

Director of Characters

The Sculptures of Folkert de Jong

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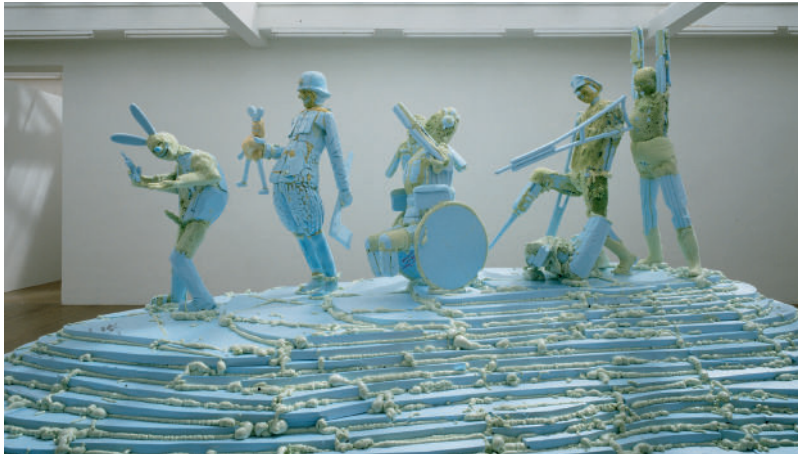
[DAVID STROBAND]

The artist Folkert De Jong (Egmond Aan Zee, 1972) has been bringing odd characters into the world for more than ten years now. Sometimes they appear in groups, sometimes alone. They are frozen in a pose and seek confrontation with us, the viewers. When the viewer encounters these carefully created characters, he is both seduced and frightened off, kept at a distance and at the same time invited to become more closely acquainted. Beauty and wonder – sometimes even bafflement – take turns.

De Jong speaks stirringly of his characters, whose roots often lie in (art) history. He tries, searchingly and contemplatively, to provide them with stories and meaning. In the course of defining his characters, De Jong unfolds a world where history seeps into our contemporary world and where our contemporary view colours history. His characters attempt, on the basis of both past and present, to shed light on how the world around us works and what our position in it is. They tell exploratory stories.

Attraction and repulsion

De Jong made his first sculptural piece – *The Iceman Cometh* – in 2001. What you see is a still from some gruesome story. Figures with various defects wander around in a chilling landscape, an island whose blueness has a wintry feel. It contains a procession of figures in ecstatic poses, led by a bent figure with big rabbit's ears, a pistol in his right hand and a penis standing proudly erect. He is followed by, among others, a soldier with a weapon in one hand and a Mickey Mouse doll in the other, and a figure that seems to be raising the stumps of his arms in jubilation. One of the more important sources of inspiration for this work is the paintings and drawings of the German Expressionists at the start of the twentieth century. De Jong was especially struck by the restrained emotional effect of a self-portrait drawn by Otto Dix, done in a trench during the First World War. Dix's satire and vivid colours make it simpler for the viewer to look at these horrors. De Jong's figures are also part of a satire: they show emotions that have been magnified as a consequence of their shortcomings. And moreover, they are brightly coloured.



The Iceman Cometh, 2001.
Styrofoam and polyurethane
foam. Photo by Jannes
Linders. © Studio Folkert de
Jong / André Simoens
Gallery, Knokke

De Jong's sculptures have lifelike human dimensions and are made of chemical products such as Styrofoam and polyurethane foam. These materials are often used in building, and also in the Hollywood film industry, and are therefore very well suited to creating effects and illusions. De Jong uses them to give his sculptures an extraordinary layering. The material looks hard and industrial. De Jong cuts his robust shapes out of Styrofoam and assembles them quite roughly. It is precisely the combination of the forms cut from this building material and their clear and actually quite lively blue or pink colour which one moment repels and the next attracts.

The caverns of the artist's soul

As of 2001, Folkert de Jong's work reflects increasingly on his position as an artist in relation to society. It is through his characters that he defines his position in the consumer society of the West, which is so forcefully driven by the media. And how does he relate to (art) history? De Jong's materials look very temporary, but in fact they are strong and durable. Their seeming transience gives something very paradoxical to the often historical figures he makes with them.

