

One of the best artists you've never heard of

Edwin Heathcote on Madelon Vriesendorp, whose skittish pictures reveal the inner life of buildings

The Chrysler Building lies exhausted on a rumpled bed beside the Empire State. What could be a used condom or a tiny deflated blimp sits on the sheets between them. The lamp on the bedside table is the disembodied arm and torch of the Statue of Liberty, her spiky crown visible peering in forlornly through the window. The other skyscrapers join her in their blank, voyeuristic gaze. The bedside rug is inscribed with the grid of Manhattan.

This is the world of Madelon Vriesendorp, one of the best artists you've never heard of. Dutch born, resident in New York in the 1970s and in London ever since, Vriesendorp's surreal, often hilarious images are familiar to architects through their appearance in the 1975 book, *Delirious New York*, by her husband Rem Koolhaas. It is the volume in which one of contemporary architecture's few great polemicists laid out his ideas about the heterogeneous city, the city in which every dense grid so that the plastic Eiffel Towers, pagodas and cathedrals become a city of kitsch gradually morphing into cheap action figures and cutesy Day-Glo animals. This is the flea market version of Freud's study, the architecture of sex and the subconscious of trash. In the paintings, the sub-surreal mingles with 1960s psychedelia, the flaccid acid of *The Yellow Submarine*, the bubble gum apocalypse of *Planet of the Apes* and the haunt ...

Koolhaas's words and ideas are inseparable in the imagination from Vriesendorp's pictures of a city of kitsch squeezed into that constrictive grid, each block living out its separate fantasy. In another version of that painting, the RCA Building (fresh from Rockefeller Center) comes in to find the towers in flagrante delicto, in others the bed is the bedrock of Manhattan island, floating in a sea of semi-submerged skyscrapers above a spaghetti of subways and conduits.

Vriesendorp is enthralled by bad art, by kitsch. There are dire paintings collected from junk stands, and the upper rooms of this little exhibition are dominated by trashy souvenirs, themselves arranged in an impossibly dense grid.

On one level, this is art as ephemeral as the interminable city souvenir postcards and gewgaws that clutter up the galleries, but on another level these are images as pivotal to our memories of the architecture of the city as Piranesi or Metropolis. 9/11 demonstrated quite how intimate was Manhattan's relationship with its icons. Even the Twin Towers, the blandest of extruded dumb boxes, became ciphers for the city's memory and for its image of itself, and their destruction was as keenly felt as the loss of a limb. We imbue architecture with character — it lives in the background of our dreams. Vriesendorp exaggerates and caricatures it so that towers become figures, walls metamorphose into

bodies. In a drawing commissioned by the architectural writer Charles Jencks, a series of images — screw, penis, rocket, cigar, bullet, middle finger — all appear as versions of Norman Foster's Swiss Re Tower (no gherkins), a sly comment on the multiple interpretations of London's most phallic skyscraper, its curves female, its form decidedly male. This show will skew your view of the city in the most delightful way. You'll forever wonder just what it is that buildings get up to when you're not looking.

The World of Madelon Vriesendorp; Architectural Association, London WC1, until February 8. Tel: +44 (0)20-7887 4145. — Illustration caption: "Après l'amour," 1975 ("What skyscrapers get up to when you're not looking").