

Jacqueline de Jong

The Ultimate Kiss

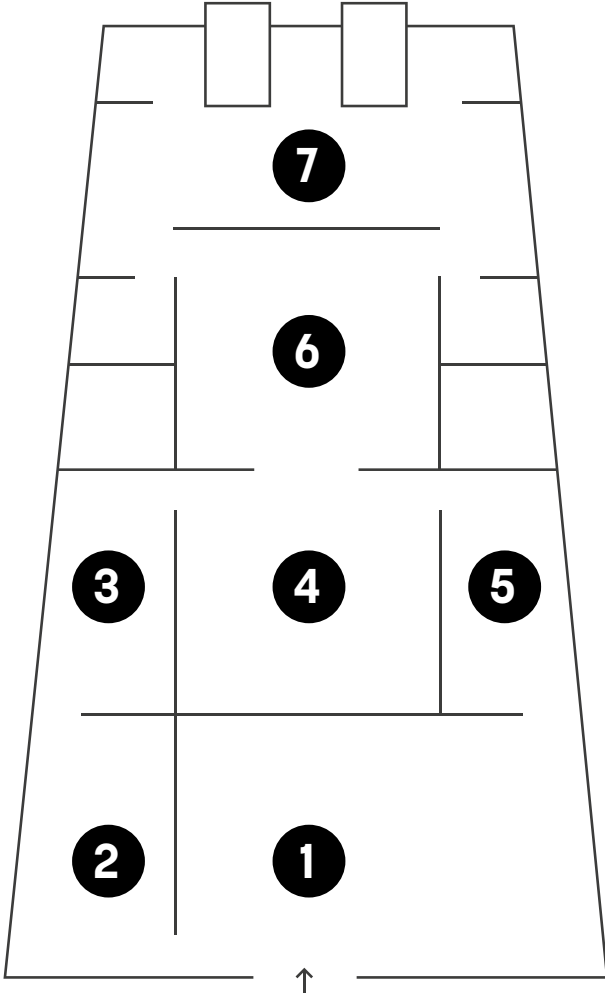
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Jacqueline de Jong, *The Ultimate Kiss*, 2002-2012. Oil on canvas, 150 x 180 cm. Courtesy the artist.

SWIELS WIE

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INTRO

Jacqueline de Jong is an essential figure of the post-war European avant-garde. Born in the Netherlands in 1939, De Jong participated as a free-spirited social activist in the revolutionary and counter-cultural movements of the 1960s in Amsterdam and Paris. She lived for a decade in Paris during which time she participated in the Situationist International for two years. Embracing painting, as well as self-publishing and craftsmanship, De Jong's practice is polymorphous, formally incorporating elements of Abstract Expressionism and Cobra, New Figuration and Pop Art. Only recently has her characteristic eclecticism been considered as a whole, her *dérives* (drifts) and the twists and turns of her artistic trajectory (reminiscent of ricocheting billiards, one of the themes in her paintings) key to

comprehending her practice's irreducibility. Freely navigating between different pictorial styles and idioms, De Jong demonstrates a voracious appetite for painted images as sites of confusion and subversion. She belongs to a group of artists who have reintroduced narration to painting by borrowing elements from popular culture, cinema and illustration, while also mixing in the absurd and the mysterious. With her penchant for experimentation, De Jong plays with forms, styles and subjects in her pursuit of an idiosyncratic and subversive oeuvre. Expressive yet realistic, her work exhibits uninhibited eroticism and sexual liberation. *The Ultimate Kiss* offers a non-linear journey through her prolific and provocative oeuvre, where works from different periods dialogue with one another.

