© Sebastiaan Bremer – Susanna Surprised by the Elders, 2011, Inks and Acryllics on C-Print, 111.76 x 162.56 cm. Photo by Jodokus Driessen

Sebastiaan Bremer

Nudes and Revolutions

EYEMAZING EXHIBITION

© Sebastiaan Bremer – Imperial Bedroom, 2008, Acrylic an Inks on Gelatin Silver Print, 61 x 49.5 cm. Photo by: Frank Oudeman

Artists have intermingled the mediums of photography and painting since the inception of photography in the nineteenth century. Even further back, according to David Hockney's Secret Knowledge, painters of the Renaissance used optic tools such as the camera obscura and the camera lucida to usher in a new era of realism in Western art. Once these techniques were finally captured through chemicals as photographs, painting and photography began a process of defining and redefining each other and their conceptual underpinnings. Within a century, photography helped to liberate painting from its illustrative obligation, while artists and theorists released photography from the limitations of realism and documentation.

But despite the emancipation of postmodernism, the things that we see in a photograph, the pictorial assumptions that remain convincingly tied to life, are hard to undermine. Which is why the work of Sebastiaan Bremer is so surprisingly effective. He paints on photographs, which would not be extraordinary but for the startling effect he achieves. His specific painting style, combined with an eye for compatible photographic subject and composition, opens his pictures into a world that feels newly discovered. At once appealing and mystifying, Bremer's hybrid works are striking in their immediate impact and mesmerising as they reveal themselves, slowly, with continued scrutiny. Similar to the breathe of new life William Kentridge has given to the hybrid of charcoal drawing and film, Bremer's work gracefully carves out a form of photography that has not really existed, in just this way, before. With all the charm, but not the rigidity, of a lenticular image, Bremer's works transform before the eye, encouraging the viewer to move physically in order to read into their shifting perspectives of both space and time.

This past spring Bremer exhibited a new series of work, ambitious in both scale and content, representing a leap forward in his own style and a leap across an impressive span of historical inspiration. *EYEMAZING* had the opportunity to discuss the new work with Bremer during the exhibition and to delve into some of the ideas and process behind his remarkable work.

Heather Snider (for *EYEMAZING*): Your current show at Edwynn Houk Gallery is titled *Nudes and Revolutions*. Can you tell us about the exhibition title?

Sebastiaan Bremer: The works in the show are divided into two groups of subject matter, one the traditional idea of the painter's studio and working with the female nude, and the other what I would call revolution. The latter idea is what I started out with, prompted by reading about the French Revolution, and thinking about our changing world. I have been thinking about the failure of so many belief structures —political systems, religions, technologies—all have their clear failures and no one can be too sure about a way forward for the world. In my view, the West has lost it's clear cultural, technological and political dominance, and this is opening a way for something else—but what? What is the alternative? What do you put in its place? I have no answers but I kept thinking about empires and revolution, and ended up making a series of works about this.

HS: This show delves into a range of historical imagery whereas you typically work with your own photographs or family snapshots. Can you explain where the underlying photographs for the new work come from and what drew you to them?

SB: Some of the works in this show are based, as in my previous work, on photographs from my personal photo archive. Other works are based on images suggested to me by Eva Kalis from the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. She knew of a commission I had done for the LACMA, in which I referred to works in their collection, and suggested that I look at the photographs George Henrik Breitner made as studies for his paintings. They are in the Rijksmuseum collection and were free for me to use. Breitner had an obsession with Rembrandt, and I noticed that he often posed his models in a similar way. Their contemporaries accused both of making their nudes too "real". Working with such a traditional painter's subject tickled me, especially since the work would be shown for the first time in a photography gallery.
I had planned to make prints from the original negatives, but there was an issue regarding stipulations of

© Sebastiaan Bremer – First Second Doll, 2010, Ink and Acrylic C-Print, 26.5 x 34.5 cm. Photo by: Frank Oudeman

© Sebastiaan Bremer – Judiths Anatomy lesson, 2011, Inks and Acrylics on C-Print, 123.82 x 110.81 cm. Photo by: Jodokus Driessen

the original donation of these particular works to the Rijksmuseum, so I was not able to do this. After a moment of despair I decided to use the iPhone pictures I had taken as visual notes of the photographs, which in the end made the whole project much more interesting to me. Not only was I free to use them, but the works now had another layer of distance and technology, along with reflections of my orange jacket, overhead lights, moiré effects, and the present time—a little layer of transgression and punk. The reuse of the old Rembrandt nudes by way of Breitner's images, which in turn were shot with my iPhone, makes for another turn, another revolution, going back to the title of the show.

