

Bouquet IX

Willem de Rooij

If **Willem de Rooij**'s art isn't identical to his role as a bridge between people, it definitely runs parallel to that philosophy. He is beneficial for the city and society. He is a consultant at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam and also a teacher at the Städelschule in Frankfurt. He lives in Berlin, where he runs BPA, the Berlin Program for Artists with two friends and other colleagues of his.

Willem teaches and acts as a mediator in his art. His mission is to highlight each person's role in the creation process of an artwork and offer a new, human interpretation of collaboration. It doesn't matter if that person is a Dutch master from the seventeenth century, a florist that embellishes his bouquets or someone responsible for weaving his fabrics. The only thing he doesn't do is omit others, create exclusivity and monopolize, which might be the character attributes that have kept him from becoming a painter.

Inspired by this type of approach to collaboration and connecting with others, *Bouquet IX* is supposed to spark discussions from a sociological and historical standpoint on the many visible and hidden meanings behind the color white. By creating such a context, not only is no dialogue to be extinguished, but intertextuality of all kinds is being catalyzed.

One of the most prominent concepts of de Rooij's work is the concept of 'the other' and the other's culture. To delve deeper into the subject, in his work, de Rooij makes references to the very first encounters between cultures, or more accurately, the first photographically recorded encounters. In a broader sense, and to quote the artist himself, 'the notion of representing; of imaging', is highly valuable. This perception is something that is entangled with the notion of an outsider observing the exotic.

For his 2010 exhibition *Intolerance*, held at the Neue Nationalgalerie of Berlin, de Rooij borrowed rare Hawaiian artifacts from several museums. Without any knowledge about their true values and obligation toward their substance, these artifacts were brought to Europe to satisfy the curiosity and lust to collect strange and alien objects. Trading and manufacturing artifacts were the only priority. Without ever trying to 'make it his own' or 'appropriate' them, de Rooij embarked on a journey to thoroughly research these artifacts and to document them in the way that would best honor their value.

Furthermore, in his ongoing exhibition at Portikus, Frankfurt titled *Pierre Verger in Suriname*, he has made selected works by the French photojournalist available to the public for the first time, accompanied by a book that comprehensively details the collection. In 1948, Pierre Verger took 257 photographs in the small country of Suriname (northern South America) chronicling the cultures of displaced Africans and Asians.

By rereading an event through referential imagery to 'the other' and by collaborating with someone who has photographically recorded the other, de Rooij is in fact telling history once more from the point of view of images through a narrative that is more accurate, more detailed and which does not factor in national interest. The country of Suriname was a Dutch (the artist's place of birth) colony, and it achieved independence in 1975.

On the *Pierre Verger in Suriname* book cover, the artist's name is stated without the use of 'by' and separate from the book's title on the inside cover in a separate frame. The back cover reads 'Willem de Rooij's installation "Pierre Verger in Suriname" connects the spectator and these images by means of a viewing device ...'

Instead of claiming ownership over the person in reference, de Rooij demonstrates a different method of referencing altogether. Much like Malcolm Morley's painting *Vermeer, Portrait of the artist in his studio* from 1968, Morley not only presents the painting without any manipulation, he leaves the title and the original artist's name in the title untouched. He painted this painting from the poster of Vermeer's exhibition, and even the work information in the lower corner is readable in the white box. (Johannes Vermeer's painting was completed on a smaller scale exactly three hundred years prior, in 1668.)

The root of referencing dates back to Willem de Rooij's 2005 collaboration with Jeroen de Rijke (his partner and colleague between 1994–2006) titled *Mandarin Ducks*, in which they tried to find out how many references they can insert into a single artwork.

Now, nineteen years and seventeen bouquets later, each bouquet—having been presented in various museums and galleries over the years—carries the references and interpretations of all the other bouquets. They're remnants of one another. Each bouquet possesses references and significance unique to itself while also carrying the meaning and history of all previous bouquets. Simply put, with each new bouquet you see, you'll be reminded of the previous one you saw (even if it was only one) and the experience you had while seeing it.