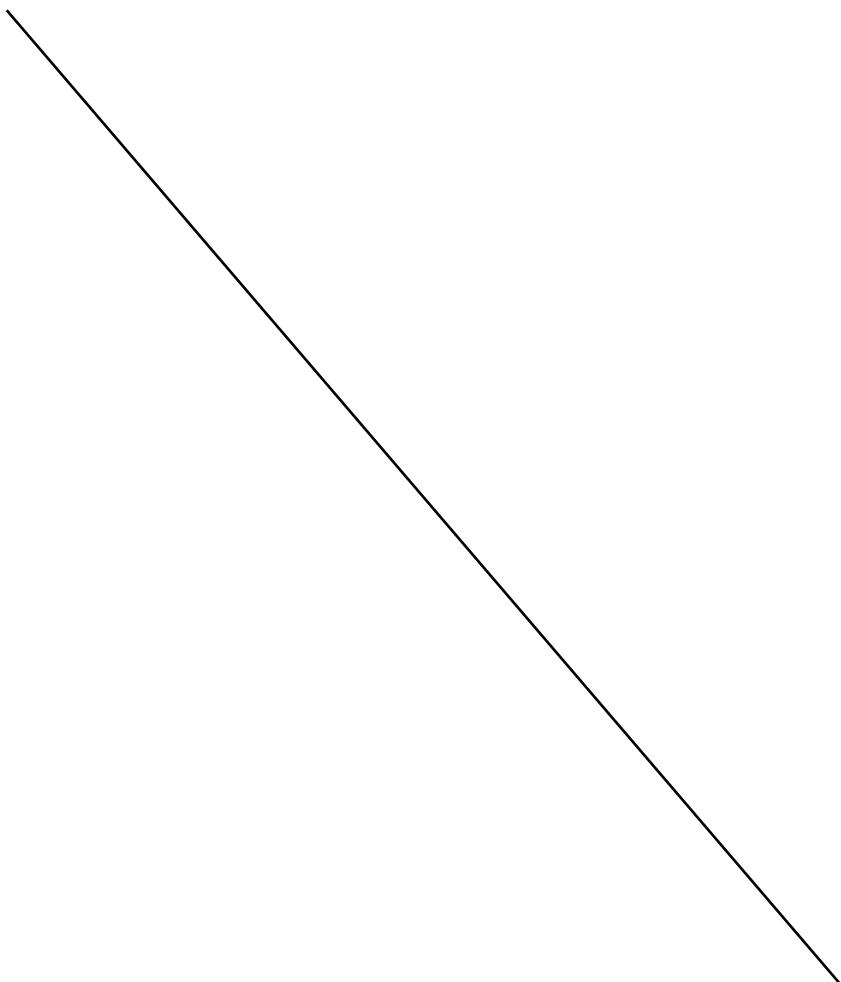
The monumental *De achterkant van het bestaan* [The Backside of Existence] is installed diagonally across the first room. This vast work was created in 1992, for the Dutch National Bank, with both sides of the sailcloth painted to present a carnivalesque dance of monstrous figures. As opposed to its title, the suspended canvas cannot be attributed a front or back, constantly inverting its relationship with its surroundings and, in so doing, disorienting visitors. Another monumental painting, *Le jour des montagnes Philosophiques* [The Day of Philosophical Mountains], presents in an expressive manner a landscape engendering hybrid forms that straddle abstraction and figuration; the result of a performance by the artist during a 1984 fashion show in Amsterdam, the painting demonstrates

De Jong's intuitive and energetic approach favouring uninhibited expression and instinctual language. Monstrous figures reappear in the series *Upstairs-Downstairs*, of which several examples are exhibited here. Commissioned by the City of Amsterdam for its new town hall, this ensemble of twenty-eight paintings was originally imagined to adorn the stairway and landings of the new building. Echoing their destined settings, the grimacing monsters are represented on stairs. These passageway encounters most often appear conflictual: for instance, the blue figure in *Big foot small head* seems to be tripping over and infuriating the green monster. The steps also evoke the stage – another essential centre of representation – and theatrical forms such as tragedy and burlesque – two typical registers of De Jong's oeuvre.

