

Such stuff as dreams are made on

Architecture's lost heroine — Madelon Vriesendorp's flat is seen as 'a work of art' by top curators. She co-founded one of the world's best known architecture firms. So why haven't you heard of her? — Words by Nell Card

On the wall as you enter Madelon Vriesendorp's flat in north-west London is a framed illustration by Drew Fairweather called *The Creative Process*. It shows a thick line changing colour from red to amber to green. The start point is labelled “work begins”; the red section — the longest stretch — is labelled “fuck off”. Towards the end, there's a small amber section labelled “panic”. The end of the line shows a few millimetres of green — “all the work while crying” — just before “deadline”.

At the end of the hall is Vriesendorp's studio where she is hastily making red cotton drawstring bags. I'm helping her thread string when she points out we're at the “all the work while crying” stage of the creative process. In half an hour, a representative from *The Architectural Review* is coming to collect the four trophies she has made for the Women in Architecture awards ceremony — female torsos sculpted from delicate strips of gummed paper tape. The bags are to prevent their Perspex cases being scuffed in transit.

In March last year, Vriesendorp was the recipient of another prize awarded by *The Architectural Review*. The Ada Louise Huxtable Prize recognises individuals working in the wider architectural industry who have made a significant contribution (this year's recipient is the Swiss architectural photographer Hélène Binet; artist Rachel Whiteread and gallery director Julia Peyton-Jones is a previous winner). “At first I thought, why me?” Vriesendorp says, pushing the fabric through the sewing machine. “I was going to refuse it. I thought: I didn't do anything for architecture. But then I thought I could make it a bit political: I could make an argument for women who haven't been recognised.” She hands me the first bag: “OK. One is finished.”

So, at her acceptance speech, Vriesendorp referenced #MeToo, describing the “bum pinching” and “clumsy advances”. She talked about the “women written out of the script...invisible to the nakedly ambitious self-promoting eyes”.

The award has gone some way to bringing her work to a wider audience. Vriesendorp is primarily a painter but also a sculptor and collector. “One can see her genius in her early works,” says Hans Ulrich Obrist, artistic director of the Serpentine Galleries, one of the first places to show her work. “They are truly exceptional and multidimensional drawings.” A frequent visitor, Obrist calls her London flat a “Gesamtkunstwerk — a total work of art”. He says her work is unappreciated because “her major contribution to architecture is not bricks and mortar”. What makes her work so relevant for today, he continues, “is her fluidity

of practice: the fact that it contributes to so many disciplines and breaks down silos. She freely moves from art to architecture to urbanism to literature to collecting. She is ahead of her time."

Vriesendorp, who was born in Holland in 1945, is one of the founding members of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA). Their first office was here, on the top floor of the Victorian mansion block where she has lived for 42 years. At the time, she was married to the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas. The Greek architect Elia Zenghelis and his wife, Zoe Zenghelis, were also founding members. Koolhaas remains a partner at OMA, which has offices worldwide, including Rotterdam, New York, Beijing, Hong Kong and Doha, and is one of the best-known architecture practices. Vriesendorp has said having children, "being up all night and having no time", limited her involvement. When I ask how long she was at OMA, she says: "I didn't really work for them. The guys were doing the drawings, the women were colouring them in. We could criticise them, and make decisions on colour. But I was always doing my own stuff as well."

We are surrounded by the "stuff" of Vriesendorp. At one end of the studio is a wall of double-fronted glass cabinets full of ornaments she has collected over her lifetime. They're arranged thematically: there's one shelf for body parts, another for skyscrapers, death and sex, food, aliens, animals. "I suppose I look for things that make me think: 'What the hell were they thinking!'"

At the foot of the cabinets is my daughter, Betsy, who is carefully taking out some miniature chairs, cutlery and cakes to make an afternoon tea scene on Vriesendorp's kilim rug. When we were arranging the interview, Vriesendorp described her house as "perfect for five-year-olds". I told her my daughter was five. "Then she must come, too."

"As a child, I had little figurines," Vriesendorp recalls, "but I started collecting seriously in New York." She and Koolhaas moved there in the early 70s, where their shared fascination with Americana took root. Snow globes, juicers and skyscrapers were steadily amassed and then appeared in the series of paintings Vriesendorp was working on at the time. These are her best-known works. The dreamlike pictures — New York being eaten by a monster, the Statue of Liberty half-naked — were used throughout Koolhaas's 1978 book, *Delirious New York*. On the cover is *Flagrant Délit*, an image of the Chrysler Building and Empire State Building in bed, being watched by the Rockefeller Center. A limbless Statue of Liberty looks in from the window, her dismembered arm and torch within, used as a bedside light.