In the 2003 work *Life's Illusions*, an ungainly figure with no arms sits drinking from a cup through a straw. His head appears to be completely covered in blood. Near him you see a green monster that looks like a Michelin man. Nearby a laughing woman in a flowery dress waves two axes around. Between the three of them burns a camp fire in blue, green and purple colours, and at an appropriate distance stands a horse mounted by a little man in an orange-coloured outfit with a variety hat atop his grinning face. This scene is surrounded by small walls that have been blown over and lots of building debris, all made from the same material as the frightful figures that seem close to madness. This work combines many of De Jong's fascinations: American comics, Bfilms, freaks, and the gruesome, dark and bizarre sides of man. He has also been influenced by artists from the West coast of America, such as Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley. *Life's Illusions* shows a singular encounter between characters with twisted horror-like heads. They live in a world entirely their own, one that

De Jong likes to visit because he can examine the caverns of the human soul there. The bright colour accents that De Jong introduces into this scene using pigment put the potential madness of the characters into sharp focus.

Round 2006 Folkert de Jong meditated even more on his position as an artist. As a rule, artists aim to develop a new idiom, and thus distinguish themselves from their predecessors. But one is also undeniably part of a tradition – works by predecessors repeatedly enrich one's own vision. It was in this period that De Jong created *Gott mit uns*, a large installation featuring well-known sculptures by such typically twentieth-century sculptors as Hans Arp and Constantin Brancusi. These sculptures are threatened and mocked by a number of theatrical figures from military history who are near to madness. De Jong here emphasises the noncommittal nature that seems to characterise so many works of art, in this case abstract works. Arp and Brancusi did their non-figurative work in tranquillity and seclusion. During the Second World War they simply carried on. While battles were being fought outside, these artists were indoors creating universal beauty. In the first place De Jong was amazed that these artists did not seem to be interested in what was going on around them, but afterwards he concluded that they were able to reduce the turbulent events to an essential visual idiom that deliberately withdrew from the misery caused by mankind. Ultimately he admires the spiritual, contemplative position these artists adopted.

Life's Illusions, 2003. Detail.
Pigmented polyurethane foam
and Styrofoam.
Photo by Jannes Linder.
© Studio Folkert de Jong



Restrained and concentrated

Round about 2006 De Jong's method and visual idiom evolved from those used in *The Iceman Cometh* (2001) and *Lost Illusions* (2003). This method involved less cutting and carving of Styrofoam, and more components of the works were made by casting. After some intensive research he developed a process for casting his materials (polyurethane) in moulds. In the course of casting (during which poisonous substances are released) De Jong adds pigments. This results in a more refined formal idiom related to painting and in subtler gestures in the characters. Such materials as jute and bubblewrap are also added to the casting process, leading to the creation of unusual structures in the work. You can see that De Jong makes the grotesque and ecstatic elements of his visual idiom merge into a more restrained and concentrated figurative idiom.

Round 2007 De Jong worked on *Les Saltimbanques* (acrobats, or circus performers). In this series, carnivalesque figures adopt still, inward-looking poses. They appear to have been inspired by the *commedia dell'arte*, but in fact derive from a series of works by Pablo Picasso. In his 1905 painting *Famille de Saltimbanques* and a series of drawings from the same period, Picasso shows performers at their most introspective. They clearly operate in a small niche in society and look only inwards, at themselves. In *Les Saltimbanques*, De Jong abandons the highly expressive features of his earlier work. No more exuberant gestures or frantic facial expressions, no more skulls or clashing of arms, only retiring and contemplative figures who pay no heed to the world or who view it from a great distance. Later works in this series – *Balancing Act 'Laura'* (2007) and *Circle of Trust (Mother and Son)* (2009) – can be seen more as 'traditional' sculptures. Here, too, it is apparent that De Jong hardly cuts his material at all anymore and assembles these forms less showily. He no longer translates his gestures and actions directly into the material, but models his forms in a more detached way by means of casting. A mother holding her little son in her arms, a girl performing a balancing act on an overturned oil drum: reflections on the human condition play a part in all these scenes. The costumes of these (circus) performers indicate that these characters accentuate human behaviour. They offer insights into the human psyche, but probably also say something about our species in present-day society, with its structures of economic and political power. The oil drum, for example, is an essential and recurring element in *Les Saltimbanques*.

Folkert de Jong has in the meantime developed into a consummate director of characters in all sorts of settings: 'I can spark off a process of associations and involve the public closely in the subject I am exploring. That fascinates me. We receive so much information. It is extremely difficult for an artist to add anything. I hope I can break open this chaos and create a moment of stillness.'⁶¹

For several years De Jong has been inspired by portraits of historical figures. They have included Benjamin Franklin, Jan Pieterszoon Coen, Abraham Lincoln and the crucified Jesus Christ. They make their appearance in the present time, take up a new position there and meet other historical characters. De Jong raises questions and makes room for reflection on our perception of history. How do we interpret it? And do we learn from it? De Jong is concerned by the condition of mankind down the ages. He does not make any moral or absolute statements, but his work contains enough metaphors that hold up a mirror to us.