These two lateral rooms present a selection of early works. Her initial approach to painting produced abstract works structured by energetic brushstrokes. These canvasses from 1961 to 1964 testify to the Cobra group's initial influence on the artist; indeed, De Jong was close to these artists thanks notably to her relationship with the Danish painter Asger Jorn, one of the group's founding members. *Playboy No. 1* and *Autofresser (Playboy No. 2)* [Car Eater (Playboy Nr. 2)] have returned to Belgium for the first time since their presentation in 1964 at the Verviers Fine Arts Museum, during the then 25-year-old artist's very first Belgian exhibition. These canvasses are part of De Jong's first proper series comprising so-called 'accidental' paintings in which monstrous figures abound, with

accidents of colliding bodies and vehicles. Her *Playboys* are paradigmatic works combining eroticism and violence in a style reminiscent of Art Brut. *Celle qui préfère les voitures* [The one who prefers cars] plays upon the trope of feminine pleasure drawn from powerful machinery, as a sort of counterpoint to the masculine vision of technical progress and the pursuit of speed associated with the Futurists. Overlapping with her 'accidents', De Jong began a new series of 'suicidal paintings': these exuberant representations present bodies thrown about the entire pictorial surface. *Qu'il a mauvaise mine* [He who looks bad] (1965) confronts spectators with the macabre battle between a redheaded woman (the artist?) and a skeletal creature with bloodshot eyes: a fight between life and death, as well as a celebration of the passions and of primitive energy. The large-scale *Ils ne savent pas ce qu'ils veulent* [They don't know what they want] presents a dynamic scene of figures and vehicles in a state of chaotic effervescence. In this tragicomic choreography, the black skeletal

body reappears, like a ghost traversing the series of suicides. The jostling figures grip and tear at each other, provoking corporal permutations and underlining the artist's fascination for deformities and transformations that she continues to explore throughout her career.



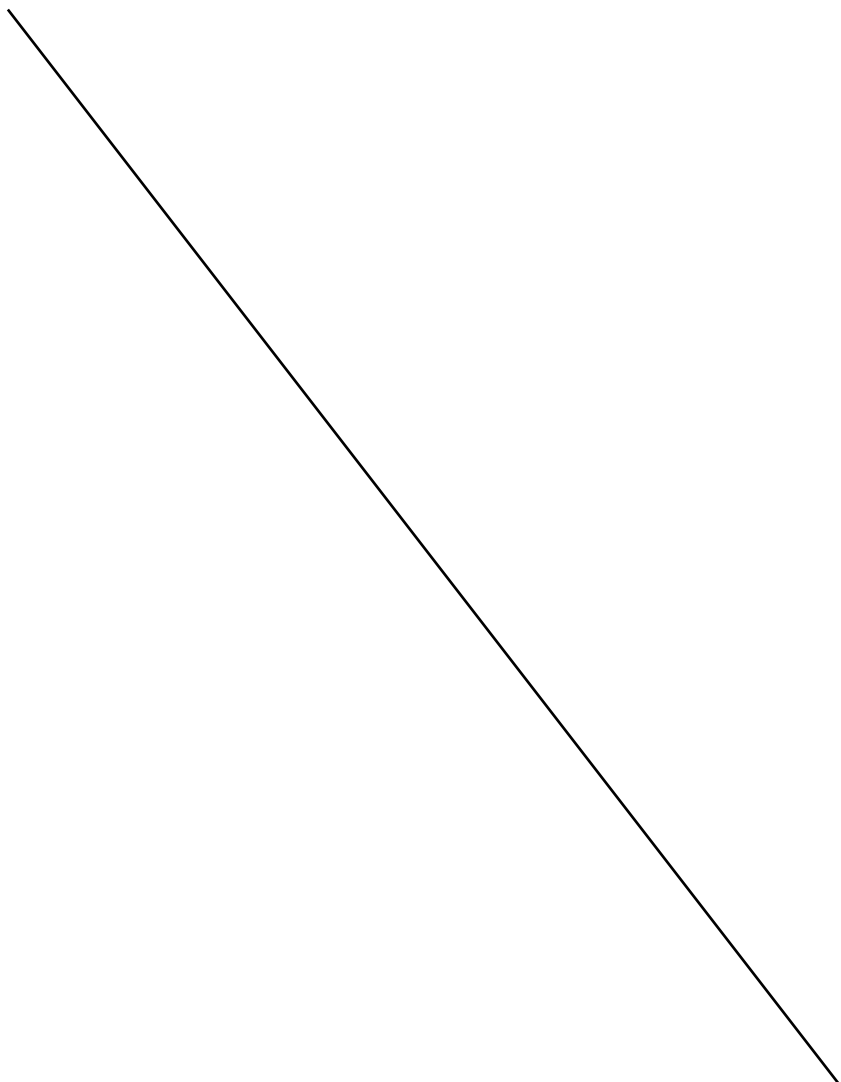
Created during the second half of the 1960s, the acrylic paintings of cosmonauts mark the artist's opting for a less expressive figuration and her interest in current events. In *Privat Property of a Space Technician* (sic) and *Tournevicieux cosmonautique*, the compositions are spatially scattered and the bodies interwoven with the lightness allowed by zero gravity. Here, her palette becomes lighter and more Pop-like. De Jong emphasizes the developing links between the conquest of space and the conquest of bodies. *Mr. & Miss Stake on Bank Holyday* (sic) and *The most marvellous days of playing Fools* provide glimpses of the libidinal force underlying the era's heroic space race, apogee of the scientific competition pitting the United States against the Soviet Union. *Grietjes*

