

Ada Louise Huxtable Prize

Madelon Vriesendorp explores refreshing alternatives to professional modes of practice in art or architecture, writes Sam Jacob

'What do they say? Behind every successful man is a surprised woman', remarks Madelon Vriesendorp. 'Or now is it behind every successful woman is an angry man?' She's talking about the significance of the Ada Louise Huxtable Prize. 'Funny and ridiculous', she calls it, yet her acceptance is important. 'I felt I was being written out of the script more and more.' Even the paintings she is most renowned for are often associated with Rem Koolhaas's name as they illustrated *Delirious New York*. It's not that they didn't, but they existed in their own right prior to and outside of the book. Neither were they commissioned by OMA, or painted by other people, as recent books by current OMA partners have erroneously and unforgivably claimed. 'OMA didn't even exist then', she says. 'I feel here is the first (and maybe last) chance for me to rectify a few historical misprints.'

Being written out of your own history is infuriating and disempowering. The easiness or ill will of those actors comes as both a disappointment and a shock. It's theft, in short. But what's stolen is something that feels like a part of you, as if they were making off with one of your limbs. And when the world nods along with the perpetrator, it only makes it worse. But history is a battleground, a contested territory whose narration is intrinsically linked to vested interests and power. Now, perhaps, more than ever. As Vriesendorp acknowledges, history is often overtaken by myth and speculation. And OMA, founded by Vriesendorp with Zoe and Elia Zenghelis and Rem Koolhaas, has always been shrouded in myths. Some self-manufactured, others accumulated. Especially those early years, which — though she remarks 'were just messing around, having fun' — are passing into architectural lore. But before they do, it's probably a good idea to fact check, eh Reinier?

For Koolhaas's retroactive manifesto, read Vriesendorp's recognition of the possibilities of misunderstanding. They share, she says, the feeling that 'if there's no story, it's boring'. And for Vriesendorp, much of that misunderstanding comes from being an outsider. Born in Rotterdam, she's lived abroad in the US and the UK since the '70s. 'Once you move away, you can never belong again. And that outsidership means you remain open to other cultures, to openness.' And it's not just being European in Brexit Britain, or a woman in '70s architectural culture. She works outside architectural culture, the art world and the academy ('I'm allergic! Brings me out in a rash!'). It leads to her unusual hybrid practice: collected by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, yet making work at her kitchen table; author of the most provocative architectural drawings of the late 20th century yet not an architect; an incredibly generous teacher but not an

academic; making art 'whose object is not to make money or be part of the art scene'. And it's the mixture of multiple things, all mixed up together, that makes her such an important figure.

Certainly, since her exhibition *The World of Madelon Vriesendorp* curated by Shumon Basar and Stephan Trüby, Maddie has become a myth of her own. The show brought together not only her legendary paintings, but other aspects of her own private geography. These included her incredible sprawling collection of souvenirs and knick-knacks, whose intensity and volume recalls Freud and Soane on a shopping spree in a souvenir shop; postcard collections (there are 8,000 apparently); her 1979 animation *Flagrant Délit*; as well as *The Mind Game*, where you confront a full-size cardboard robot-human figure as part of a psychological diagnosis kit. This is an exposé of her multiple interests and multiple modes of working and thinking. All of it somehow 'outside', but outside in a way that allows things to connect, to make new relationships, often to stunning effect.

Her work has a kind of Saul Steinbergesque Dadaism, where objects become creatures and people become things. It's a world where buildings have sex lives, and where with her current sculptures old milk containers transform into bulldogs. Everywhere there is a fluidity between the animate and inanimate: 'Maybe you can blow life into anything', she says. The show helped cement her cult significance. All of us who follow the cult of Madelon recognise her struggle: of how to be an outsider without being left outside. How to operate with other models that draw the world differently, not prescribed by the academy, the profession or the market. Hers is a vision of a world without boundaries, of connections and openness, of being able to write new stories about the things we think we already know.

That openness is also evident in her serial collaborations. 'It encourages you to look through other people's eyes and make them look through yours, both stepping beyond one's own limits.' The cast includes her daughter Charlie, Assemble, Charles Jencks and many others. Even a kind of dialogue with Lina Bo Bardi, who seems to act as a kind of historical echo chamber in the way her work and life merge into a seamless act of making and collecting. Openness can leave you vulnerable, where 'misunderstanding is misunderstood', where you are not taken seriously if you are interested in too many things, where your propensity to work with others leaves attribution open to abuse. 'History, it's just speculation isn't it?' remarks Vriesendorp, but there's a difference between the exercise of power that history writing contains and the constructive rewiring of historical narratives that challenge those very same powers, that is central to her work. 'Myths are important lies, to attract attention, to embellish stories, to mesmerise.'

Ridiculous as she may see it, this award recognises how Vriesendorp has changed the way we see and think about buildings and cities through her remarkable paintings. But even more, it's recognition for her unique form of practice. A way of working, a way of being in the world that suggests alternatives to professional modes of practice in either art or architecture are possible. Even if it isn't easy, as her newly minted motto suggests: 'If at first you don't succeed, cry, cry again'.

Madelon Vriesendorp received the 2018 Ada Louise Huxtable Prize, awarded by The Architectural Review and The Architects' Journal. © The Architectural Review; transcription for the artist's own archive.