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Left: Jeroen de Rijke/Willem de Rooij, *Orange*, 2004, one of a sequence of eighty-one 35-mm color slides, soundproof box, dimensions variable. Above: Jeroen de Rijke/Willem de Rooij, *Bouquet I*, 2002, flowers, vase, wooden pedestal, written description, list of flowers. From the series "Bouquets," 2002–. Installation view, Galerie Buchholz, Cologne.

FLORAL IMPERATIVE

DANIEL BIRNBAUM ON THE ART OF WILLEM DE ROOIJ

WHETHER AS A CREATOR of ravishing bouquets and sumptuous textiles or as a curator of disparate but uniformly stunning objects, **WILLEM DE ROOIJ** has never shied away from beauty. But, as **DANIEL BIRNBAUM** argues in the pages that follow, de Rooij has been equally unflinching in his insistence on the political and historical dimensions of aesthetic experience, from imperialist tropes that have persisted across centuries to the modernist tension between allegory and abstraction. In advance of the Dutch artist's exhibition at Frankfurt's Museum für Moderne Kunst—MMK 2 next month—a show that will trace the arc of de Rooij's career, from works he created with Jeroen de Rijke to his practice as it has unfolded since his collaborator's untimely death in 2006—Birnbaum elucidates de Rooij's seductive investigations of form, both its engagement and its autonomy.

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IN THE LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, Dutch artist Melchior d'Hondecoeter painted a suite of curious avian fantasias. These pictures, whose extravagantly plumed subjects are depicted in elegant gardens or unspoiled wilderness, have lost none of their charm, but viewers today may feel a certain uneasiness in their contemplation. If you are used to thinking about art in terms of its historical and political contexts, you can hardly help noticing that in these beguiling scenes we find European and "exotic" birds improbably commingling under the dominion of the Western eye. Though d'Hondecoeter's artistic achievements did not rise to the level of Shakespeare's, say, his canvases prompt a comparison to one of the Bard's greatest works, *The Tempest*. Like that play, d'Hondecoeter's paintings transform imperialist delusion into visionary art, and enchant and trouble the contemporary viewer in all their problematic glory, their rendering of empire as form.

For his 2010 installation *Intolerance*, Willem de Rooij hung these paintings in Berlin's glassy high-

modernist Neue Nationalgalerie. However, while the artist had clearly conceived *Intolerance* as a confrontation of sorts, it was not a face-off between d'Hondecoeter and Mies van der Rohe. Rather, the paintings were brought together with another group of works: an array of pre-twentieth-century ritual objects from Hawaii, all incorporating feathers. The sumptuous canvases and the lavish feathered pieces had been painstakingly gathered from numerous far-flung collections. The pictures were hung on both sides of a freestanding light-gray wall, while the works of the unknown Hawaiian creators appeared in large, brightly lit niches set into this partition. Within the exhibition itself, there was no discursive attempt to reconcile or synthesize the heterogeneous items. But the artist insisted that a three-volume publication should be seen as integral to the project. Thus *Intolerance* comprises not only the installation but also a catalogue raisonné of all known feathered objects (effigies, helmets, capes) created in Hawaii before 1900, as well as the first comprehensive examination of d'Hondecoeter's oeuvre, not



Top: Willem de Rooij's *Intolerance* (Feymedia, 2010).

Above: *Kū'i hulu manu* (feathered-god figure), Hawaii, n.d., feathers, mother-of-pearl, human hair, dog teeth, seedpods, 26 × 9 × 14 1/2".

Left: Willem de Rooij, *Intolerance*, 2010, Hawaiian feathered objects, oil paintings by Melchior d'Hondecoeter. Installation view, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin. Photo: Jens Ziehe.

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Left: Melchior d'Hondecoeter, *A Pelican and Other Birds near a Pool (The Floating Feather)*, ca. 1680, oil on canvas, 63 1/2 x 56 3/4".

Above: Willem de Rooij, *Birds in a Park* (detail), 2007, works by Keren Cytter, Isa Genzken, and Fong Leng. Installation view, Galerie Buchholz, Cologne. Three garments by Fong Leng, 1976–82.

What the artist's vivid and gorgeous flowers remind us of is this: **Beauty works.** It wreaks its effects on us whether we want it to or not.

to mention scholars' commentary from the perspectives of art history, economics, and anthropology.

