



INTERVIEW MADELON VRIESENDORP

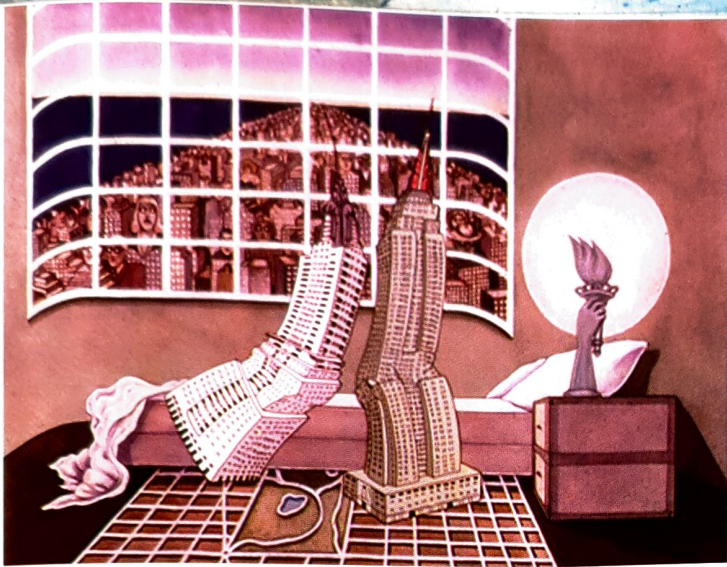
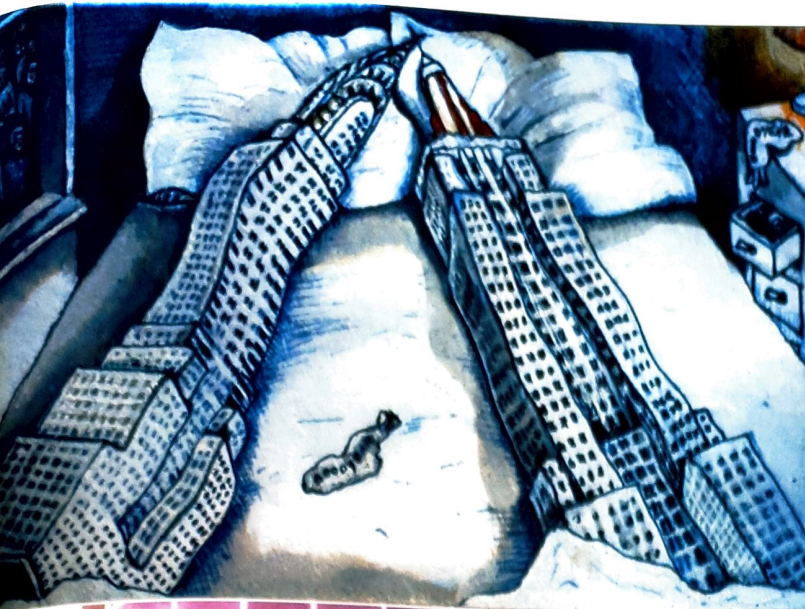
A NEW EXHIBITION SHOWS WORK BY ARTIST MADELON VRIESENDORP THAT HAS HARDLY BEEN SEEN SINCE IT WAS PUBLISHED IN HER HUSBAND REM KOOLHAAS'S 1978 BOOK, *DELIRIOUS* NEW YORK.

CAROLINE ROUX SPOKE TO HER ABOUT ART, KOOLHAAS, AND THE 'PRODUCTIVITY OF DISTRACTION'

PORTRAITS BY MARIUS HANSEN

Anyone visiting Madelon Vriesendorp for the first time would be well advised to read an essay by her friend, the architect Fenna Haakma Wagenaar, on the way there. In it, Haakma Wagenaar describes the difficulties she has even having a telephone conversation with the artist. As Vriesendorp drives through London, their dialogue is interrupted by the artist's rewinding of a Thelonus Monk tape to a favourite passage and a long diatribe on other drivers. Finally, Haakma Wagenaar's battery runs out. She is compelled to visit Vriesendorp at home, a place, Haakma Wagenaar says, where nothing linear is likely to take place. Vriesendorp's working method can best be described as the productivity of distraction. Maddy, the architect says, has a mind like a satellite dish, picking up and spewing out information.

