Iceman Cometh* (also the title of a play by the American Eugene O'Neill in which a number of desperate characters are constantly scrutinising one another) depicts a gruesome landscape peopled by cripples. A line of blue and yellow characters is frozen in ecstatic poses on a cool blue, wintry island. The procession is led by a bent figure with large rabbit's ears and a proudly erect genital organ, who is holding a pistol in his right hand. He is followed by a soldier with a weapon in one hand and a miniature Mickey Mouse in the other; behind him come a legless individual in a wheelchair, a man on crutches with a wooden leg and a figure jubilantly raising the stumps of his arms above his head. The man with the crutches laughs as he steps over a limbless body and next to him, on the sideline, is another proud character whose mouth is frozen in a scream. This bizarre procession is on its way to a smaller island further along, where there is a half-ruined igloo inside which a tormented woman with amputated breasts seems to be hospitably awaiting



Folkert de Jong,  
*The Iceman Cometh* (detail)  
at the Groninger Museum (2002).

the gentlemen's arrival. They are probably in for another rude awakening. An American flag flies from the igloo and next to it lies a crashed warplane.

'The Iceman Cometh' is essentially a 'still' from a gruesome story, which can only be viewed from a distance. This time you cannot move between the figures, but only walk gingerly round the islands.

De Jong is obsessed by the caverns of the human soul, the twilight world we all, it seems, carry within us. This work was inspired by paintings and drawings by George Grosz and Otto Dix which communicate the madness that lurks inside us all, and by photographs of groups of soldiers returning from the front. One drawing by Otto Dix in particular, a self-portrait in a trench (which actually dates from 1924) made a great impression on de Jong. It illustrates the insanity of war and the effect of its horrors on the human psyche.

Even in his earlier work De Jong was looking for concentrated experiences of frustrated desire and constraint which can so easily result in madness and horror. In 1996 he camped in a studio in the port area of Amsterdam, where he often came across abandoned shoes, pornographic magazines and the like. One day he found a bag containing women's clothing, stilettos and letters, which he took back to his studio and painstakingly examined, detective-style. He fantasised about the fate of the woman who owned the bag and then went on to create potential victims out of wood, foam rubber and tape. De Jong's video recordings of them, and of himself lying as a 'victim' on the back seat of a car proved that the dummies lent themselves to being used in a more narrative context.

During his studies at the Rijksacademie in Amsterdam (1998-1999) he started creating environments which revealed worlds that appeal even more explicitly to our darker nature.

It is precisely the proximity of a neat and tidy, sunny lifestyle to a life full of dark passions and unfinished business that never fails to fascinate De Jong. He has read about men who play Nazi games up in the attic after a day at the office, and about a small community in America where a man who called himself 'The Bishop' founded a semi-religious cult in which he actually sacrificed fellow villagers.

In his workshop at the Rijksacademie he made recordings in which he took part in dark rituals with his brother and his girlfriend. Videos show a girl lying with a bag over her head, a figure dressed as a doll and De Jong – the undisputed leader, holding a gun and wearing a jacket embroidered with the words 'The General'.

Until 2001 De Jong made these sort of environments and filled them with homemade weapons, a wooden tank, a Stuka aeroplane and flags bought from army surplus stores onto which he sewed caricatures of soldiers and strange names like 'Sacke en Sugar' and 'Pecke in the Crown' – light-hearted worlds filled with potential destruction. Already at this time he was drawing inspiration from West Coast artists like Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley, and also from B and splatter movies and comics.