In talking about the project, de Rooij tends to make his selection of artifacts appear simple and straightforward, suggesting that his choices were based on the works' attractiveness. He presents his decision to commission book-length studies of Hawaiian featherwork and of a seventeenth-century animalier as the result of pure intellectual curiosity: "I wanted to know more, but couldn't find anything—because it didn't exist," he said in a 2010 interview. "So I decided to facilitate the production of the knowledge I'd been searching for." But there is nothing self-evident about selecting and studying the two categories of precious item showcased in the installa-

tion. For, though linked by their aesthetic appeal, their function as prestige objects, and, of course, by the motif of feathers, the paintings and ritual items seem to have virtually nothing in common. And yet, in spite of being fundamentally fractured, the installation *did* feel self-evident, as if its elements had been waiting for this moment of confrontation and concurrence. The display at the Neue Nationalgalerie—which marked a turning point in de Rooij's career, as his first major project since the untimely death of his longtime collaborator, Jeroen de Rijke, in 2006—conveyed a sense of being not merely an amassment of fascinating things but a work of art.

To be sure, this sense of striking coherence and visual impact has been a recurring characteristic of

de Rooij's works, both those made with de Rijke and in his own production since 2006. His forte is the creation of an impression of disparate elements coming together into an arrangement of a higher aesthetic order—whether the items in question are feathers, threads, flowers, or works by other artists. He used this facility in the transitional period preceding the Berlin exhibition in a series of curatorial gestures, almost Duchampian in their subtlety, that became legible only retroactively, as a maze of allusions to both the past and the future. These transitional projects, *The Floating Feather*, 2006–2007, at Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris and *Birds in a Park*, 2007, at Galerie Buchholz in Cologne, were announced via enigmatic invitation cards displaying images of exotic birds,

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Left and below: Jeroen de Rijke/
Willem de Rooij, *Bouquet IV*
(details), 2005, gelatin silver print
with aluminum frame, flowers,
white ceramic vase, written
description, list of flowers; print:
48 1/4 x 48 1/4", flowers: dimensions
variable. From the series
"Bouquets," 2002-.



perfectly rendered in oil on canvas. Back then, nobody who received these cards, myself included, had ever heard of d'Hondecoeter or seen either of the paintings whose titles de Rooij had appropriated. In both press releases, de Rooij made the slightly cryptic claim that "the painting and what it represents—rather than its title—could be seen as an emblem for the exhibition." The exhibitions themselves proved to contain not seventeenth-century paintings but rather works by Keren Cytter and Isa Genzken, two artists close to de Rooij, and by fashion designer Fong Leng, who in the 1970s successfully instrumentalized her ambiguous, exotic Chinese-Dutch heritage as part of her branding. These three cultural producers seemed almost to be standing in as proxies for de Rooij himself—as if, immediately after the demise of his collaborator, he had to find provisional modes of operation before a project like *Intolerance* could seem possible, and so had found it necessary to disguise himself as a curator busy assembling works by others.

There are, of course, techniques and traditions for gathering, collecting, and arranging aesthetic components that are older and distinct from modernist collage/montage and post-postmodern algorithmic search and aggregation. De Rooij has continued to look to such precedents, just as he and de Rijke did. Perhaps the quintessential example here would be the "Bouquets," 2002–, which were a signature element of de Rijke/de Rooij's oeuvre and which de Rooij has continued to produce on his own. Consider *Bouquet IV*, 2005, an abundant cluster of dahlias, chrysanthemums, and other blooms realized with the Cologne florist Mathias Thevissen. In an admirably precise statement that revealed how thoroughly he'd absorbed the precepts of flower arranging, de Rooij enumerated the bouquet's key qualities:

The overall impression of the arrangement is dense and compact; all flowers have the same height and thus form quite an even, dome-like shape. The hierarchy between the flowers is designated by their colors and shapes, not by means of their placement within the arrangement. In other words: the different flowers are evenly distributed over the whole, never coming to a concentration of any sort in any area. An exception are the euphorbia and the lisanthia. Although they are also distributed in an even rhythm over the total ensemble, parts of these flowers extend somewhat higher than the other sorts, thus forming protrusions above the entire surface of the piece.