ontstoken tandvlees [Grietjes' Infected Gums] focuses more specifically on this relationship between erotic impulses and the brutality of their satisfaction: figures intermingle and devour each other in a frenetic dance, reminding us that while Western society was first stepping onto the moon, it was also reconsidering sexuality's role with culture. Monstrosity and violence are never far-removed from our erotic impulses, as evident in *Le Salo et les Salopards* [Bastards and Scumbags]: rather than concealing bodies, this screen exhibits monstrous figures carrying out rather mysterious acts, but fully expressing their great vitality and confronting observers with their own libidinal projections thanks to the mirror occupying the centre of the composition. Like so many Pop-esque meteorites fallen about the exhibition space, De Jong's *Objects* explore the potential of painting on objects seemingly deformed by changes in perspective, refusing any clear identity in favour of constant bodily permutations.

The *Série noire* paintings are based upon the eponymous collection of paperback books – paradoxically lacking cover illustrations – launched by Marcel Duhamel in 1948. By borrowing the titles of some of these crime novels, such as *Matt Helm sans guitare* [Matt Helm without guitar] and *L'âne du Liban* [The donkey of Lebanon], De Jong creates free-form illustrations in which violence and death are portrayed with a grotesque realism. This appropriating and digesting of existing codes are inspired by the Situationists' critique of mass media. Narrative experimentation characterizes the entire series, notably through montages of disparate elements. For instance, *Prof. Althusser en étranglant Mme Nina K* [Prof. Althusser strangling Mrs. Nina K] forms a fictional whole by

combining two real events: the murder of the sociologist Hélène Rytman by her husband, the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, and that of Nina Kandinsky, the Russian painter's widow, the victim of jewel thieves at her Swiss chalet. Other works are constructed like cinematic montages: in *Gardez vous à gauche* [Keep to the left], the presence of what appears to be a detective photographing a murderer in the very act of murdering produces an eery effect. In *Rhapsodie en rousse* [Rhapsody in red], the murderess – whose red hair brings to mind the artist's own – stoically observes her victim beginning to bleed; confronted with the relative calm of this scene, rendered all the more tragic by its violent chromatic contrasts, the spectator automatically becomes an accomplice. The visual tropes of detective stories are thus played upon within a humoristic realism that insists upon the genre's clichés, such as the detective's fedora and beige trench coat, not to mention the red-headed femme fatale. The *Série noire* works also involve their spectators, by confronting them with

their own voyeuristic impulses, thereby presenting violence and madness as unavoidable forces of human nature, while at the same time subjecting the pictorial language to burlesque détournements.



