



## INTERVIEW: KINKE KOOI & MIRJAM WESTEN

### *Why your predilection for drawing?*

Actually it arose from a combination of reasons. When I was still painting, often I had difficulty getting down to work. I was troubled by a kind of laziness syndrome. If I had bicycled past an office, I would think: there at least people are getting some real work done. I longed for a painting neurosis that would make me keep on painting. Like when I was a child; then I would draw and make things with my hands for hours on end without the slightest difficulty. At a certain moment, I decided to allow that joy of making things with one's hands to enter into my work again. I searched for actions that I liked doing and finally hit upon the drawing of lines in an endless repetition. Also, I noticed it enabled me to create a much more spatial representation of things. This came close to what I imagined it would be like to work within a compulsive neurosis. Really it is more a meditative way of working. These two modes are closely related; maybe a neurosis is a failed longing for meditation.

Later I used the work "knitting" for that way of working, which can also be a very meditative act. The principle that you make a sweater from one thread is what appeals to me. That's why I began drawing: from the desire to do a lot with one pencil. Painting is based too much on the grand gesture, whereas I want to get to know one thing thoroughly. By drawing all those fine lines I gradually grow into a drawing, like a sculptor who is endlessly sanding and polishing a piece of stone to create a form. Then very slowly an image emerges. It's very satisfying. In that way you become initiated into the world of specialism: you learn what subtlety can do. I very much believe in the power of subtlety.

### *In addition to your drawing technique and the spherical frames, your use of color is also very particular. Why do you work in monochromes?*

Mainly it has to do with a longing for saturation. Not knowing when to stop: on and on, time and again, in the hope of finally reaching a definite limit. It is a desire to feel very intensely. The bulges in my work emerged from that strangely indolent and bloated feeling. Once I was a teenager, I painted my whole room pink, the waste paper basket, the chair. Everything. I even started collecting pink objects. I have always wondered what is the origin of that urge. Among other things, I associated it with stuffing myself with chocolate, after which I would feel apathetic and depressed. Sometimes I would ask myself the same questions a hundred times a day. Why don't you know when to stop? Why don't you have any self-discipline?

### *When did you start painting animal and human figures instead of landscapes?*

My drawings still contain many elements from my landscapes. I used to paint landscapes with lots of animals, trees or birds. The main point for me was emphatic arbitrariness: everything is equally strong; everything has its own center. Everything had to have the apathetic, meditative aura of being, "complete and perfect in itself." Also, it had to do with the two extremes of spacious and full. I tried to infuse the landscapes with a feeling of physicality. The trees on the canvas had to give you the sensation of ants crawling over your body. In the painting 'Mountains and Trees' I depicted the feeling of constantly touching your own little wounds or pimples: disgust and pleasure rolled into one. Another painting was entitled 'Leprous Landscape'. A massive mountain and a tree also kept reappearing. In fact I'm still busy with that, as in 'Mary as a Mountain.'

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In the end, I had worn out that multiplicity to such a degree that all of a sudden I wanted absolutely only one thing on the canvas. More and more I began drawing animals onto which I projected human feelings. I wanted to express compassion. Compassion always has been a strong element in my emotional life. Compassion with a child, an animal or war victims. I really still don't know how I should relate to that feeling.

*But the figures you portray do not exactly reveal the vehemence of that feeling...*

No, it's more visible in the way I observe them. They look very apathetic. Their feelings seem to be locked-up inside. I emphasize the look in their eyes, and show them in a pitiful position, as if they are being forced into doing something. Like the naked bull brought out to be shown in his Sunday best while he himself is restless and scared and ignorant. I was, and still am, very interested in animals. That has to do with my search for happiness. How do you become happy? Animals are a source of inspiration. I identify with them because I think they live on the basis of a kind of primordial information, and are not ashamed of their nakedness.

*You have also made a number of diptychs in which an animal and a woman are depicted side by side.*

As in 'Two Fools,' in which both a bull and a woman look over their shoulder. There is a loneliness and an expression of not-knowing in both their eyes. Not knowing what kind of a situation you are in, which can also mean that you have broken away from each and every influence.

*Since 1989 you have drawn mainly female figures. What is the attraction in that for you? Are they self-portraits?*

When I was pregnant with my first child I really only wanted to draw, and especially women. You could indeed consider them as self-portraits. I no longer felt like drawing from a model and then took some photographs of myself as a starting point. Although the drawings don't always resemble me, I experience everything that I make as a self-portrait precisely because I use myself and my questions as points of departure.