If the foregoing suggests painstaking attention to detail, the payoff of such meticulousness is very much in evidence in the work. Almost anyone who has come across the bouquet, or the artists' photographic rendering of it, would agree that it gives expression to a sense of harmony. Most people would, I think, use the word *beauty*. The palette is naturally crucial to this effect:

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Left: Jeroen de Rooij, "Willem de Rooij, Bouquet V, 2010, ninety-five species of flowers, vase, written description, list of flowers. From the series "Bouquets," 2002-. Installation view, Galerie Buchholz, Cologne.

Above: Jeroen de Rooij, "Willem de Rooij, Bouquet II, 2003, flowers, vase, essay, written description, list of flowers. From the series "Bouquets," 2002-. Installation view, Rugan Projects, Los Angeles.

Right: Agbani Darego crowns Azra Akin as Miss World, Alexandra Palace, London, December 2, 2002. Photo: Hugo Philpott/AFP/Getty Images.



De Rooij's works might exist as physical crystallizations, but their logic owes much to the tactics of film: framing, cutting, editing, and, above all, focus.

The essence of *Bouquet IV* lies within its color palette, which extends to many different varieties and mild shades of pink, peach, orange yellow, light green . . . and even soft blue . . . but never arrives at an extreme. Avoided are whites or light yellows on one side of the spectrum, and reds, purples, or deep blues on the other. There are no green leaves whatsoever. The hydrangea—which are quite large and could appear slightly dark in tone in comparison to the other flowers—are neutralized by smaller and lighter flowers placed in their hearts.

In this work, it seems, we find ourselves face-to-face with beauty in its purest form. If this in itself makes the piece a provocation in the context of contemporary art, with a long-standing antiaesthetic chip on its shoulder, another of the duo's flower pieces, *Bouquet II*, 2003, is even riskier. A kind of instruction piece, *Bouquet II* includes a florist's account of the quantities of flowers to be used (" . . . ten white French tulips, thirty red ranunculus, ten red French tulips . . . "), a signed certificate of authenticity, and a copy of a text by the artists, titled "Azra Akin, Agbani Darego, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Amina Lawal." Originally published in an Austrian art magazine, the essay traces a tangle of controversies that unfolded in the early years of the millennium, interconnecting the four women of the title. This chronicle, which touches on Islamic fundamentalism, European racism, and populist nationalism,

is too intricate to summarize in detail. Suffice to say, it centers on a northern Nigerian sharia court's decision to sentence Amina Lawal to death by stoning because she'd had a baby while unmarried. In the wake of the international uproar that followed, the 2002 Miss World pageant was moved from Abuja, Nigeria, to London. A photograph of Agbani Darego, the winner of the 2001 pageant and a Nigerian citizen, embracing Azra Akin, her Turkish-Dutch successor, had been the inspiration for the flower composition, realized by LA celebrity florist Joseph Free.

Religion, feminism, Islamophobia, sexism, and racism, all encoded in a bouquet of flowers: What, exactly, are we to make of this? And, in fact, the question may be more broadly applied, since this kind of compression and aestheticization of discursive labyrinths is a consistent feature of de Rooij's practice. Certainly, his work is marked by its discursive complexity—as epitomized by the three-volume *Intolerance* publication—and by its address of global political and cultural histories. His art often alludes to his native Netherlands' colonial past as well as to the rise of new forms of European nationalism, the populist representatives of which have been especially vociferous in Dutch politics. He consistently looks to non-Western aesthetic traditions, particularly to the art and architecture of the Islamic world, and these rich amalgams of allusion and citation are, as often as not, distilled into

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Willem de Rooij, *Residual*, 2012.
Jacob van Ruisdael's *View of Bentheim Castle from the North-West*, ca. 1655, climate- and humidity-controlled display case. Installation views, Bentheim Castle, Bad Bentheim, Germany, 2012–. Photos: Jens Ziehe.



the kind of precise, arresting visual gesture embodied by the bouquets. What these vivid and gorgeous flowers remind us of is this: Beauty *works*. It wreaks its effects on us whether we want it to or not. There's no easy way to negotiate the role of this “beauty effect” in de Rooij's art, because there is no easy way to negotiate it anywhere else. His work often confronts us with the same kind of unease we feel in the face of d'Hondecoeter's paintings. There is a kind of critical reuptake here, in other words, whereby the politics of beauty weave themselves back into de Rooij's work not via any explicit critique of beauty, but rather via the artist's embedding of beauty qua beauty, in all its seemingly universal, uncritical splendor, within complex frameworks—ideological, ethical. The very title of his magisterial *Intolerance* seems to insist on the necessity of constructing this type of frame, alluding as it does to the 1916 film of that name, D. W. Griffith's defiant follow-up to *Birth of a Nation* (1915). In calling his sprawling epic *Intolerance*, Griffith was not, as some have claimed, apologizing for *Birth of a Nation*—a work that is both a tour de force of cinematic bril-

