

A Jealous Statue of Liberty with Jet Lag

Copulating skyscrapers, angry monuments and absurd cityscapes. Madelon Vriesendorp (81) made Manhattan into a surrealist universe. The Rijksmuseum bought a number of her drawings. 'My whole house is a kind of museum.'

By Kees Keijer

The Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building lie intimately next to each other, when the Rockefeller Center catches them in the act. The drawing *Flagrant délit* became world-famous as the cover of *Delirious New York* (1978), the influential manifesto by architect Rem Koolhaas about Manhattan. Generations of architects know the image, but surprisingly few people know the name of the creator, artist Madelon Vriesendorp.

Vriesendorp was one of the founders of architecture firm OMA, whose work is exhibited in museums such as the Guggenheim, MoMA, Centre Pompidou and Victoria & Albert. Yet her work is remarkably little known in the Netherlands.

Visual History of Manhattan

The Rijksmuseum is trying to bring about a change with an exhibition featuring several drawings by Vriesendorp from her famous New York series, and this resulted in the presentation of more of her well known drawings, including *Après l'amour* (1975), a comparable drawing to *Flagrant délit*. The latter came in 2024 as a gift from architecture historian Thomas A.P. van Leeuwen into the collection of the museum.

Vriesendorp's drawings are playful, absurd and surrealist. Skyscrapers behave like humans, the Statue of Liberty looks jealously. Through this kind of imagery, architects and artists look at Manhattan differently. Her work gave an emotional and psychological view of the modern city.

The source of this famous drawing lies in the 70s when Vriesendorp with her then partner Rem Koolhaas left for the United States. First they went to Cornell University in Ithaca where Koolhaas worked on his book on New York. At the same time Vriesendorp started her own obsessive research into the visual history of Manhattan.

Loose Limbs

"There we started by travelling around and gathering material," Vriesendorp says from her home in London. "Postcards, old books, similar things." They collected enormous amounts of visual material over twenty or thirty years, the period in which New York reinvented itself as a vertical metropolis. A friend in America set them a simple mission: "She said: you just have to buy everything from 1929. That was the moment when all the skyscrapers wanted to go higher. In America everything must be bigger, fatter and taller." During the search Vriesendorp became fascinated by the dreamworld of American modernity: the futuristic advertisements, the streamlined forms of art deco and the bizarre utopian ideas about technology and progress. "Norman Bel Geddes wanted to streamline everything, even people. He made drawings of how you could completely smooth your hair backwards. As if people had to pass through a wind tunnel."

What began as architectural research gradually became something far more personal and stranger. The buildings of Manhattan became living characters in her mind, with

human emotions, desires and sexual relationships. "It started with the anthropomorphism. Then Rem said: then put those buildings in bed together." In the seventies everybody was in bed together. It was the time of the pill, all this freedom. So that idea back then didn't feel so strange.

The free spirit also recognized itself from her studies at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam. "We protested against old-fashioned art education. We had to draw potatoes. Everyone tried everything: performances, sexuality, whatever you could do with your body." She recalls how poet Simon Vinkenoog in the park on a crate stood proclaiming that people had to shag more. "It was a crazy time."

In 2008 Vriesendorp had a large exhibition at the Architectural Association in London under the title *The World of Madelon Vriesendorp*. It showed how comprehensive and idiosyncratic her work is. The skyscraper drawings form only a small part of her universe. Her London home is filled with collections: miniature skyscrapers, Chinese towers, toy figures, religious statues, loose limbs, sculptures made from packaging material and thousands of postcards. Everything is simultaneously carefully ordered and completely chaotic.

On a Postage Stamp

"My whole house has become a kind of museum," she says. "I cannot stop making things from waste products. The neighbours' kids sometimes come over to look around as if it's an open-air museum. Then they bring their friends and give them a tour of my house."

The Statue of Liberty appears regularly in Vriesendorp's drawings. Lady Liberty, according to Vriesendorp, is the most tired figure in the drawing, who suffers from jetlag after travelling from France to New York. In another drawing she stands with a grumpy, angry or sad facial expression on a postage stamp. "It is not meant to be serious. I have never been very serious, unfortunately. Basically I have never really made anything that didn't make me laugh."

Drawings by Madelon Vriesendorp can be seen in the collection display 1950–2000 at the Rijksmuseum