HS: *The Second Doll* and *Susanna surprised by the Elders* both contain recognisable Rembrandt references. Can you talk about your "relationship" with Rembrandt, and how you connect to his work from a contemporary, personal perspective?

SB: Rembrandt's work is so multi faceted—I never thought I would be able to use his work until a few years back when I looked at him while creating *The Robing of the Jewish Bride*, which was drawn onto a polaroid I shot around 1995. Originally, I considered works that were too specific to him to pillage, if that makes sense. Artists like Vermeer and Rembrandt are so big and in-your-face in Holland, you don't really consider them as artists but more as founding fathers, or touristic stalwarts; you can't really look at them properly. But Rembrandt's overt ransacking of other artists' paintings for body parts and compositions made me think again. When following his work you end up in such a rich place. His drawings, which are undeniably of his hand are, when traced or copied, incredibly naturalistic or photo-realistic in a way I cannot really comprehend. His humanity is so strong, it shines through all he does. Previously, as with the LACMA work, I felt most comfortable using details from paintings by artists like Kalf, who painted in an almost hyper-realistic way, and whose imagery seems easily integrated into the rest of the work. There is a passage in Gary Schwartz' *Rembrandt* book wherein he quotes a seventeenth century painter's book in reference to Rembrandt's borrowing: "In a famous passage of his Schilder-Boeck, Karel van Mander compared picture making to cooking. In his advice to young painters, he writes with a culinary pun: 'Steal arms, legs, bodies, feet. Here it is not forbidden. He who wants (to succeed) will have to act the part of Rapiamus ('Let us steal'—treated as a proper name, as if a character in a play). Well cooked rapes make good porridge.'"

HS: How has working within the footsteps of another artist and photographer affected what you are doing and where you feel you are going with your work? You dealt with this in many ways in the Brazil based *Invasoes Holandesas* work, was that a sort of bridge to the current series?

SB: I tend to go back and forth in my use of photographs and subject matter. Serendipity plays a large part in the way my works come about. I do have a desire sometimes to do a certain group of works, but events and people can take me in a completely new direction, and I try to have faith in that. I usually have an idea, and only later stumble upon the right image to draw upon in my boxes of pictures. I rarely set out to take a picture beforehand to use, although sometimes I do. The *Invasoes Holandesas* series was different in that the underlying imagery consisted of almost impersonal photographs, made around the year 1900, for use in geography classes and libraries. I layered three images on top of each other to create the final prints, then I drew my interpretation of the complexity of present day Brazil, tying it all together in a way. Sometimes the function of the imagery underneath is little more than a vague melody in the background, informing my work but staying mostly invisible. Sometimes it's much more prominent. I think in order for a work to be successful it needs to be taken on its own terms. I find that most plans change and most rules that I have at the outset are broken.

HS: You have often said that your work is about time, and how time is a fluid experience incorporating memories, perception, and a process of overlapping that you echo in the layering of imagery and materials in your work. Your leap back in history to Rembrandt traverses not only four-hundred years of time, but also the cultural impact made by an icon of Western culture. How have your thoughts about time evolved through the process of connecting to such a distant era, and such a powerful artistic legacy?

SB: Here in New York you have such a large part of the Dutch and the world's cultural heritage. Seeing the Dutch paintings in the museum always gives me a start—the place that they depict is so familiar. They don't look too different from the Holland I remember. But being far away from Holland has made me look at Dutch art and the superstars, like Vermeer and Rembrandt, without much worry about their fame. I doubt I would behave this way had I never left Holland. As far as the distance in time, one thing that never ceases to amaze me is how close our experience can be to people who lived so long ago. If you read poetry from another era, or hear a play, or see art, it's still very recognisable. The human experience is amazingly stable and sometimes frustratingly so—we don't evolve that fast. For all our progress we remain stuck in the same bag of skin and still strain to connect and understand ourselves and the world, not unlike how it was in the 1600s or even 2000 BC for that matter.

HS: Your titles are always intriguing and usually somewhat ambiguous; the work featured here is no exception. What is your intention with your titles and how do you feel about discussing the meanings or intent of your titles?