In 1976, De Jong began a new series inspired by french billiards. In *Le carambole inspiré par un burin de J. Minne* [Billiards inspired by a chisel by J. Minne], a seemingly awkward perspective stretches the table, as though sucked in by the fully stretched-out player. In other scenes, the figures disappear, as in the geometrical composition *Mysterie*, with the representation focusing upon the abstract motif of the bright-green billiard table. However, movement remains an ever-essential element: the rolling and ricocheting billiard balls, or the bodies moving around the table as they position themselves for the winning shot. All of these aspects underline the artist's interest in 'topology', her focus on the deformation of objects in space and in time. This interest takes a new approach

in the painting *Elvis (3 generations)*, conjuring up three images from different periods to form a single representation of the singer, as a sort of cultural chimera of 1950s rock'n'roll, shattering the distinction between pop culture and fine art. The cinematographic close-up of *Beginner's Luck* spotlights the game's erotically-charged panoply (the cue and the table bed, the poking shot and the kiss...), while also emphasizing the artist's feminine perspective in opposition to the culturally dominant male gaze. Finally, the *Queues*, a polyptych of vertical billiard cues, reaffirms these same interests while opting for a more abstract approach: the cues are no longer held aloft by any player, but rather proudly stand all by themselves, as erotic and ironic references to male virility.

The final exhibition room gathers together various works illustrating the artist's constantly renewed relationship with images and their dissemination; here, pictorial and graphical creations from early in her career are confronted with more recent productions.

Her early series *TV Drawings* from the mid 1960s made of collaged fragments of intense pictorial vivacity recreate the effects of movement found on screen. The 'suitcase paintings' relate via writing and painting to De Jong's life upon her return to Amsterdam in the early 1970s. Deprived of her Parisian apartment, De Jong invented these canvas-cases as manifestations of her wanderlust or as intimate journals. The posters created by De Jong for the May 1968 uprisings illustrate more explicitly her

commitment to the period's cultural and socio-political revolutionary movements. The vitrines present a selection of her self-publications, the most famous example being *The Situationist Times*, the periodical she founded in 1962 as an illustrated, English-language version of *the Internationale Situationniste*, from which she soon freed herself. In the recent *Potato Blues*, she pursues her fascination for rhizomatic forms and unhierarchical structures, which she now observes on the sprouted potatoes grown at her house in France. Likewise, the artist continues to contemplate her immediate surroundings, as well as current socio-political events: for instance, *Tureluurs* – created during lockdown – evokes the isolation and psychological confusion of the pandemic age. Finally, in *The Ultimate Kiss*, after which this retrospective is named, the kisser's red tongue appears to inject life into a skeletal body, like a last metaphor for the energy of art and its capacity for transformation.

PUBLICATION

On the occasion of the exhibition, a monograph is published in collaboration with Mercatorfonds. The publication is designed by Eurogroupe and includes essays by Devrim Bayar, Juliette Desorgues, Xander Karskens, Annabelle Ténèze and Niña Weijers, as well as a conversation between Jacqueline de Jong and Alison Gingeras.

WE HOPE YOU ENJOYED YOUR VISIT. THANKS!

WIELS would like to thank Jacqueline de Jong and all lenders. Special thanks go to the Mondriaan Fund, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Belgium, Pippy Houldsworth Gallery and Dürst Britt & Mayhew for their support. Also a big thanks to our intern Paolo Baggi.

Curators: Devrim Bayar & Xander Karskens

The exhibition will travel to MOSTYN, Llandudno, Wales (UK), and to the Kunstmuseum Ravensburg (DE).

More & events: wiels.org

[TOP](#) ↑



De Standaard



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