The book is described on the OMA website as "a polemical investigation of Manhattan". But though Vriesendorp's works have also become iconic as illustrations of the text, her name has been missed off credits or the paintings described as commissioned by Koolhaas. "Nothing was made for the book," she asserts. "It was all my series. It was not a collaboration. He just used it."

She pulls open the drawer of a plan chest and brings out a collection of books with her artwork on the cover. "The publishers had my transparencies and they gave

them to anyone who wanted them," she says. "I phoned them up years later to ask for payment, but they told me the editor had died."

The tendency to appropriate, miscredit or sideline Vriesendorp's work was addressed in 2008 when the Architectural Association (AA) staged a major retrospective entitled *The World of Madelon Vriesendorp: Paintings/Postcards/Objects/Games*. Curated by cultural programme director Shumon Basar and theorist Stephan Trüby, the show consisted of etchings, watercolours, gouache and oils alongside her collection of objects, postcards, trinkets and cardboard maquettes. "When Shumon said, 'I want to make an exhibition of your work', I said, 'You can't — it's all old stuff, there's nothing here.' They took the whole studio."

"For us, [Vriesendorp] has always been a central figure in the production of architectural ideas and discourse," says Eva Franch i Gilabert, the director of the AA. Between 1982 and 1992, Vriesendorp taught at the AA. In 2015, the school hosted her 70th birthday. "She is a seminal voice of the institution," Franch says. "She is all about opening up people's imagination, regardless of age, disciplinary labels or expertise."

The AA exhibition travelled to Berlin, Venice and Basel with a catalogue featuring contributions from her long-term collaborator the critic, theorist and designer Charles Jencks, her daughter, Charlie Koolhaas, architect Zaha Hadid and curator Obrist, among others. The book is a celebration of the distracted playfulness of her practice, which is characterised as an extensive "art of generosity".

Her kitchen is where she displays her latest work: models crafted from household waste. Betsy hovers next to a table in front of the window, looking at a menagerie of animals and insects sculpted from plastic milk bottles. On the counter is a mushroom carton transformed into the carapace of a beetle; avocado packaging becomes a toad with a retractable tongue.

Vriesendorp strains strawberries through a sieve, before adding the juice to smoothies. We are in her "sciatica kitchen" (she designed the wide drawers to make everything easily accessible). "We're not really allowed straws any more," she says, popping one into each glass. "Luckily, I've made a machine to wash them." She rummages in a drawer and produces a stick with a cloth attached to the end. It's one of several customised tools, including an extendable bottle brush made from the handle of a broken umbrella, and an extendable fork she uses to steal food from plates across the table.

"I'll draw if I'm commissioned," Vriesendorp continues (a new work is on the cover of the March edition of *The Architectural Review*), "but I've always liked making things much more than drawing. That's what I did as a child. I escaped my noisy Dutch family by making things — by playing." Vriesendorp's mother was renowned feminist Harriët Freezer and her sister Huberte is a writer and translator. Vriesendorp is suddenly reminded of a board game she created for her children, Charlie and Tomas, called the Pig and Croc Game. We follow her into the

living room. Betsy climbs into the Lina Bo Bardi chair in the window and Vriesendorp starts throwing cushions at her to catch. (The Italian-Brazilian architect is Vriesendorp's "hero": she co-curated an exhibition of her work in 2012.) In front of the sofa is a coffee table covered in the tools of Vriesendorp's craft: brushes, pens, 10 kinds of tape and the TV remote. ("I always have The Daily Show on.") Vriesendorp finds the game and lifts the lid to reveal 12 lids from squirty cream cans. Betsy is instructed to look away as Vriesendorp hides a plastic pig and a plastic crocodile under two of the lids. The aim of the game is to find the pig before the crocodile. When the crocodile is revealed, we all have to scream.

We play until the doorbell rings and the trophies are collected in their red bags. "Thankfully," Vriesendorp says, "there are no more projects in the pipeline other than having friends over and going to see my grandson." Before we leave, Vriesendorp lets Betsy select a few objects from the cabinets. Betsy makes her a card covered in hearts. We come away with a glass mouse, a mother-of-pearl seahorse and a baby in a nappy, no bigger than a thumbprint — mementoes from Vriesendorp's world — and the promise of another play date.

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