

## The World of Madelon Vriesendorp

Era-defining images and masses of micro oddities... Emily King enters the realm of the OMA co-founder. — Words: Emily King

Until now Madelon Vriesendorp's public reputation has derived entirely from the series of paintings that were published on the cover and inside her husband Rem Koolhaas' book *Delirious New York* in 1978. This might sound like a slight, but it's not.

Virtual anonymity is a position that Vriesendorp chose and cultivated. Among those in the know, her extraordinary collection of tchotchkes had become something of a myth — Serpentine Gallery curator Hans Ulrich Obrist suggests that they generated a “rumour archive” — but her audience was restricted to a small circle of family, friends and the select few who heard the rumours and sought her out. Vriesendorp's most visible activity in the last 30 years has been the painting and colour course she taught with fellow OMA founder Zoe Zenghelis at the Architectural Association in the 1980s and early 90s. Her current show, in which she reveals a part of her extensive collection of unlikely trophies, is, in a sense, the AA revealing a long-cherished treasure all its own.

Because of the nature of Vriesendorp's repute, the big questions hovering over the exhibition concern the relationship between her imagery and Koolhaas' text. On a factual level, the curators Shumon Basar and Stephen Trüby want to correct the common misapprehension that the paintings were commissioned to illustrate the book. This is a simple matter of chronology: the paintings were made in 1974 and 75, while the book was written a couple of years later. What proves more difficult to unravel is the interplay between Vriesendorp's fanciful imagery and Koolhaas' theories. Here I have to declare myself: I have only absorbed *Delirious New York* in the sense made newly respectable by French critic Pierre Bayard's *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read* (which I haven't read either). From this position, the cover illustration played a vital role, not only influencing what I imagined the text to say, but also informing my imaginative hold on Manhattan. Seeing the pictures in series, particularly in conjunction with the animated film made by Vriesendorp and Teri Wehn-Damisch in the late 1970s, is like elaborating on a story known for decades.

As well as Vriesendorp's paintings, Basar and Trüby have borrowed several collections from her London flat, including a vast stock of postcards amassed with Koolhaas in the 70s. Kept in his and hers suitcases, the categorisation of these images is the clearest indication of their respective modes of thought. Where Koolhaas lists the Chrysler Building, the Empire State and the New York Fair, Vriesendorp finds “Children”, “Disasters” and “Flowers”. The repetition and variation among these images is completely fascinating, like a visual version of

Chinese whispers. Upstairs Vriesendorp shows part of her legendary collection, a completely absorbing table top of nick nacks — the hopeful, the cheerfully wrong and the just-a-little sad — all ranging in height from about one to 30 centimetres. Basar suggests this collection represents XS, the ghost chapter of Koolhaas' tome SMLXL. Vriesendorp calls it variously “a micro-culture clash”, “a nano-conception on a ‘grand’ scale” and “a memory-bank of scrambled issues”. Recalling the name of this exhibition, I keep mistakenly inserting the word “secret” into the title. Standing before Vriesendorp's tableau feels like privileged access to a private world.

*The World of Madelon Vriesendorp was at the Architectural Association School of Architecture, London, 14 January to 8 February. Images © Charlie Koolhaas. Top image: Flagrant Délit, 1975, used on the cover of Rem Koolhaas' Delirious New York, 1978.*