*What questions do you ask yourself, then?*

I draw whatever vehemently dwells inside of me: concerns, fears, frustrations and amazement, but mountains and trees, too. At the point when I start asking myself questions about things, I'm ready to draw them. By drawing them I give a concrete shape to my problems. I erect a statue to them, as it were. This turns it into something positive: I draw to conquer. For example, in 'Crying Baby' I started from a feature of breast-feeding, until then unknown to me. When it happened to me I was astonished. At the same time I thought it was fantastic: as soon as I started talking about my newborn baby, milk would squirt out of my breasts! I was amazed and yet also almost offended that I had never ever heard of a lyrical poem or story about this phenomenon. Or, that it was used in biology lessons at school to prove that body and mind are one. I wanted to erect a statue to this experience. Another fascination is related to looking in a specialized way. When I look at pictures of women, or women in the flesh so to speak, I scan their bodies quickly for imperfections not tolerated by society: pimples, little hairs but especially cellulitis and stretch marks. When I discover one, which usually is not that difficult especially in 'Playboy', I think- Ha, she too! Of course, it is ridiculous to see such a small blemish on such a large body. I have caught myself

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being on the lookout for these imperfections even on trees. Why are they allowed to have them, I thought?

*The fleshy bodies in your drawings, but also the swirling lines in the background, have an almost fetishistic quality. They are plainly sensuous. The female figures - but perhaps that applies to all the figures in your work - are displayed in an exhibitionistic fashion. At the same time, you present them in all their vulnerability, full of shame.*

I always fall in love with what I draw. Perhaps that is why I chose drawing as a means of relating to things. Often, I hit upon a subject because I am constantly thinking about something, something I am embarrassed about but can't keep my eyes off or my thoughts from; something that I was already searching for in my landscapes: disgust and pleasure at the same time. So then I ask myself: would I dare to draw this? And then I just have to, based on a vague but compelling feeling. I think that that is where the element of exhibitionism comes in. It gives me an enormous powerful feeling to make something I'm afraid of- that it would be ugly or stupid- into something beautiful. Yet, I work also from a feeling of eagerness and greed. In that way sometime I would like to draw a treasure chest full of jewels and gold.

*Many of your drawings show tabooed subjects. Could one say that religious images, as in your drawings of the Virgin Mary and Buddha, are taboo in the arts?*

I didn't have a religious upbringing, so religion isn't a taboo for me. Actually, I feel drawn towards it. For a very long time in the history of art religion was the most important source of subject matter. Nowadays, it is an unspoken rule that one cannot address religious themes in art without irony or cynicism. I don't want to make cynical work. In a playful way I have always believed in God. I'm not too much concerned with Christianity but more in the fact of believing. I am very credulous. Sometimes that is awkward, yet it also serves me well. It gives me the capacity to take the vague for true. Five years ago I drew a 'Mary as a Mountain' for the first time. Suddenly I realized that most religions don't have a female God. And at the same time, it dawned on me that at art school I had only male teachers. And also that there were never any references made to female artists. On a cultural level, I had never identified myself with a woman. From a cultural viewpoint my female identity was a blind spot. It's like a kind of nourishment, a food of primordial information that you need as a woman: when you don't get it, at first you don't really notice it. But in the long run it results in a deficiency. I've been drawing 'Mary as a Mountain' for five years now, over and over again. This constant repetition enables me to study this theme in depth. I don't know what I really want with this Mary, I just trust that at some point I will arrive at the answer automatically. That is what I mean with my belief in the power of subtlety. Usually subtlety seems insignificant, it only becomes significant when you zoom in. That's why I don't have any problems with visualizing vague feelings like indolence or not-knowing. At present I'm drawing turbulence, which I consider to be a primeval phenomenon just like 'ignorance' and 'animality'. I draw them as exercises in abandonment in the basic assumption that ultimately it will pay off and lead me to something.

*If I make a list of all your themes it strikes me that they are all taboos. I never associated your female figures with concepts such as smooth, beautiful, seductive and uncomplicated. What would a lustful femininity look like in your work?*

In principle, lustfulness has nothing to do with visual beauty, but everything to do with abandonment. At the same time I have to admit that the ideals of beauty were so deeply



drilled into me, I still cannot really separate lustful from beautiful. And also my sense of shame gets in the way. If I'm honest, I think I would find a woman who is uninhibitedly lustful very embarrassing to look at. To me, she would look like a monkey who's happy.