It's just as well that I had read this shortly before I rang the bell on her front door in north London. Before I knew it, we were admiring the artificial grass on her balcony and commiserating over the loss of »



her view to a sad slab of commercial building opposite. She had shown me how the bank of drawers in her kitchen turns into a game for children (hunt the cutlery/paper/cleaning cloths) and how she designed the slanting, rather maritime-looking cupboards above the sink as the ultimate solution to banging one's head. There was talk of coffee, though it took time to materialise; discussion of a collection of Soviet-era child's toys bought on the street from a child in Moscow in the 1980s; a series of paintings by her father, a former personnel office for Shell ('he started in pastels when he was 80 and oils when he was 85'); a frying pan found in Oxfam, Camden Town, with a Turner painted inside it, and a description of attending a party in the very same flat.

'It was John Miller and Sue Rogers' apartment then, and Richard Rogers and Ruthie (they'd just got together) came. Richard had just won the Beaubourg competition and I remember him coming in and all the buttons flying off his shirt. That's how tight the men wore them then, 1970. And then more and more people arrived and I realised they were all architects!' A good or bad thing? 'Oh terrible, terrible. I was finding out how close the London architecture community was.' In the case of Miller, Rogers and Rogers, very close indeed.

Vriesendorp had gone to the party with

her husband, Rem Koolhaas. If you've seen photographs of them back then, you'd guess they were at the top of the guest list, this young newly married Dutch couple: tall, creative and both incredibly good-looking. Koolhaas was studying at the Architectural Association. Vriesendorp was at the Central School of Art, continuing the etching she'd begun at art school in Amsterdam. 'It's such a wonderful medium. Just one line is beautiful,' she says.

When Miller and Rogers moved out in 1976, Koolhaas and Vriesendorp moved in. They set up OMA here with Elia and Zoe Zenghelis, producing paper architecture for the rest of the 1970s. The children grew up here. (Charlotte, 30, is organising an architecture biennale in Shenzhen; Thomas, 26, is a cameraman in Los Angeles). Koolhaas went on to become an architectural hero. Vriesendorp took a back seat, although she is still known for her paintings that appeared in *Delirious New York*, the 1978 book which sealed Koolhaas's reputation as a key urban thinker. The cover image *Flagrant Delit* shows the Empire State and the Chrysler buildings caught in post-coital glow by the Rockefeller building. It's a peerless evocation of the sexuality of architecture; it's the real sex and the city.

Those who had assumed Vriesendorp, now in her early sixties, had stopped producing will be surprised by her exhibition

Opening image: Vriesendorp at her north London home where she has amassed a vast collection of miniature buildings, people, animals and body parts

Above: A selection of her paintings featuring the recurring theme of the New York skyline

Top left: Study for Apres l'Amour (1975)

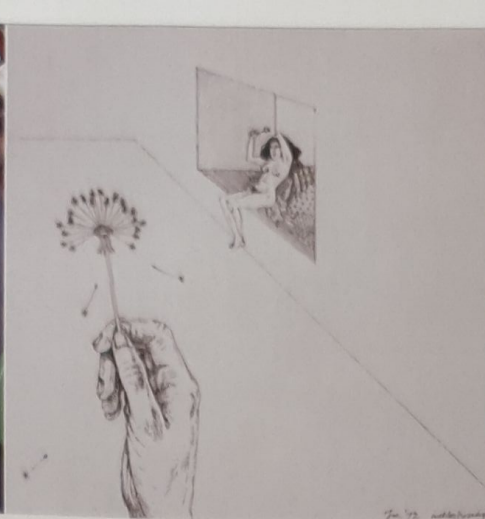
Centre left: Flagrant Delit animation still (1980)

Right: 10 Ans Apres l'Amour (1984)

at the Architectural Association in London in January. Vriesendorp has been busy, but her world is a very private one of friends and family. She has amassed a vast collection of miniature buildings, people, animals and body parts that is displayed on two large boards in the studio in her flat; a kind of wunderkammern where the juxtaposition of objects reflects the chaotic randomness and rationality of the city.

She has 40 framed paintings to show from 1966 to now whose lush use of symbols and signs might be described as surrealism-meets-pop. She has created her own game, an after-dinner home analysis kit comprising a box of objects: a female torso, a man, a dog, a foot and so on. Players select and place objects in a room set with an open door. All those present are then allowed to interpret what this means. 'Everyone wants to know more about themselves,' she says, a believer in the subconscious, though not necessarily a Freudian. 'Psychotherapists are people who know nothing about people, and have to go to learn it. I don't need to study it.' A life-size version of the game will be in the gallery at the AA. A cardboard man and dog stand, ready to go, in her studio.