My request to include a de Rijke / de Rooij article from 2003 in *Bouquet IX* was denied. The article was titled 'Azra Akin, Agbani Darego, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Amina Lawal', which belonged to *Bouquet II*, which was supposed to be in reference to something different. Now for me, *Bouquet IX*, which is about something else entirely, also encompasses that article.

Misunderstanding and misinterpretation create a certain memory. Misunderstanding forces you to look more closely next time and use that previous misunderstanding as a reminder to focus more intently on the new work. In order to depict contrast, one must recount both sides of the story.

The bouquets of de Rooij have the ability to attract like black holes, draw in all forms of conversation and pass them through stems and flowers to push them out with a new aroma.

What we are exhibiting is a bouquet made from ten different white flowers, placed in a white ceramic vase that stands on a wooden rectangle-cube that is also white. This bouquet sits in a white gallery space. Thus, we are dealing with the complex layers of the color white and the scope of their meaning.

Commissioning other parties to install the bouquet in the white gallery space, keeping the process hidden and keeping the flowers fresh and away from the spectators are all part of Willem de Rooij's methods. One can't deny that this relationship takes on new layers in a city like Tehran, where local labor workers have different rights compared to that of the artist's place of residence. This relationship, along with the conversations and extra references, did not exist back in 2012 when *Bouquet IX* was first created. The exhibition's setting and location are added to the conversation surrounding *Bouquet IX*. Exactly like John Baldessari's work *A Painting That Is Its Own Documentation*, every time this piece is exhibited, the date and details of the exhibition are added and painted on to it.

Baldessari's artwork will never end, and neither will the conversations around de Rooij's bouquets. Coincidentally, Baldessari artwork was created in 1968, the same year as Malcolm Morley's aforementioned work.

The socio-historical meaning of the color white is something that stands opposite of what de Rooij labels as 'the other'. By reiterating modern history, de Rooij tries to confront the spectator with what has been recorded in the clearest and most non-judgmental manner.

In *Bouquet IX*, we're not taken to a distant past. We ponder everything related to the color white, and for that task, we don't travel very far back. History becomes as short as our memory. All that we've touched and can remember becomes history. In fact, it's the rapid recording and judgment of events in the digital world of today that erases our need to refer to a distant history. Now, history is our experience. *Bouquet IX* refers to today's social interpretations of the color white, which inevitably slides back toward the past, like a snowball rolling on snow, attaching itself to more snow on the way and becoming bigger.

On the other hand, thanks to their color, these flowers have managed to blend in together and even appear united in front of our eyes, like a football squad's group photo. We know that the flowers from each bouquet will not last the same as each other bouquet due to their unique qualities. These flowers are kept alive for the duration of the exhibition and are also replaced multiple times until the exhibition ends. *Bouquet IX* won't physically exist post-exhibition and, instead, stays on as data and takes on legal attributes.

That's exactly what Willem de Rooij is looking for: keeping the bouquet in the most ideal shape for a limited time. After that, the artwork lives on as a memory for the audience. Visual details gradually make way for personal emotions at the time, as well as our own discoveries. We remember the smell, and it becomes important. De Rooij also connects our personal experience to the experiences of others in the long run. We sit together like the flowers. Those flowers become united, despite all their uniqueness and individual qualities. They visually translate the unity itself.

This also occurs for the other bouquets: in *Bouquet VII*, he arranges natural and artificial flowers together, or in *Bouquet VI*, where fifty white tulips stand tall next to fifty black tulips, standing shoulder to shoulder despite all conflicts. *Bouquet V* and its ninety-five unique flowers are, in fact, pure abstraction. Ultimate unity. In a political interpretation, any form of classification is diminished—abstraction in the spirit of Joan Mitchell. Whatever was unique to the individual becomes unique to the collective.

Willem de Rooij invites us to converse through his work. His work becomes fluid and gains meaning when it is entangled with others. Memory and remembrance is a portal for discussion, and lastly, *Bouquet IX* could be interpreted as a memorial to his partner, Jeroen de Rijke (1970–2006), with whom the bouquets started.

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