Les Saltimbanques, The Joker and Human Pyramid, 2007. Pigmented polyurethane foam and Styrofoam. © James Cohan Gallery / Studio Folkert de Jong. Private collection



The immortals

This is apparent in his latest installation, *The Immortals* (2012), made at the Glasgow School of Art, which was an important and internationally renowned arts centre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a monumental room containing classical-looking plaster sculptures stands a big wooden scaffold; on top of it a female character looks out over the room. Diagonally behind her a man stands on a lower step, one foot on a yellow bucket covered with a sheet of Styrofoam, and like her he is looking out into the room. Both have the precise and refined modulation of the figures in *Les Saltimbanques*, are made using the same casting methods and are also distinguished by their lively range of colours. These two characters are Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the architect of the Glasgow School of Art, who was associated with the Arts and Crafts movement, and his wife Margaret MacDonald Mackintosh, who was also an artist. In another part of the room two men being embraced by a woman stand on a sheet of Styrofoam. They are again Mackintosh and his wife, while the second man has the features of William of Orange. Here, too, figures from different historical periods meet, which gives them a metaphorical import.

De Jong once explained in a conversation ⁽⁶⁾ that during his study trip to the Glasgow School of Art he became fascinated by the man-woman relationships of the time. Margaret MacDonald Mackintosh remained in her husband's shadow artistically, but did work in the upper levels of the school, whereas the men populated the lower regions. Men traditionally represent power, and De Jong here examines a possible reversal: Mackintosh stands behind his wife on the scaffold and the woman enfolds the two men in her arms. De Jong is fascinated by apparent contrasts between good and evil, beautiful and ugly, man and woman. He thus appears to play the part of *The Storyteller*: a seated figure playing the guitar on a chair that closely resembles those designed by Mackintosh. This artist is at a suitable distance from the other scenes, adding lustre to what is going on, and probably also providing a commentary. Another woman, Margaret again, stands in a proud pose on a small wooden construction, her

Les Saltimbanques, Accordeon
Player, 2007. Pigmented polyu-
rethane foam and Styrofoam.
© James Cohan Gallery /
Studio Folkert de Jong.
Private collection



eyes closed as if in ecstasy. She is wearing a summer hat made of underlayment, a plywood material that De Jong has used more frequently recently. Margaret's face is modelled on the famous late nineteenth-century death mask in *L'Inconnue de la Seine*. It was cast from the beautiful face of a dead woman, probably a suicide, who was pulled out of the Seine. Her mask was duplicated many times, adorned many a studio and was a major source of inspiration for artists. By means of this sort of reference, De Jong gives his characters many layers of meaning; this includes the title of this group of figures: *The Immortals*.

The court jester

A bronze figure by Folkert de Jong will soon be appearing on the Koningsplein, an oval open space in the stately and distinguished part of The Hague where the royal court resides. He uses this extremely traditional artist's material in his very own way. He adds a patina so that all manner of 'funky' colours appear on its surface. His fascination with graffiti on statues and monuments led him to add colourful patches and patterns to the tradition-laden bronze. In this way he refers to the fact that lots of people like to make their own visual contribution to statues and monuments. They are fascinated by their magnificence and durability and want to match themselves against it.



Left:

Les Saltimbanques, Balancing Act
Laura, 2007. Pigmented polyurethane
foam and Styrofoam. Photo by Aatjan
Renders. © James Cohan Gallery / Stu-
dio Folkert de Jong. Private collection

Right:

Mother and Child, 2009. Pigmented
polyurethane foam, Styrofoam and
adapted Euro pallet. Photo by Aatjan
Renders. © Studio Folkert de Jong.
Rabobank Art Collection

The Immortals, 2012. Detail. Pigmented
polyurethane foam, spray paint and
wood. Photo by Glasgow School of Art
Scotland. © Studio Folkert de Jong /
André Simoens Gallery, Knokke

The character De Jong will install on the Koningsplein is a court jester, a figure that will appropriately provide gently ironic comment on institutions that have a sense of perpetuity. On this square, the bronze court jester acts as a landmark, it is the needle on the record-player: everything revolves around him at a set tempo and he makes this visible. ■

www.folkertdejong.org

Translated by Gregory Ball

NOTES

⁽ⁱ⁾ Michaël Amy, 'Confronting the Grotesque; A Conversation with Folkert de Jong', in *Sculpture*, vol. 27, no. 5, pp. 24-33.

⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ Noted down during a conversation with the artist on 7 November 2012.