It will be interesting to see what happens when Vriesendorp's private world is transported into the public realm, and what happens to Vriesendorp herself under scrutiny. When asked why she never sells >>



her work she replies that she doesn't 'want the pressure.' You sense, too, that other people's approval is secondary to the satisfaction that comes from creating. This she never stops doing. Visiting children leave with little hats made out of socks. The pathology of her collecting will be exposed too; something that links her closely to the writer Douglas Coupland. He came to the house shortly after his Generation X success to interview Koolhaas, but walked into Vriesendorp's studio and said, 'oh, I'm home'. 'He makes towers out of things he finds,' says Vriesendorp, as if this were the most normal thing in the world. 'His approach is more sanitised than mine. I'm more random, though we both collect these.' She holds up a piece of a 1930s plastic train set.

Shumon Basar, who writes regularly for this magazine, has been keen to show Vriesendorp's work since he met her seven years ago. How you negotiate something as precise as a gallery show with this freeform, fluid mind is anyone's guess. 'You go in grab stuff and leave,' says Basar of the curatorial process. 'Something will just come into her head and that's that. She has her own logic. It's not our logic, it's never the shortest route between A and B.' You

could describe Vriesendorp as childlike, in that she seems to operate entirely in the present (and loves the company of children; those of neighbours and friends are a constant presence in her flat) but that would be to deny her adult sophistication.

Through much of our meeting, she has her head stuck in a big plan drawer, as she searches for a magazine. On its cover is a painting of the Chrysler and Empire State buildings, with a washing line of postmodern icons hung between them like their love children. Hans-Jürgen Commerell, director of the Aedes Gallery in Berlin, where the show will travel next, has called to say someone wants to buy it, though Vriesendorp doesn't know where the actual painting is. She is agonising over a price – €3,000? Koolhaas phones from China and a long conversation ensues, mostly in Dutch. Koolhaas says you should never sell anything for less than €25,000.

If the intention of the exhibition was to extricate Vriesendorp from the shadow of Rem, I'm not sure that would be possible. Vriesendorp herself creates that inextricable link. His name peppers the conversation, and she is really delighted to describe how they met. (They were 17, she was in love with his cousin. They all drove

Top left: Vriesendorp's game, a selection of objects which players place in a room with an open door setting; other players are then invited to analyse what it means

Middle: An etching, *Dandelions Spell* (1972)

Top right: *The Ecstasy of Mrs Caligan* (1974)

Below: Vriesendorp at the easel, at home

to Delft together and Koolhaas sat in the back tickling her neck all the way. 'Talking to him was like talking to a girl. You could talk about anything,' she says.) She accompanied him to the US in the early 1970s when he went to study with Matthias Junger and to New York. 'You wouldn't have to do that now,' I say, and she agrees. 'It's amazing that I took it all from Rem. Women are incredibly independent now. That's why men go to China to find subservient girls.' Yet their creative partnership has underpinned her life. 'He made me try a lot of things that I instinctively wouldn't have done.'

He comes back to London at weekends. 'It used to be where he rested,' she says, 'but now he has work here.' Inevitably, he's a superstar architect. 'In the Sixties and Seventies, it was about where the milk bottle would go, the human scale,' she sighs. 'Now it's back to stardom and monumentalism. It's not good to be so well known. People make up their minds before they know much, before they've even been to a lecture. People can't even talk to Rem normally now because he's famous. And the adulation is as scary as the hatred.' She deserves a lot of the former. Let us hope that the exhibition provides it ■

SHE IS STILL KNOWN FOR HER PAINTINGS THAT APPEARED IN DELIRIOUS NEW YORK, THE 1978 BOOK WHICH SEALED KOOLHAAS'S REPUTATION AS A KEY URBAN THINKER. THE COVER IMAGE SHOWS THE EMPIRE STATE AND THE CHRYSLER BUILDINGS CAUGHT IN POST-COITAL GLOW

The World of Madelon Vriesendorp: Paintings/Postcards/Objects/Games shows at AA Gallery & Front Members' Room 14 January to 8 February 2008

