

Eight artists, eight visions

Eight female artists ultimately took up the invitation to take part in the exhibition: Berlinde De Bruyckere, Karin Hanssen, Kati Heck, Ann Veronica Janssens, Marie-Jo Lafontaine, Sofie Muller, Joëlle Tuerlinckx and Cindy Wright. Their extremely varied contributions in a variety of disciplines have become highly personal statements that comment on the concepts for which Resolution 1325 stands. In this respect it is remarkable that none of these women has ever had it particularly easy in her position as an artist; for example, several of them have carried out a great many impressive international projects to which the Belgian press has devoted little or no attention.

With only one exception, all their contributions to this exhibition are figurative and almost all take woman as their subject in a literal sense. Eight female artists show eight portraits of women and women's issues. Each artist emphasises certain things in her own way. But there is one notable constant, that of showing women of all eras, down the centuries, as a part of a cyclical movement, as related to artistic or cultural history. Which makes an abstraction of specific situations and leads one's thoughts towards a greater entity, a greater good.

Sofie Muller calls her sculpture 'Eve'. This name alone of course summons up certain connotations. Muller's Eve is a small girl, but also an older girl, writing on a wall. She quietly draws circles with her own blood, as constantly recurring cycles out of which it is impossible to break, and also as an infinite series of zeros. She is remarkably pale. Her eyes unfocused, her hair in knots, she is of all times. According to Muller, she is reminiscent of the 17th-century pictures of Jesus as a child, stretching out his right arm in blessing, and also of the pelican that sacrifices her own blood to feed her children. In Muller's view she is above all an image of the 'first woman' as a girl who has already lost all her innocence. As Eve in the Bible or Hawwä in the Koran, as the goddess Kheba in Hurritic mythology, the mother of the gods, or Chavah in Hebrew mythology, she is often considered the source of all evil, born to serve and efface and sacrifice herself.

Muller's contemporary Eve unites all these elements and is even now often the victim of conditioning, tradition and culture.

Karin Hanssen calls the young woman she portrays here 'The Girl'. In her work, Hanssen is especially interested in social determinism and in this portrait wants to fill a gap in the representation of the non-Western woman in Western portrait painting. She sees the portrait as forming a virtual diptych with Vermeer's renowned 'Girl With the Pearl Earring': alongside the white, typically Western girl she presents an equally anonymous girl who is, however, of Polynesian origin and who, moreover, is looking in the opposite direction. In this way her work also becomes a response to Gauguin, but whereas in his portraits of women he emphasises the exotic, Hanssen makes use of a Western tradition. A notable element in this respect is the hand, which in a certain sense makes her portrait more active than Vermeer's. The hand supports her girl's face, but also veils, protects and conceals it, thereby making it more difficult to read the portrait. Introspection, which is also a specific reference to 17th-century painting, creates a certain aloofness and indeterminacy that has an odd attraction.¹

The untitled portrait by Cindy Wright does not look directly at us either. She looks straight past us, as was the case in many portraits by the Flemish Primitives. When women were portrayed at that time, it was hardly ever as independent individuals who addressed the viewer directly.

The woman Wright portrays is dark in tone and mood, and is also wearing a crown of thorns as a necklace that draws blood. This piece of jewellery of course refers to the powerful influence of Christian culture on Western society, but it is above all her strength that the woman thus demonstrates. She wears it, and bleeds, but at the same time appears not to be affected by it.

In her work, Wright always starts out from photos, which she manipulates on the computer and then transforms into paintings. This layered approach also shows in her interest in showing both the inside and the outside; after all, in addition to pitiless portraits she also often paints pieces of meat in fine detail. But it is also expressed in the difference in the distance the viewer has to take with regard to her paintings, whereby details have a different effect. Wrinkles, bags under the eyes and hair seem at first sight like external, superficial details, but they also clearly indicate underlying forces.

Marie-Jo Lafontaine has always been interested in universal and explicit multicultural forces which she expresses in a variety of portraits and in other ways. To this end she is always in search of strong personalities, both children and adults. The black and white photo of a girl that she has selected for this exhibition is ambiguous, it is hard to say whether she is still a girl, or already a young woman. Her face is largely hidden behind long, wild hair, and one shoulder is bared. She embodies both murdered innocence and vigour.

When it comes to photos, Lafontaine likes to work in series which gradually reveal the image she is looking for or images which in their interaction make it clear what interests her. Here, the girl is gradually freeing herself from everything that hinders her from being a burgeoning woman. The wild hair and the absence of any recognisable face refer to the ambiguous strength of the monstrous, precisely that of which one is so afraid in a woman.

