

Madelon Vriesendorp's new Mind Games exhibition turns trash into treasure

The warped world of the OMA co-founder, who sees fantasy and mischief in everyday scenes and objects, is on joyous display at Sir John Soane's Museum

'One man's trash is another man's treasure' is a phrase Madelon Vriesendorp takes quite literally. Through her eyes, the cardboard bulges of avocado holders become gormless tadpoles, a milk bottle is feathered out into the tendrils of a Chinese dragon, and a row of gutted toilet cleaner bottles bow their bottle-cap heads in subservience to their phones.

"I like all the rubbish that I collect," she says. "I can't throw things away — I think they will end up in the sea."

These Franken-objects can be found in Mind Games, a new exhibition at Sir John Soane's Museum commemorating Vriesendorp's 2025 Soane Medal win. A medium-straddling artist perhaps best known as one of the co-founders of OMA in 1975, she joins the ranks — including Denise Scott Brown, Peter Barber and Marina Tabassum — of those the award has recognised for enriching public understanding of architecture.

BUILDINGS THAT COME ALIVE

Mind Games celebrates a half-century of Vriesendorp's knack for discovering latent whimsy in otherwise commonplace objects. This thread weaves from her 1970s illustrations, personifying the infrastructure of her adopted New York, through to humanoid masks cast last year from statue heads passed up from her downstairs neighbour via their balconies.

Nothing is safe from Vriesendorp's yen for reinvention, not even herself. The exhibition's contents were selected directly from her house, where her artworks share breathing space with a magpie's nest of trinkets and tchotchkes.

In her Soane Medal lecture she described it as the "trash version" of both Soane's museum and Sigmund Freud's study. Far from being precious about her oeuvre, Vriesendorp calls curator Erin McKellar a "genius" for the way she has interpreted a life's worth of objects. "That is the whole point — to let people have their own opinion on everything," she says.

Vriesendorp's taste for higgledy-piggledy interior ambience makes her an apt houseguest of Soane's. But whereas Soane had a penchant for drawing his structures in ruins, the buildings Vriesendorp draws are very much alive: they lounge about, they go for a swim, they stand guard. In a recent cover for the New York Review of Architecture's 50th edition, they scamper down a street, limbs akimbo, following the magazine's rat mascot — stylised as the Pied Piper.

That cover also featured a reworking of her most famous illustration, *Flagrant Délit*, which was used as the cover for then-husband Rem Koolhaas' *Delirious New York*. The original portrayed a loose-limbed Empire State Building and Chrysler Building caught post-coitus by the RCA Building; in the 2026 version, we get the aftermath of a ménage à trois between the rat, the Chrysler Building and the Statue of Liberty, a pair of Mary Jane heels (whose, we can't quite be sure) tossed blithely to the floor.

PSYCHOANALYTIC EXPERIMENTS

As for her other interior design benchmark, Vriesendorp's affinity for the granddaddy of psychoanalysis is hardly subconscious. The gouache *Freud Unlimited* reads like a dream you can't quite remember the next day, where the island of Manhattan is imagined as a bed, floating in water with its skyscraper companions, connected to a tangle of ductwork through which subway trains barrel.

The titular mind game, meanwhile, is a psychoanalytic experiment visitors to Vriesendorp's home are treated to, which has been recreated in the museum's Foyle Room. Different groups have been asked to rearrange an assortment of objects, each ascribed two contrasting meanings: a snake is darkness and wisdom, an egg is life and death, a dice is passion and fate.

When RIBAJ visits, members of the Soane Museum Youth Panel are the latest to serve themselves up for analysis, arranging a magic bean next to a disconcertingly orthogonal dog. What this says about the spiritual health of the next generation is, as with everything Vriesendorp does, up for interpretation.

Madelon Vriesendorp: Mind Games, Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Images (in the original): Madelon Vriesendorp in Sir John Soane's Museum; 'Egret'; 'Priests' c. 2022 (credit Gareth Gardner / Tilly Buckroyd); 'Pied Piper' centrefold for New York Review of Architecture, 2026; Flagrant Délit, 1975, watercolour and gouache (credit Madelon Vriesendorp). © RIBA Journal; transcription for the artist's own archive.