SB: I always find it hard to title a work, but using *Untitled* gets more in the way of seeing a work than I'd like to allow. I think it sounds quite forbidding. If someone is going to take the effort to look at the work I should take the effort to title it. The titles generally allude to the origins and ideas of the work, and hopefully they provide a way in. You can dissect works and titles, and I am sure for some that is interesting, like solving a puzzle. On the other hand, with a puzzle I think a large part of the experience is also in the effort of putting it together yourself and getting a bit adrift while you do that—ending up somewhere of your own. The images and allusions in the title and material of the work are the building blocks of the piece; in the end I hope it will be more than the sum of those parts.

HS: Let's look at *Judith's Anatomy Lesson* for instance. Given the reference to Rembrandt throughout this series, I can only assume the title refers to *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, but the central photograph appears to be from an unrelated source and the painted figure to the left is taken from the Rembrandt etching *Woman Bathing Her Feet at a Brook*. It is easy to feel a bit lost amidst the references. Can you guide us through your ideas and imagery in this piece?

SB: The woman in the photograph, taken by Breitner, is looking at a copy of T*he Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, on the wall. How that got into the atelier of Breitner I don't know. But there it is. I only saw it upon close inspection of the photograph. She was posed not unlike a *Woman Bathing Her Feet at a Brook*, but facing the other way. Judith and Holofernes is a famous scene much painted but not by Rembrandt (as far as I know there is only a sketch Rembrandt made of this scene, but not a finished work of any kind.) There is usually a second woman in the picture, a servant with a bag to stuff the head in after decapitation. So, I gave the woman in *Judith's Anatomy Lesson* a bag to hold, also because the composition needed it. I thought the idea of the woman having an anatomy lesson prior to the meeting with Holofernes made sense. The work has many other possible interpretations but I prefer to leave this dissection to others.

HS: There is an odd figure at the lower left, it is driving me crazy trying to figure out what it is, can you help? Am I looking too hard, or is it purposefully abstruse? How important is it to you that the elements of your work are legible, as opposed to being read as abstractions, or personal interpretation?

SB: This shape is part of the hat on the floor, but it kept looking like a woman's crotch to me, especially as imagined by Bellmer in his dolls. Since *The Second Doll*, another piece in the show, is a clear version of a Bellmer doll, I felt that a little connection to that piece was in order. Bellmer's work has been of great inspiration to me and I wanted to pay homage to him. I take great pleasure in adding elements such as these, some clearer than others.

HS: Vince Aletti humorously described your lively painting style as giving your work the effect of "being eaten away from within by some Art Nouveau virus." Your elegant doodling and filigree lines have a life of their own even while coming together to be surprisingly illustrative. Where do you think this style of yours came from, or evolved?

SB: The first works like this were started around

© Sebastiaan Bremer – Black Slipping Banquet, 2008, Acrylic and Inks on Gelatin Silver Print on Fiber Paper, 117.5 x 123 cm. Photo by Frank Oudeman

© Sebastiaan Bremer – Cat and sleeping puppy in the Atelier, 2011, Inks and Acrylics on C-Print, 67.63 x 99.38 cm. Photo by: Jodokus Driessen

1997. This way of drawing felt right, freeing, and became a way to literally record time, dot by dot, like an old phonograph needle recording the sound waves on a surface. It felt good and besides, I never really liked the way lines worked as a sieve on a work, a screen. Little dots and marks find their place and let the image breathe more around it. Images appear, sometimes intentionally, sometimes in an almost subconscious way. Later on I realised that there is much precedent for the using of dots in art, from Australian aboriginal painting on to many contemporary artists as well. Another thing I always loved was how Vermeer's way of painting with tiny blobs of paint, in *The Milkmaid* for instance, corresponded with the ideas that Van Leeuwenhoek had about the material world consisting of globules (the seventeenth century version of molecules and atoms). It took a while before I found the stamina to finish a larger piece, and also before I gave myself the OK to pursue this for real, to get a proper, expensive print made and then deface it.

HS: Did you ever have an "ah ha" moment in which you decided to start painting right on the photographs? Was there a logical progression from your early work of transcribing photographs in paint, to then painting directly on to photographs? Or would you say rather that it came in jumps and starts? Was there a catalyst, a turning point that you can identify?