liance and a shameful monument to the grotesque racism at the core of the colonial project—but rather was castigating those critics who had been “intolerant” of his 1915 ode to the Ku Klux Klan. Via its title, de Rooij's installation accesses a complex history of racism and its representations, exposing the continuity between the institution of slavery in the United States and the imperial aspirations of the Dutch, linking them in the same vast web of historical implication from which no beautiful object can free itself.

The processes of reduction that de Rooij undertakes so brilliantly, producing powerful visual moments that punctuate whatever constellation they are part of, may perhaps be productively construed in cinematic terms. His works might exist as physical crystallizations, but their logic owes much to the tactics of film: framing, cutting, editing, and, above all, focus. The very concept of focus presupposes a dialectic between discreteness and contextual embeddedness: To focus is to draw attention to *this* by ignoring *that*. In the act of bringing an image into focus, the film-

maker prompts scrutiny of an object while also articulating the fact that the rest of the world is still out there, beyond the edge of the frame. This dialectic is key to de Rooij's work, where the same meticulous care is given to display elements and framing devices as to the art itself. When de Rooij exhibited a single painting by a seventeenth-century master (Jacob van Ruisdael's *View of Bentheim Castle from the North-West*, ca. 1655) in a display case, as in the 2012 project *Residual*, he made visible the technical considerations of conservation—humidity, light, temperature, security—by installing all the control devices in such a way that their digital displays could be read in the lower part of the vitrine, while their cables extended to the upper compartment, which contained the painting itself, in its heavy golden frame, suspended in midair and visible from all sides. Together, the painting and the glass case constituted a kind of filmic zooming and pulling back, a broadening focus that opened onto its own context: that of the institutional and economic structures that museums tend to hide.

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Above: Three stills from Jeroen de Rijke/Willem de Rooij's *The Point of Departure*, 2002, 35 mm, color, sound, 26 minutes.



Montage and abstraction—association and reduction, the twin faces of modernist form—stand at the center of the artist's preoccupations.

No, context cannot be shut out, nor can art escape it—but not, of course, for lack of trying. De Rooij's work can be seen as a trenchant, lifelong investigation into this predicament of montage—the act of juxtaposition, of recognizing the frame—and abstraction: the apogee of the modernist quest for artistic autonomy. Montage and abstraction—association and reduction, the twin faces of modernist form—stand at the center of the artist's preoccupations, perhaps most explicitly in his and de Rijke's well-known piece *Orange*, 2004, a work that consists of eighty-one monochromatic slides projected in succession on a white wall. The hue varies slightly from slide to slide, but there is nothing in any of the images to assist the viewer in transcending the realm of pure color and finding some kind of signification. However, a written statement by the artists weaves a dense network of associations that include the tendency of cinematographers to eschew the color orange because it makes skin appear unrealistically pink; the distinctive "safety orange" of the overalls worn by Guantánamo Bay prisoners; and the increasingly admired Dutch monarchy, whose popularity, according to the artists, goes hand in hand with the rise of neonationalism and xenophobia in the Netherlands. Not since the end of World War II, they say, has there been such support for the family of Queen Beatrix, aka the House of

Orange. By 2004, the repressed significations of the monochrome had been investigated by many artists. But *Orange* did something slightly different. It did not deploy the monochrome in order to wryly expose modernism's delusions. Rather, it mobilized the monochrome's status as a signifier—but an inevitably and radically indeterminate signifier, one capable of holding various meanings in unresolved, simultaneous suspension. One is tempted to say that, like a vase in which flowers commingle, the monochrome in *Orange* becomes a vessel of sorts, one capable of holding together intricately complex historical and political meanings.

