

(1) Wild at Heart is curated by regular supervising tutors from De Ateliers: Rob Birza, Dominic van den Boogerd, Marlene Dumas, Willem de Rooij and Marien Schouten. The exhibition was designed by Rob Birza in collaboration with Krijn de Koning.

Wild at heart

by Dominic van den Boogerd

In Wild at Heart, De Ateliers is presenting four young, internationally operating artists who have in recent years worked in our studios in Amsterdam. These artists have been invited to exhibit because of their single-minded artistic vision, but also because of some surprising connections between their work.⁽¹⁾ Many of their images touch upon the sensitivities of our time, such as the public obsession with sex and violence, disastrous breakdowns in communication and the limits of what reason can comprehend. The world that they are reflecting is one of degradation, desperation and permanent threat, the very opposite of modern ideals of civilisation such as improvement and progress.

The films and paintings in Wild at Heart have been created out of a sense of urgency. These works reflect the confusing, hybrid world of modern life and are at the same time articulate images with their own visual logic. Their importance does not lie so much in the relevance of their subjects, but first and foremost in their *mise en scène*, in the self-assured and coherent way in which they raise these issues.

(2) Richard Woodward, A Dark Lens on America
New York Times Magazine, 14/01/1990

The title of the exhibition is taken from the 1990 film by David Lynch, which he described as 'a love story in the middle of a violent, twisted, modern world'.⁽²⁾ Lynch's predilection for dark desires, absurd extremes and bizarre details has gained him a reputation as a psychopathic Norman Rockwell, whose reckless fantasies reach the screen in an almost unfiltered form. As well as a kinky love story, Wild at Heart is also a sinister road movie, a black comedy, an action film, a cinematographic homage to The Wizard of Oz and, last but not least, a musical full of crashing metal and groaning ballads. Clichés of every conceivable genre are all subjected to inspection, from the weird violence of B-movies to the conventions of the western. This playful reflection on the medium ('I love 49 different genres in one film,' Lynch has declared) is one of the qualities that the artists in the Wild at Heart exhibition have in common. They continuously scan the variety of manifestations of visual culture, with a conviction that nothing should be ruled out beforehand and that everything might have a place in the universe that they have created.

The film is about the burning

passion between Lula (Laura Dern) and Sailor (Nicolas Cage), a romance that is both erotic and courteous, but which is under constant siege from the evil that is all around. The two are unmistakable reincarnations of America's greatest sex idols of the twentieth century, Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe. On the run from the hit man that Lula's hysterical mother Marietta (Diane Ladd, Laura Dern's real mother) has sent after the couple, the two lovers make it to the Deep South of the United States. There, on the very edges of civilisation, the sexual perversions and sadistic violence of the psychotic Bobby Peru (Willem Dafoe) reveal the depths of the American psyche. 'We're shooting a porn movie, Texan style....,' he tells Lula and Sailor in a motel one night. In hallucinatory images, Lynch then shows where Main Street USA meets Dante's inferno.

Permanent threat and the disguises of evil are recurring themes in the paintings of Melissa Gordon (b. 1981, Boston, USA). The series What you can't see could kill you (2005), for example, is based on a 1985 news report about Sylvia Seegrist, a schizophrenic woman who caused a bloodbath in a shopping mall in Philadelphia. The paintings show interiors, objects, notice boards full of photos and documents – material that appears to come from a police investigation and that could represent the key to a universe that is dark and dreadful. In the Seegrist case, the psychiatrists treating her tried to explain their client's derailment in terms of Freud's view of neurosis, which regards repressed urges as the driving force behind psychotic behaviour. This theory of the 'hidden truth' has now given way to what Lacan referred to as the 'confusion of signifiers', an inability in the patient to discern which sign signifies what.

The 'confusion of signifiers' is a phenomenon that fascinates Melissa Gordon (as is also demonstrated by the *trompe l'oeuil* effects in her work). In paintings such as Still Life (2005) and Pomp and Circumstance (2005), based on the interior decoration of the White House in Washington, this confusion is related to the dividing line between the trappings of power and the art collections of the ruling classes. The series can also be seen as a pictorial memory of what were once called 'political pictures'. Scenes of America (2005), from the same series, shows the French wallpaper that Jackie Kennedy selected for the hall of the White House, which came from a country house in the south of the United States: on the one hand, it's a sign of taste and status, but on the other, it's indicative of faded glory and of America's lack in self-esteem. The ethereal light appears to lift these motionless images out of the stream of passing time. Sometimes they are reminiscent of the cool clarity of Edward Hopper, and sometimes of the warm glow of Thomas Cole and the eighteenth-century landscape painting of the American Sublime.

In Gordon's recent series of works the confusion is related to the true nature of Margaretha Geertruida Zelle, born in 1876 as the daughter of a millionaire from Leeuwarden, and famous from Paris to Milan as Mata Hari, exotic dancer and desirable courtesan in military circles. In 1917, the French authorities found her guilty of espionage and she was executed by firing squad. It has never been clear what the evidence was and the dossier will not become public until 2017, one hundred years after her execution. Mata Hari (Malaysian for 'eye of the day') was a double agent for the Germans and the French in the First World War, a self-made sex symbol with a legendary reputation. Like other female protagonists in the work of Melissa Gordon, she unites the image of the good girl and the bad girl in one person, a *femme fatale* who is not only fatal in love, but also in war. One of the paintings combines her image with those of her sisters in the struggle, such as Patty Hearst, Valerie Solanas, Angela Davis and Patti Smith (*Possible Genealogies*, 2006).

Keren Cyffer (b. 1977, Tel Aviv, Israel) has in recent years used the most simple of techniques to make many films that excel in their sophisticated use of 'visual narration'. Not only does the artist incorporate her own experiences and those of her friends into her scripts, but also those of characters from films, television series and novels. Carrying on in the tradition of experimental filmmakers such as Ulrike Ottinger and Jonas Mekas, Cyffer makes films without a professional crew and uses people she knows and other artists as actors. The casting form of Vaksler Productions, Cyffer's one-woman company, illustrates this approach. The flair of directness easily compensates for the shortcomings of self-help.

The Date Series (a filmshoot as a date) consists of seven short films about relationships, love, sex and loneliness. In a succession of situations, the artist takes conventions of cinematic graphic genres such as the western, the love story, the musical and the psychological drama and bends them to her own aims. The results of this aesthetic joyride are unpredictable, inimitable, raw and ambiguous – always involving a debunking sense of reality and a desperate sense of humour. Although all sorts of things go wrong in the relationships between the central characters, this never results in real tragedies. It's more a case of mirroring a banal reality, a cynical soap where the gun smoke from the occupied territories of Israel, Cyffer's homeland, hangs in the air.

The way Cyffer plays with cinematic laws is similar to what Nicolas Cage attempted to do in *Wild at Heart*. In an interview, the actor said: 'The worst an actor can do is to copy another performer. I had always believed that, but then with *Wild at Heart*, I thought, maybe it's time to try something else. I used to call that my Andy Warhol period, because I would take the icon of Elvis the way Warhol would, and try to put something on top of it and filter it in some way.' Just as Cage imitated Elvis in his role as Sailor, Keren Cyffer has created her own version of cinematic genres such as the film noir (*French Film*, 2002), the auteur film (*Experimental Film*, 2002) and the epic history film (*War and Peace*, 2002). Moving beyond the limits of pastiche and parody and trusting in the philosophy of self-help, Cyffer is able to appropriate the work of great cineastes like Godard, Fassbinder and Bergman and use it to express something about the absurdity of these cruel times.