SB: Jumps and starts is more like it. I never really had proper training in an art school so it's all just based on my own tastes and desires. There was never anyone telling me what to do or where to go next. I used to paint and use photographs as source material. A large part of my painting consisted of transposing the photographic image on a canvas by hand. Then I would do a little flourish on top, to make the work as I imagined it. At some point I found I wanted to get away from everything that I found boring in my process, so I started to work directly on photographs. Then I found that I could enter the photographic "reality" by using small marks. I could get into the substance of the image, squeezing into the work as it were, in between the molecules, or better still the small dots that the photographic image consists of. Sometimes it was hard to tell where the picture ended and my marks began. It became a way to add what I imagined when I saw an image, a way to show things through my eyes.

There was not a true turning point, but there was an image I had that I loved and didn't know how I could make better than the source material. I desperately wanted to use this image, but to what effect I could not tell. It was a beautiful image, representing a perfect moment of ambiguity. It was captured in water but neither flying nor swimming, really free, in no specific place, no gender, just perfectly otherworldly. Heavenly. I had a bit of a crisis in where to go with my work at that point and just decided to go for it and take the plunge, but what that meant was totally unknown to me. Then, in our apartment in the East Village, I got a phone call from my wife who was at the airport, about to return from her hometown in Brazil to New York, and she was afraid to fly. I told her all was fine and there was nothing to worry about. After hanging up the phone I started working with a lattice work of dots on a corner on the photograph. I began to second guess my statement that all would be well with her flight, and got into a serious bout of magical thinking. I could not sleep and became afraid to. I resolved to continue drawing the slight waves on the image, seemingly holding the person in the picture afloat, imagining that if I kept going all would be well. This work, *I held my breath for 13 hours afraid she wouldn't come home*, was a kind of a breakthrough in the sense that I felt I could put disparate things together, with another kind of logic. It's something powerful and meaningful, however slight and ridiculous it might seem sometimes. Deeply felt things are in a weird way really real. It's amazing how certain things just get a talismanic power.

HS: How long does it take you to make one of your pieces? Do some come together much faster or easier than others? Do you ever get stuck or does the work flow pretty well once you're going?

SB: The one I just mentioned was made in one sitting of around thirteen hours, but sometimes I work on a piece on and off for years, as in *Waterfall*, (2008-2011) in the show at Edwynn Houk, or in the *Triptych* (*Spinoza's Trials*), 2009. It really depends on many things, but for one—how much I know about what I want to do. I think they take about the same time as it takes to make an oil painting. Some works I make more by free association, letting ideas come and go and form organically through drawing. With other

© Sebastiaan Bremer – Leda and the swan, 2011, Inks and Acrylics on C-Print, 101.28 x 80.65 cm. Photo by: Frank Oudeman

© Sebastiaan Bremer – Frown, 2004, Inks on C-Print, 40 x 40 cm. Photo by: Jodokus Driessen

works there is a specific agenda at the outset, which I will more or less stick to while working on the piece. I do have a drawer of work that has been abandoned. Sometimes I pick them up again years later, which can be a trip, working with your seven-years-younger-self on the same piece.

HS: Your painting style is in many ways opposite to what Rembrandt did. Whereas he had an uncanny ability to transform two dimensions into something so solid, and lifelike, you use paint to create imagery that seems to slip back and forth between dimensions. As you wander creatively through his world, and his history, where do you find yourself? Do you feel like a painter? A photographer? An upstart? A portal?

SB: I have no idea. My work gets called photography, painting, or drawing, depending on who is talking. I guess it's an amalgam of all the above. I think most artists mix media, and are not really concerned with what medium they use. At issue is more what they want to say, by whatever means. I have been drawing since I was young and I feel most comfortable when I sit at a table, so that is how I work most of the time. When I guest-teach here in the US and in Europe I find that most art students are crossing borders all the time.

The painting department students tend to make sculpture and photography as much as the students in the sculpture or photography departments, and vice versa. I like it when I can't entirely figure out how a thing is made at first glance. Like a slight of hand trick – at some point you just have to give up and look at whatever you are standing in front of, and get lost for a little while. Sometimes in museums you see people doing a funny dance, moving back and forth: they lean in to see the image disintegrate and become paint blobs, and then they go back out again to see the image cohere. I think for a lot of us that moment of transition is fascinating. Perhaps we all like to be fooled and want to see how it all comes together and falls apart. And even if you know how, it can still be magical.

Text By Heather Snider

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