The woman is a recurring element in Berlinde De Bruyckere's work, in which she likes to tell the world's great narratives. One of its characteristics is the gradual, almost seamless transition between dead and living elements, and between nature and culture. One of her earlier works, the blanket women, is a good example of this. There is often a certain desolation and melancholy, almost a lament for a seemingly lost or simply impossible world. In the sculpture De Bruyckere has done for this exhibition, the arms and head of a sitting woman merge into the branches of what looks like a weeping willow. The weight of the branches means she is unavoidably pulled forwards and she appears rather despondent. She is related to De Bruyckere's 'hair women', who were no longer capable of freeing themselves from their heavy burden, unlike the 'blanket women', who were ultimately able to do so.²

The starting point for Kati Heck's contribution is Otto Dix' 1928 triptych painting 'Grossstadt'. In her work, Heck moves the prostitutes from the side panel to the centre and makes a contemporary version using friends as models. This is typical of her method, and she likes to give shape to events in her own environment. Although she does not call herself a rabid feminist, it comes as no surprise that she agreed to take part. After all, in her work she constantly raises questions, in an absurd manner, about the whys and wherefores of daily life and society, and above all about the absence of a critical attitude.³

Here too, her painting is preceded by a photo in burlesque style in which she and several friends present a contemporary version of Dix' prostitutes. Whereas Dix' women are a sort of manly women, Heck's women make much greater play of their physicality and are just as bold and strong.

At the time of writing, it is not yet known how she will incorporate this image into her painting. In most of Heck's paintings, a whole range of themes, techniques and subjects merge together in a fascinating brutality.

Joelle Tuerlinckx will be showing her 2006 video 'La fille qui descend l'escalier'. The first scenes show an historical black and white photo from a book about deSingel in Antwerp. It shows an anonymous woman going down the stairs in the entrance hall. In her video, Tuerlinckx then shows a contemporary woman going up and down the stairs in all sorts of variations: slowly, fast, on the left, crossing from one side to the other, and so on. On just one occasion she descends alone. Her gaze is always neutral, but after a time her presence nevertheless becomes extremely compelling. She has created an expectation and the viewer is always on the lookout for her amongst all the other people in the picture.

Another 2006 video from the same series, 'Les hommes qui marchent', also filmed in deSingel, is completely different, if not in sharp contrast. No anonymous men here, but seven 'marcheurs' – architects and artists who are emphatically named and are selected for their particular way of walking. They are not swallowed up in a particular crowd, however small it may be, but walk alone in the corridor towards the camera. Here too, the starting point is provided by an archive photo from deSingel, one from 1967 showing prominent people on a working visit. Both these videos are part of Tuerlinckx' exploration of the essence of architecture and how one experiences it by moving around in it, but she inevitably brings to light a certain number of socio-cultural issues.⁴

Lastly, in her contribution, Ann Veronica Janssens appears to summarise the work of the other artists. Her own work is always related to such concepts as perception, emptiness, materiality (and immateriality) and infinitude. In this regard she is above all extremely interested in light, heat and such phenomena as gravity. She is here reviving a 1993 work that has lost none of its power. A simple white fluorescent tube straight through the wall connects the white and black rooms of the gallery. The perception of the light is of course different in the two rooms. But there is also a link between them. What the work shows in this context is that things can never be put in black and white terms, but that there is always a grey area where things merge into one another. That there is a need for exchange and cooperation. And that only in this way can a better understanding of and attention to each other arise.

This is also a message that best summarises the intention of this exhibition. Showing the work of these eight female artists together is above all meant to procure attention for the 'other', by looking closely, observing and especially not forgetting.

Edith Doove
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Translation by Gregory ball

1. See Eric Rinckhout, 'Ik geef een meerwaarde aan alledaagse beelden', interview with Karin Hanssen, De Morgen, 13th March 2007.

2. See Barbara Baert, 'Over wat draagt en draaglijk is. De stoffelijke wereld van Berlinde De Bruyckere', in Berlinde De Bruyckere Eén 2002-2004, De Pont, Tilburg, La Maison Rouge, Paris, 2005.

3. See www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/kati_heck_articles.htm

4. See Moritz Küng, 'Introduction', Programme Book Joelle Tuerlinckx – After Architecture After, deSingel, Antwerp, 2006, www.desingel.be/download/Tuerlinckx-31182.pdf