An impulse to activate this paradoxical potential of abstraction appears, in nascent form, early in de Rijke/de Rooij's work: It is the animating force of their 1997 film *I'm Coming Home in Forty Days*, where the monochrome is a kind of hovering presence—but not a stable one. Shot from a passing ship, the film progresses from a depthless and featureless bluish expanse to the emergence of a massive iceberg, clearly three-dimensional and yet continuously blending in with sky and ocean, creating a sense of perceptual uncertainty. A parallel progression toward representation occurs in other films by the duo, such as *Bantar Gebang*, 2000. In one continuous ten-minute take, the film presents the

Below, from top: Jeroen de Rijke/Willem de Rooij, *Orange*, 2004, sequence of eighty-one 35-mm color slides, soundproof box. Installation view, Secession, Vienna, 2005–2006. Jeroen de Rijke/Willem de Rooij, *I'm Coming Home in Forty Days*, 1997, 16 mm, color, sound, 15 minutes. Jeroen de Rijke/Willem de Rooij, *Bantar Gebang*, 2000, 35 mm, color, sound, 10 minutes.



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A flat surface attached to a stretcher will always signal that we are looking at a painting, but De Rooij's works are something else, hybrid forms in which the legacies of Islamic textile art and modernist painting are poised in balance.

dawning of a new day: We begin in a state of visual indeterminacy, but slowly discern that we are witnessing sunrise in a slum of Jakarta—a city that was once the capital of the Dutch East Indies. And in the pair's 2002 film *The Point of Departure*, as the camera slowly zooms out, unidentifiable forms gradually reveal themselves to be details of an intricately patterned carpet from Azerbaijan.

There are echoes in *Point of Departure* of an unrealized exhibition concept from the late 1990s: Shortly after finishing *I'm Coming Home in Forty Days*, as de Rooij would later recall, the artists decided that the film should be projected in a room "in which an oriental rug would cover the floor" because they felt that "the cool blue of the film would combine beautifully with the warm carpet colors, but we also felt that the abstract quality of the floral motifs would fit the

crystalline structure of the ice." While that particular display remained unrealized, de Rooij's recollection suggests that abstraction in his work has always drawn equally from two nonrepresentational traditions, modernist and Islamic. With this genealogy in mind, de Rooij's recent textile works take on additional resonance. At first glance, they are reminiscent of Blinky Palermo's fabric "paintings." They may initially appear monochromatic, but on closer inspection, iridescent threads create more ambivalent and oscillating effects. The handmade fabrics were produced by artisanal weaver Ulla Schünemann but designed by de Rooij, who gave extensive thought to the thickness of the threads, the materials from which they would be spun, and the visual effects that would be produced by their crisscrossing in the weaving process. The minute attention to detail so evident in all

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Opposite page: Willem de Rooij, *Braun, Dreieck (detail)*, 2015, polyester thread, metal threads, 5' 1 1/4" x 10' 3" x 2 1/4".

Above: View of "Willem de Rooij: Rye Wonk," 2015, Petzel Gallery, New York. From left: *We Really Log*, 2015; *Regrown Lab*, 2015; *Bouquet XV*, 2015. Photo: Jason Mandella.

his work here gives rise to a world of singular pictorial objects. A flat surface attached to a stretcher will always signal that what we are looking at is a painting, but ultimately these works are something else, hybrid forms in which the legacies of Islamic textile art and modernist painting are poised in balance.

There was no elaborate display concept when these works went on view at New York's Petzel Gallery in spring 2015, no freestanding walls or niches. But there were several new bouquets that, in their luxuriant scale and bold, somewhat eccentric palettes (mustard and violet, e.g.), could not have asserted their presence more powerfully. Clearly, the implicit context here was that of de Rooij's practice itself—as will be the case in his upcoming show at Frankfurt's Museum für Moderne Kunst—MMK 2, where works by Fong Leng will be juxtaposed with key projects by de Rijke/

de Rooij, along with recent textiles and flower arrangements signed by de Rooij himself, in a complex orchestration of personal and historical temporalities. In a sense, the elegant and beautiful tapestries, so carefully conceived and exquisitely executed, are emblematic of the artist's ever more impressive distillations of ornament and abstraction, form and signification. At the same time, they cannot really be said to emblemize anything. Rather, they operate as something much more elusive, remarkable, and crucial: instances of abstraction that cut right through the textures of meaning that we tend to read into works of art. □

"Willem de Rooij," curated by Klaus Görner, will be on view at Museum für Moderne Kunst—MMK 2, Frankfurt, Oct. 15, 2016–Feb. 19, 2017.

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Visit our archive at Artforum.com/imprint for a portfolio by Jeroen de Rijkel/ Willem de Rooij with an introduction by Pamela M. Lee (March 2008).