

mistakes + visions = Madelon Vriesendorp

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However familiar the image has become, it never loses its strangeness: the Empire State and the Chrysler buildings in bed together, limp with love, caught in the act by the Rockefeller Center; Manhattan's origins imagined as a family romance played out between skyscrapers, with the Rockefeller cast as victorious progeny in an Oedipal scene depicted in clinical detail. *Flagrant Deli* was the painting that appeared on the original cover of Rem Koolhaas's *Delirious New York* and, together with the other images painted by Madelon Vriesendorp in that book, have become iconic. They are the kind of image that you remember in hyper-detail without seeing, which seem etched on the inside rather than the outside of the eye. Yet few people have seen the actual paintings or know much about the artist. Until now, that is, when her paintings and objects and archive – a huge cabinet of curiosities – are being shown at the AA in an exhibition curated by Shumon Basar and Stephen Truby.

*Flagrant deli*, *Après l'amour* and *Freud Unlimited* all appeared in *Delirious New York*. But they are part of a much larger series of paintings of the secret life of buildings that already existed before the book was first published in French in 1974. Those that were included intervene on the text rather than simply illustrate it – erupting in moments of hallucinatory intensity that expand the radical collage effect of the book as a whole. Other paintings from the series have been published elsewhere – for example *The Ecstasy*

*of Mrs Caligari* appeared on the cover of *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* in 1974 – as *Apres l'Amour* would also appear in the Italian magazine *Casa Bella* in 1975. A diary was produced by *Casa Bella* in 1977 which comprises all Vriesendorp's paintings as well as work by Zoe Zengelis and other OMA projects. To see Vriesendorp's work as part not only of that context, but her own larger body of work, is to see it in a different light - to see that whilst her images are central to the genesis of the OMA project and *Delirious New York* in particular they also have a life outside of it. Her paintings are crystal-clear visions of desire and destruction. Some are apocalyptic in their catastrophic vision of an abandoned utopia of Manhattan in ruins. They create an imaginary world, or rather, in Vriesendorp's terms perhaps, they make a city – which means they are diverse and complex and lived in multiple ways.

The paintings, drawings, collages and collections that she has made are driven by a powerful logic. This is not about an individual style. In fact Vriesendorp prefers to work collaboratively. It is about what the work feels like. Where looking outwards seems to be looking inwards and vice versa. The paintings offer visions of the weirdly mutating cityscapes of Manhattan, but they also offer visions of the inside of mental constructions – like the inside of your head. The normal format of her paintings is to depict an interior and then to make apertures in the walls which are either depictions of windows or pictures. The rectangular frame of the painting becomes a container for a nest of Chinese boxes that are the pictures within the picture. Even when the *mise-en-scene* is not an

interior, the basic structure still applies, as if a picture is always marking the intersection of inside or outside. Shut your eyes and you can see the lining.

It is of course predictable to find that there is a gap between what the paintings look like in illustration and what they look like in the flesh. Anyhow, leaps of scale are built into them, in what Vriesendorp has called 'scale confusion'. Scale and its confusions are also endemic to architecture. It comes as no great surprise either to discover that she first trained not in fine art or architecture but in etching, which she studied at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam and that she began work as an illustrator. Her sensibility is in many ways that of a miniaturist. One of her earliest works that she showed me at her studio off the Finchley Road is a postage stamp-sized etching that contains no less than fifty figures. Today her studio is crammed with hundreds, probably thousands, of tiny figures and objects collected together on every available surface. On top of a large plan chest there is a tiny but vast city scape made of small souvenirs – including innumerable Empire State buildings and other skyscrapers of course – which comprises several different zones each of which is a concentration of buildings, figures and body-parts, with a one corner devoted to religion and war. This is like a diagram of a city, and its viscera. The small objects, most cheap and made of plastic, are drawn from all over the world, many given to her by other people. On another table there is a Mickey Mouse zone with one specimen in red coral from China, small tokens of globalisation. It as if the geography of the world could shrink to this, but also these tiny objects could expand to expand as vast idea as the myths and symbols of the world.

