



Jacqueline de Jong Resilience(s)

PIPPY HOULDSWORTH GALLERY

Jacqueline de Jong: Resilience(s)

Elizabeth Fullerton in conversation with Jacqueline de Jong

November 2019

Over six decades Dutch artist Jacqueline de Jong has created a richly diverse body of work that employs a distinctive vocabulary of eroticism, violence and humour. Expressed through vibrant colour and form, her practice draws on a range of influences from art brut to pop to expressionism. Often working in series, she has made paintings inspired by the cultural revolution of the 1960s, mass media and the wars in Europe and the Middle East, among other themes. Her practice further encompasses performance, sculpture, photography and printmaking.

It is impossible to talk about de Jong's oeuvre without mentioning the historical activities and events that fed into it. De Jong came to prominence in 1960s Paris in the thick of the European postwar avant-garde scene, where she encountered Jean Dubuffet, Wilfredo Lam, and the older generation of artists in the circle of Asger Jorn, an early partner. During the decade she spent there, she worked in British artist Stanley Hayter's fabled Atelier 17, and was part of the anti-authoritarian Situationist International (SI) and one of its few women members. Upon her ejection from the SI by Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem and Attila Kotányo, she founded the radical magazine *The Situationist Times* (1962–67). De Jong created political posters for the 1968 student protests, all the while developing her unique painting language.

It was around 1962 that monstrous figures began appearing in de Jong's canvases. She translated quotidian events that she witnessed into febrile, expressive paintings that quickly garnered her acclaim and successive shows at European and American galleries.

The electrifying paintings in *Resilience(s)* are, for the most part, drawn from two series, *Upstairs Downstairs* and *Paysages Dramatiques*, painted in the mid 1980s. Nonetheless they hark back to the vivid gestural canvases of the 1960s, sharing thematic links and a brilliant palette. The large-scale *Big foot small head (for Thomas)* (1985), created for Amsterdam's city hall in the mid 1980s, portrays an irascible-looking man, dagger in hand, trampling a reptilian beast underfoot as he descends a truncated staircase. The stair motif is revisited in *Ceux qui vont en bateau* (1987), one of three monumental paintings from the *Paysages Dramatiques* series, which shows a monkey-like creature embracing, or perhaps biting, a horse (or wild boar) against a tumultuous backdrop of heaving seas and encroaching foliage. Three further paintings depict equally ambiguous encounters between hybrid animals. In *Drôle de la chasse frustrée* (1987) two birdlike figures tussle over a rifle with a green beast-man. The confrontation, set against an ominous blood red sky, finds formal echoes in the later painting *Afweer* (1995), in which intense hues and strong, urgent brushstrokes are similarly deployed to convey ferocity and passion.

Chasse chevaliere (1987), on the other hand, reveals a different emotional register, perhaps intimating a more decorous seduction (or rebuffing) occurring between the two figures. De Jong uses brown craft paper pasted onto the canvas both to provide a more muted ambience and also as a framing device within the painting. This marouflage technique recurs in a number of the landscape paintings which, unusually for de Jong, are devoid of figures. Nature's savage majesty is the subject, even in the four scenes featuring small rowboats, where human presence is implied. Cliffs plunge vertiginously, hills seethe and waters churn and rage, threatening to engulf the boats, as in *Le paysage marine dégonflé* or *Bateau ivre en détresse* (both 1987). In these thrilling canvases, all is alive and in motion; one can almost smell the brine, feel the sting of waves whipping one's skin.

Like other significant female artists of her generation, de Jong has until recently received considerably less institutional attention than her male counterparts. However, the acquisition in 2011 of the archives of *The Situationist Times* by Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, and major surveys at Musée les Abattoirs, Toulouse (2018) and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2019), demonstrate a reawakening interest in her work. The time is ripe for recognition of her innovative practice and for de Jong to claim her rightful place in the art historical canon. When I asked de Jong about her choice of title, *Resilience(s)*, for this show, she said with characteristic capriciousness, 'I came across the word in the title of the book *Resilience: Philip Guston in 1971* and I liked it, and I like it in the plural. It doesn't have a metaphysical meaning, I just enjoyed it as a word'. Yet the word seems apposite for an artist who has consistently demonstrated a relentless curiosity and freedom of ideas, undaunted by the unevenness of the playing field.

Elizabeth Fullerton: I would like to start with your visit to the tiny island of Schiermonnikoog in northern Holland, which became a catalyst for your *Dramatic Landscapes* series in this show. What are your memories of that trip?

