

Maderon Vriesendorp Text, Virginia Whiles
Feb 5th. 2008

The World of MADERON VRIESENDORP. (Paintings, postcards, objects, games) Architectural Association Gallery. Bedford Square. London.

Maderon Vriesendorp is known for her precisionist-style paintings, such as 'Flagrant Delit' done in 1975. This work was later reproduced on the cover of Rem Koolhaas' book 'Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan' Similar iconic imagery was used to illustrate the architectural scenarios, surreal and futuristic, projected by OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture) of which she was a founder member. This exhibition is the first in the U.K. to give a retrospective of her practice as an artist with 'the archival impulse'.

Gracefully set out on two floors at the AA gallery, the initial impression is that of an installation curated with impeccable taste: the Byzantine blue wall of the lower floor preludes the mosaic turquoise carpet upstairs, only the coffee stains from sloppy students brings it into the real world of Vriesendorp: a world with a messy interior, disguised by the very chic of the decor and catalogue.

The book titles in the photos of the collection in situ give the game away: 'Our Wonderful World'...'L' Amour Fou'...'Panama and the Canal', 'Sir John Soane Museum', 'Persian and Mughal Miniatures', 'Sigmund Freud', 'Alice 's Adventures in Wonderland'. Propping up the polyglot postcards, wedged in between the crowds of mini-memorabilia, these slices of knowledge act as full stops in the 'stream of unconscious' flow of objects which constitute this show. The sheer mass of 'stuff' (a message on MV's studio door cites Thomas A Edison 'To invent you need a good imagination and a pile of junk') recall images of 'cabinet de curiosites' or 'wunderkammern'. Truly marvellous in its heterogeneous hilarity, Vriesendorp's collection provokes a 'wow' factor in the viewer not only for its visual psychedelia but also for the ecological undertones of globalisation. How to clear the carbon footprints of thousands of mini nanos? (especially when, as she comments, her cleaner refuses to dust them!)

Rather than the sack-cloth and ashes aura of guilt inhabiting the sober Pitt Rivers museum, Madelon Vriesendorp's collection vaunts itself through colour and kitsch, the crazy objects seem to grin with delight at having found a home where they are treated with such tlc. All this is indeed delightful..a magical mystery tour, imbued with the Surrealist belief in chance encounters between unlikely objects and eccentric humans in strange sites. So what is going on?

Whereas the common sites for colonial 'collectors' lay in exotic jungles and remote villages, in a postcolonial era they are more likely to sit within the airport tourist kiosk or in the local charity shop. Whereas the Garden of Delights had Bosch as a manic concept or and Surrealism had Bataille as a sceptical Guardian of the Tomb, both delving into the darker sides of life, what are we to make of this 'apparently irrational' display, described in the

catalogue as 'playground Surrealism'? A magnet on my fridge given to me by a caring friend says: 'You can't have everything, where would you put it?' This show suggests either that Vriesendorp has somewhere to put almost everything or that she simply does not care about such silly questions. Should we let the accusations of 'trophy hunting' or the psychoanalytical implications of fetishism perturb our regard...or simply let go of such anxieties, embrace hedonism and shout 'carpe diem!' Should we not rather enjoy the show's Dadaist virus sparked off by Alfred Jarry and caught by Duchamp, contaminating Cage and spread by Fluxus but which now seems a somewhat rare disease?

Such profound thoughts are provoked by this show which certainly proves the point that art objects 'trigger dialogues'. On looking closer, the viewer may enter into their intricate narrative, one often set in motion by friends invited to play with the objects, to invent scenarios. Vriesendorp declares her fondness for the 'freaks of culture' such as the Father Xmas with Wings, for those hybrid productions of cultural clashes which create miniature models as emblems of a positive multiculturalism.

'I feel like a tourist who has been given the wrong directions, misunderstood them, and ended up in the right place anyway.'

Random connections lead to a nano-conception on a grandiose scale. Vriesendorp hints at her desire that this collection may be a future trophy for archaeologists and: *'perhaps create the confusion (or certainty) relevant to that future culture'*

Indeed the objects function like relics. They have the votive quality of talismans, as souvenirs of experiences or as lucky charms. It is fascinating to note how much the miniaturisation of a monument contributes to its status: it enhances its power. This is partly due to the importance of the media, that transmission via reproduction globalises its presence. Also its reduced scale evokes a sense of control in the beholder, as described by Susan Stewart in her fascinating book 'On Longing' (1993)

For Vriesendorp the appropriation of 'blissful ignorance' can serve to disarm the surveillance of classification, perceived as a male characteristic and undermined by the female flexibility for masquerade. Such ideas relate her to the feminist discourse of Irigaray and yet Vriesendorp's feminism is pragmatic rather than rhetorical, it flows with the course of everyday life, rather like her art.

It lies in the very contradiction between the industrial mass-produced objects and the crafted care of her domestic presentation at home, where even 'arranged marriages' are organized. Her 'found' frying pan decorated with a sunset painting by Turner (a hypothesis promptly deconstructed by Sotheby's analysis of the metal) lies alongside its hand-sewn cover of a fried-egg (an image used by one critic's derision of Turner's painting). Whooping with laughter, Vriesendorp recounts the stories behind each object, such as one of her many juicers: the one with the fascist helmet, found in a thrift shop for 'Crippled Civilians' in Toronto.

Such tales certainly seem to prove the Maussian theory whereby objects serve to sustain social well-being through a system of exchange. The way

that this idea was extended by Alfred Gell's notion that art objects function as prostheses of the artists and thereby generate social dialogue would apply here but for the way this show is curated. Her own work is undermined by the hanging, apparently more intent on the overall vision of a curiosity cabinet.

This performs well in scenographic terms, but denies the viewer a closer appreciation of her actual qualities as an artist rather than as a collector. The virtuosity of Vriesendorp's drawing is comparable to Ernst in her graphic precision, the subtlety of her water-colours is comparable to Klee in her delicate fusions of tones, her imagination is as wild and scary as the great illustrators of neo-gothic fairytales from Blake to Fuseli to Sendak, yet this is sadly hard to discern here. Maybe because, as so honourably suggested by her husband, Rem Koolhaas, Vriesendorp's *'free-floating ability'* has always tended to serve others first.