Some artists are collectors, some are not. Vriesendorp's way of being an artist is that she is. The greatest collection of all is of postcards which she and Rem Koolhaas trawled America for since the 1970s. She has a couple of old suitcases of old postcards, all classified – or zoned – according to subject. One crazy subject after another. With a sleight of hand, what she calls the 'wish you were here' postcards are 'wish you weren't here' postcards – disasters, crocodiles, giant vegetable competitions and so on. The often hand-colored or badly printed postcards of rock formations are at times lurid in their strangeness – hysterical rock formations to rival Dali's anamorphic projections in his own paranoid-critical method, which has clearly informed Vriesendorp's visionary vision of landscape – where everything becomes a body or a potential body, in a vast terrain of desire. A postcard collection also multiplies across huge distances – bringing together the vast landscapes of the US – contracted to a picture about 3 by 5 inches. Picture-making according to the measure of perpetual mobility that is a postcard, is itself a sudden and involuntary contraction.

Madelon Vriesendorp's paintings are also rather like a collection of things – a deliberately incoherent composite rather than a composition of coherent elements. The titles are part of the collage too. *The Ecstasy of Mrs Caligari* came about shortly after seeing Fritz Lang's film, with Liberty lying sprawled huge and helpless over Manhattan, engulfed in drapery that is also water, superimposed over the globe. And whilst you can often see in the paintings souvenirs of past art, such as little fragments of motifs that remind you of Bosch or Dali, they are even closer to old postcards than they are to a history of painting. If Frank Stella once said that he wanted his painting to look as good

as the colour of the paint in the can, then I imagine Vriesendorp wanting to make a picture that could be as good as one of these old postcards. Often the postcards have been doctored and collaged together and have a compelling impurity about them. The way Vriesendorp draws and uses bright clear water colour invokes the graphic techniques of historic postcard images of famous Manhattan skyscrapers from the late twenties and thirties produced when they were first built. Many of the images within images that she introduces into her paintings are of postcards in her collection – the underground caverns and gorges, for example, that decorate the wall of *Freud Unlimited*. A postcard is an image that is in circulation and part of a distribution of images within a culture. But they are also, now, like a pre-history of image networks – archaic, weird, strangely dream-like – their mobility frozen in time in an image-bank – or a suitcase, or a painting.

There is one set of images that Vriesendorp is particularly fond of. A section of suitcase is given over to postcards of cars on empty beaches, with headlights glaring across the empty expanse of sand. Remember the image which hangs behind the bed in *Flagrant Deli*. The single beam manages to project outside the painting to mingle with the aureole of light that is Liberty's torch on the bedside table, one of several beams that function as gazes and ricochet around the apartment. Maybe one of the greatest pleasures of collecting is to find another of the same. In an irresistible coincidence, Vriesendorp explains how she found another postcard of an amateur painting that had been copied from this self-same image - rather badly done with the sunset skewed out of vertical alignment at the horizon. It can't be difficult to get a sunset falling straight but this failed to do so. The image becomes precious as a consequence. She likes bad painting. She likes

mistakes. When I systematically get the title wrong of *Après l'amour*, calling it *amour fou* in spite of myself, that appeals to her. When the interview she did with Beatriz Colomina for the catalogue of the exhibition at the AA was transcribed the phrase 'the woman is a torso' magically transmuted into 'the woman is a toaster' and she liked that even more. A torso meets a toaster. For Vriesendorp the jolt of the word-slip leapt to a length of African fabric that lay on her studio chair on which is printed a fabulously loud pattern of giant toasters. She will make it into something. What appears wrong ends up being right. The woman is a toaster; a building a body; a rock hysterical.

I had always assumed – wrongly as it turns out – that *Flagrant Deli*, the primal scene, must have come first. I should have known better – because of course the whole meaning of a primal scene is that it only manifests its 'firstness' in retrospect. Many of the paintings that show the city in meltdown – with the familiar protagonist-skyscrapers toppled and in ruins – were painted before it. These are mainly in the possession of Madelon Vriesendorp's friends, given as gifts, on their walls. Bringing them together again in this exhibition shows the full force of the work. The more of it you see the stronger the sense of fragmentation of the narrative of disintegration. Any large collection of anything strains but ultimately fails to contain all its disparate parts. The diversity of the work she does, the objects and images she collects, the paintings she makes, the mind-games she plays is hard to contain for just this reason. Like the model of the postcard small things exacerbate this sense of dispersal – not just by shrinking vast distances but scrambling and short-circuiting time sequences too.