

Dürst Britt & Mayhew

Exhibition title: Border ... and other Lines

Artists: Jacqueline de Jong

Venue: Dürst Britt & Mayhew, The Hague, The Netherlands

Date: 3 June – 16 July 2023

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Border ... and Other Lines

text by Melanie Bühler, Senior Curator at Kunstmuseum St. Gallen in Switzerland.

Jacqueline de Jong's third solo exhibition at Dürst Britt & Mayhew brings together a series of large-scale paintings made between February 2022 and May 2023. 'Idlib in the Snow', a painting completed at the beginning of 2022, marks the transition from a series of works about one catastrophic event, the refugee crisis in Syria, to another: the war in Ukraine. The refugee tents in Idlib at Syria's border are covered with snow, which, in hindsight, can be seen as a dark omen of the crises that would unfold further north, in Ukraine. The canvasses that follow carry the names of Ukrainian cities that, over the course of the last year, have become battlegrounds. Alongside the works dedicated to the war in Ukraine, two paintings with refugees return, as this catastrophe continues to unfold as well. Her most recent painting, Disasters, brings the two subject matters together.

Reflecting **Jacqueline de Jong's** working process, the exhibition also includes works less directly related to political events. De Jong refers to them as "loose works." They function as playgrounds or sketchbooks developed alongside the more reality-bound paintings. These imaginative works make no direct references to contemporary political realities and are instead populated by De Jong's signature humanoid creatures – skeletons, monsters, animal-human hybrids – in chaotic distribution, equal parts dangerous, dark, deadly and erotic. Throughout her oeuvre, many of De Jong's works have absorbed moments of crisis and terror, moments in which order has dissolved and something bigger, more terrifying has taken over. Wars have been frequent subjects and continue to haunt De Jong's imagination as terrifying, all-consuming machines that leave the humans forced to go through them in chaos and disarray.

Figure and ground tumble, perspectives collapse and flames flare up between rubble and ruins; buildings fall, and figures are squeezed into the diminishing spaces between them. The human bodies depicted have become pliable, they are thrown around, and when they appear as a mass or in groups – as they often do in the works that refer to the refugee crisis – their bodies are stacked and packed tightly, piled on top of each other. They are pushed and pulled, mangled and thrown away, degraded to material. Lines are crossed here, in the most dehumanizing ways.

MB: The title of the show is Border ... and Other Lines, could you explain it?

JdJ: The Border-Lines series, which I made in the last four years, concerns itself with refugees and migrants. The Other Lines that I've added now refers to a series which I've been working on since the 24th of February 2022 about the war in Ukraine. Of course, these "other lines" – and with that I mean the signs of war in Ukraine – have been visible for a long time, since the annexation of the Crimea. However I am not a journalist making a report. This is my interpretation and imagination and feeling of what is going on. But it's not only actuality – in my work the two

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eventually get combined: these two major events that are now going on in this world at this particular moment. But of course, at the same time, a hundred, a thousand other disasters are happening in the world concurrently.

MB: The depiction of wars has a persistent presence in your oeuvre. Is this mainly because of the images that come to you and populate your imagination through the news feed, or would you situate this preoccupation differently?

JdJ: It actually started in the very early days, with the Accidental paintings and the Suicidal paintings. While they are not about war, they have a dark side to them. They are also humorous. There is no humour in the war paintings I've made, and there is less of the erotic in it because there is not much of the erotic in war. What I do think is that there is such an overwhelming amount of images that I really feel the urge to use them.

MB: Why do you choose to paint these most horrifying events?

JdJ: Well, there is a sort of necessity. I don't know why I choose them, because I've been choosing for a long time already to make work about all sorts of horrible events. Well, they're not events, they're facts. They are essential facts. And of course, it doesn't change anything if I paint them, but at least it's my expression. I do it out of a personal necessity, which of course doesn't change the situation at all, unfortunately.

MB: How do these images come to you? Do you work with specific material from the news that depicts the specific events that you paint?

JdJ: The material comes from all sorts of news coverage: TV, newspapers, internet. There is so much that can be used, and in the case of Ukraine, it's mainly the incredible photographs that come out, the photojournalists having taken huge risks to take them. There is so much going on in the world which is captured in images, and there are so many of them that using them is unavoidable. While working on a painting that refers to such specific images, I am also always working on a completely imaginative work, side by side, which in a way is complementary to the actuality. These are the "loose works," which are either on paper or on canvas. They are, in a different way, about a sort of feeling of horror but with less recurrence to the here and now.

MB: Could you elaborate a bit more on the process of working simultaneously on the images that reflect actualities and the loose works?

JdJ: As I have said, they are very complementary. The loose works are like a sketchbook. You could also see them as an expression of the split mentality that I apparently have and the need I feel to express myself in that way. They are sketch-like, while the others are much more intense. The Border-Line and Ukraine paintings have a real, specific anchor in reality, while the loose works have this freedom, the same openness as a sketchbook. Their meaning can change over time, and the imagination of the viewer is much freer, much less directed by actualities than the other works.

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Jacqueline de Jong (b. 1939, Hengelo, The Netherlands) is widely known for her contribution to the European avant-garde of the 1960s. Throughout a career spanning six decades her work has explored the violence, banality, eroticism and humour of human interaction. Painting is the foundation of her practice, which also encompasses drawing, sculpture, printmaking, jewellery and artist books.

In the 1960s she became involved with the radical artists and thinkers of the time, most notably with the Situationist International (SI) and Gruppe SPUR. When **Jacqueline de Jong** was excluded from the SI, along with the other visual artists, she founded The Situationist Times. Hailed as one of the most important and experimental journals of its time, the publication offered opportunity for collaboration between writers, poets and visual artists. As editor and publisher, she produced six issues between 1962 and 1967. In 1968 she marched with the students in Paris, printing artist posters in support of the movement.

Jacqueline de Jong's painting practice is diverse: declining to progress in a linear fashion, she often doubles back and revisits formal and conceptual concerns. Early works from the 1960s include expressive abstraction, the violent and humorous Accidental Paintings and Suicidal Paintings series, and the witty and erotic Private Lives of the Cosmonauts. Themes of sexual desire, war and violence continue throughout, with the Série Noire of 1980s, the Paysages Dramatiques and paintings of the 1990s that address war more explicitly. During the 2010s, de Jong took inspiration from the monstrous shapes of overgrown potatoes to explore the humorous and grotesque side of nature whilst experimenting with new materials and photographic printing. Her most recent work returns to oil painting and a re-examination of early themes that have new resonance in the present day.

Work by **Jacqueline de Jong** is held in private and public collections including Centre Pompidou, Paris; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, CNAP France, Musée les Abattoirs, Toulouse, Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Museum Jorn, Silkeborg; Lenbachhaus, Munich; Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo; Kunstmuseum Göteborg; MCCA Toronto; MONA, Tasmania; Rachofsky Collection, Dallas; Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem; Museum Arnhem; Cobra Museum for Modern Art, Amstelveen.

On 30 May 2023 Jacqueline de Jong was awarded the prestigious title of Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by François Alabrune, French Ambassador to The Netherlands.