Since 2001 De Jong has concentrated on developing and perfecting his sculptural skills. In *Life's Illusions* (2003) an ungainly figure without arms sits drinking from a glass through a straw, his head covered in blood. Near him is a green monster (he looks like a Michelin man) sitting on a stool and a woman in a flowery dress who is laughing and waving two axes. In the middle a blue, purple and green wood fire crackles and at a suitable distance is a horse ridden by a man in a blood-stained orange uniform, a top hat perched on his grinning head. The scene is surrounded by collapsed walls and a mass of building rubble. It portrays the desperation within which these characters verging on madness can thrive. Yet, interestingly, the rubble is made of the same material (Styrofoam and polyurethane foam) as the characters. When examining the notion of 'psychological transformation', De Jong uses materials which are easy to transform. The building materials can be cut quickly, and as they lend themselves to cutting and pasting they can be assembled with relative ease. The colours in *Life's Illusions* are more varied and more expressive than in *The Iceman Cometh* and so the sculptures acquire rather more painterly connotations.

The work *Medusa's First Move: The Council* dating from 2005 is a complex and skilfully executed group sculpture. Scenes from films like Fritz Lang's *Dr Mabuse* (1922) and Ingmar Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955) were important sources of inspiration for this work. A large round table stands on a plateau (raft) resting on oil drums. People dressed in a variety of historical (mostly military) costumes sit at the table on baroque chairs. Around the table are objects which include a globe, a bust and a skull; above it hangs a sumptuous chandelier.

Despite being a very compact composition, *Medusa's First Move: The Council* presents a multiplicity of attributes, human attitudes and facial expressions. The work seems to portray a secret consultation at world level. Yet in this séance-like setting, the participants are totally sidelined and behave like lost souls. In particular this work shows that De Jong has developed a virtuoso sense of form and composition.

It is a brilliant embodiment of human madness. Or as Folkert de Jong puts it: *'I like the relationship between play and violence. Pleasure and brutality produce a strange mix. Perversity and pleasure go together if we explore the boundaries of our order. I like the faces of my sculptures to be humorous in a dark sort of way.'*<sup>1</sup>

David Stroband

*Translated by Alison Mouthaan-Gwillim*

1. Folkert de Jong 'Shoot the freak'; Folkert de Jong & Simon Wallis; page 2 of this interview; Rotterdam, 2005.

## **The Sweet Smell of Success** **Viktor & Rolf**

When it comes to the history of Dutch fashion, Viktor & Rolf's story is an unusual one; in fact, it has all the magic of a fairy tale. And there is no denying that there is an element of the fairy tale in fashion, or, to quote Viktor & Rolf at the opening of their retrospective exhibition at the Louvre in 2004: *'Fashion is an aura. It is applicable to more than one product. Fashion is a dream, something intangible.'*<sup>1</sup>

The way Viktor & Rolf present themselves shows that this premise is the driving force behind their activities. When for example in 2004 they were invited to appear on an Italian television show, they were aware that they were virtually unknown to the wider Italian public. So by way of introduction they had a man-sized book made, with the words *'The Story of Viktor & Rolf'* in Italian on the cover and underneath: *'by Viktor & Rolf'*. The two designers turned the leaves of the gigantic book in a joint choreography, while clips from their shows were projected onto the pages. Eventually live mannequins came strutting through the open frame of the 'last page' wearing Viktor & Rolf's latest collection and antlers on their heads. The Italian presenter read out the text supplied by Viktor & Rolf as a voice-over: *'The creative urge was so strong that they set off into the great unknown to acquire fame and fortune. They achieved their goal with their fabled fashion shows in the capital of fashion.'*

The creative urge is generally what enables resolute Dutch fashion designers to persevere and hold their own in what has traditionally been a non-fashion-conscious climate. And there are many Dutch labels and fashion-designers operating in the Netherlands and also abroad, many with considerable commercial success. Yet not one of them can be compared to Viktor & Rolf. Why is that? What makes Viktor & Rolf different from other Dutch designers?

Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren were born in small towns in the province of North Brabant in 1969. In later interviews they talked about their craving for glamour in that thoroughly Dutch environment and how the only ray of light came from a particular soap advertisement on television.

Viktor & Rolf in their  
own menswear for  
Spring/Summer 2005.

