

'Beauty goes hand in hand with decline'

Artist Joanneke Meester about the fears that adults project on children.

By Lucette ter Borg

NRC handelsblad, amsterdam, 2 juni.

What the tiger shark in formaldehyde was to the British superstar-artist Damien Hirst, was 'The pistol' to Joanneke Meester (1966). In 2004, Meester showed the hardly five centimetres large object on the Kunstvlaai in Amsterdam. The pistol had been cut out from a piece of skin, which Meester had surgically removed from her own stomach. It made her famous and notorious.

They reproached her with sensationalism, she would flirt with violence, she was only trying to attract attention, the pistol 'as flat as a dime'. But there was also praise, for the intimacy, the audacity, the metaphorical strength of the work. In contrast to the shark art work of Hirst, which was dashingy called "The Physical Impossibility of Death In the Mind of Someone Living", the pistol was only called "no title".

And in contrast to Hirst, who sold his shark for a very large amount of money to the advertising tycoon Charles Saatchi, Meester never distanced from 'her' pistol, although there was even written about up to New York. The pistol is still laying in formaldehyde in the basement of her house. Beautifully white and with on the spots were the needle stitched into the skin, rusty brown discoloration of clotted blood.

If you look at her video's and installations, she occupies herself with what is traditionally considered a 'women's thing': vulnerability. But two years ago, a critic had already pointed out that Meester's work is powerful enough to be delegated to the Biennale of Venice. By then she had transformed the former nuclear shelter in Dalfsen to something that looked like a medical laboratory full of deformed beings of pig skin, embroidery silk, artificial hair and rabbit ear. The razor-sharp arranged space was claustrophobic, horrible and nevertheless there was a temptingly clean and pure atmosphere. It was as if Louise Bourgeois had gotten a free hand in an installation of Ilya Kabakov.

That strength also manifests itself in the large installation she shows at gallery Witzenhausen in Amsterdam in September. Need You is a frame with components of white plastic child playhouses lying in a heap, curtain rails and transparent curtains. Above and between these houses dolls are dangling up side down. They seem adorable and young - with their trinkets of lace and buttons for decoration - but they are ancient.

Their heads are bandaged, ripped open, mutilated. Their long, yellowish grey, black and brown hairs hang down. Everything is glaringly illuminated. Everything is visible.

Beauty goes hand in hand with decline, love with cruelty and at the end everyone stands alone. 'Nevertheless', says Meester, 'not everything is cruelty.' To Venice Meester is not going to go. Aernout Mik has been delegated again.

But the Tate in London has already shown interest. 'Three years ago,' she says in her kitchen in Amsterdam. 'But I wanted to experiment further especially with presentation forms.'

'Before the pistol I was working on cuddly toys of pig skin. When do you still see half a pig hanging at a butcher? I wanted to show the pain that we hide in our daily life. But, - she hesitates - the cuddly toys were there, whereas I want to make something that (points to her heart) is here. The pistol out of my own skin was the most vulnerable and most violent that I could think of. Everything I read, saw and heard concerning violence around me came together in that sculpture. I was not only culprit and artist, but also victim. I said: "Okay, this is as far as I can go: shoot. And they shot."

In her most recent work Playground, which can be seen starting 10th June at foundation outLINE in Amsterdam, she searches for a border area again. This time by taking naked children as a subject.

In Playground the audience has to lay down on their backs underneath five monitors. Young, nude children - the genitals 'neutralised' - run into the picture and stretch themselves out carefree on a black rag of leatherette. They chat with the artist who films them from above. On her indications they draw round their own naked bodies, jaunty, clumsy but without shame. 'Beautiful,' you here the artist say. 'Now it's finished.'

The drawing that stays behind is the one the police draws at a crime scene.

'The emphasis,' she explains, 'lies on the innocence of the children. They portrait their own status as a victim in all frankness and at the same time they protect themselves. Against what? Also against the fears that adults project on them. I want to show how helpless adults are against the vulnerability of a child. We can't even show their naked beauty anymore.'

Works of Joanneke Meester can be seen at the foundation outLINE in Amsterdam (from 10th of June), Safe in Dalfsen (until 24th of June), Zilt in Heemskerk (from 7th of July) and Artspace Witzenhausen in Amsterdam (from 2nd of September)

See for more information: www.joannekemeester.nl