Jacqueline de Jong: I first went there with two other artists and our partners and I said, 'it's very funny being three artists at the same moment on an island. It's asking for trouble. We have to make a work'. We decided to make a big triptych together. It was shown in three museums in the Netherlands and then sold to a collector who had to construct a building around it because it was nine metres long.

EF: What was it about the island that you found so intriguing?

JdJ: Having visited the other Dutch islands, I must say Schiermonnikoog is the most magical. It's small and has pheasants and animals running around it. There are no cars and there's a lot of shooting. That's something you can see

in the paintings in the exhibition. I didn't like all that shooting. I like to eat pheasants, but don't like that they're shot. So it's the dramatic notion of this 'completely harmless' island and then the dramatic effect that the animals are shot. That's my interpretation. But the landscape is very beautiful. I went several times in that period but I haven't been back in 30 years. But there was also another reason I made these landscapes. I had the occasion to fly in a tiny aircraft across Denmark and see the yellow patchwork fields. Seeing landscapes from the sky is a different view. And then, why 'dramatic'? Because why not dramatic! Because of colour and so on. The landscapes are very different from all the other paintings because there are no monsters and people, or things looking like people or animals in them.

EF: *Passage de Paysage* seems to fuse the two, with the trees taking on monstrous characteristics.

JdJ: Yes, but those are inspired by Francis Bacon's paintings, his destroyed self-portrait from 1988, *The Painter on the Road to Tarascon* (inspired in turn by Van Gogh). Yes, the trees do become monstrous, and then in the big paintings, of course there are actual monsters.

EF: It's interesting that you mention Bacon's take on Van Gogh's painting because I was struck by affinities with David Hockney's vibrant landscapes, also inspired by *The Road to Tarascon*.

JdJ: Yes exactly, and he used trees with different colour scales, which are very dramatic.

EF: I was discussing *Passage de Paysage* with my mother, who is an art historian, and our understandings of it were completely different. For me, the grey streak is the road hurtling into the distance whereas for her, the road was the large swathe of crimson. And again, in *Ceux qui vont en bateau*, featuring a monkey and a horse, she saw a monkey astride a rat whereas I saw a cow.

JdJ: That's exactly what I think my paintings should do! Misunderstandings. Disagreements. Multi-interpretations. I never know what they are. I make suggestions. I don't make definitions. They're very often interpretations of literature, influences from outside.

EF: Do boats have any special significance for you? As a motif they're present in several of these works.

JdJ: The boats are whales too. They're whales and boats. They're something not very specific. I think boats are magic. I like them. But again, I don't want to pinpoint the boats.

EF: What I like very much about these dramatic landscapes is that things metamorphose right before your eyes. A gnarled, contorted tree assumes corporeal, muscular form; two oars seem to shoot out of the turbid water like leaping fish.

JdJ: That's true. That's the idea of art. Well, mine at least. They change all the time.

EF: I note that the beast-people in the works in this show seem not to have a particular gender. You convey a tremendous sense of carnal lust, while leaving everything fluid and opaque.

JdJ: Yes you've understood it very well. In my older paintings the figures are very obviously male and female. Here they are not. I don't know what they are. They are nondescript, let's put it that way.

EF: Do you have a clear idea in your mind of the creature you're going to put onto the paper or does it develop as you go?

JdJ: No I don't have a clear idea or concept, it's mainly the material that gives me the figure to get to the subject. Very often I start by drawing directly on

unprepared or on prepared canvas. With the *Dramatic Landscapes* it's a double thing because the craft paper on the canvas creates a different structure.

EF: Colour evidently plays an important role in your work?

JdJ: Absolutely. Asger Jorn taught me about complementary colours and made me read Goethe's *Farbenlehre* [*Theory of Colour*]. As a tutor he was very important to me. Mainly concerning colour but in a way also form. I almost always use a palette that is as bright as possible, even today.

EF: Aside from Jorn and Bacon, who have been your predominant artistic influences?

JdJ: So many. You could say R B Kitaj, and Hockney definitely, of the younger artists. And among the older, historical ones, there's Max Beckmann and Goya. I was very much influenced by all sorts of artists. And I still am. People are influenced by what they see and what they look at and I don't hesitate to use the influences.

EF: You've stayed with painting as your primary medium, even when it was unfashionable, said to be dead. Were you ever tempted to abandon it?

JdJ: Usually I don't listen to fashionable ideas. I definitely don't listen to people anyway, whatever they say! I'm not making works on climate issues and I'm definitely not making works on gender issues, although my work is very much #MeToo-like in a way. It's not so directly visible though. I hope that my work is too universal to be pinpointed.







