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Art Institute show a cool Dutch treat

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BY [KEVIN NANCE](#) Staff Reporter

In one of the most striking images in "In Sight: Contemporary Dutch Photography From the Collection of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam," opening Saturday at the Art Institute of Chicago, Hans van der Meer depicts a soccer game at what Henri Cartier-Bresson would have called "the decisive moment": the ball finding the net, the backward-lunging goalkeeper's body frozen in mid-contortion like something out of Cirque du Soleil.

But unlike many of Cartier-Bresson's classic images and the intense closeups of modern sports photojournalism, van der Meer's picture doesn't focus on what almost anyone else would consider the center of attention. The goalie, instead, is a tiny smudge in a wide-angle image that encompasses 11 other players, the soccer field, a pasture beyond, a horizon of unimpressive trees and houses, and an empty, overcast sky the color of the dull side of aluminum foil.

'IN SIGHT: CONTEMPORARY
DUTCH PHOTOGRAPHY FROM THE
STEDELIIK MUSEUM'

When: Saturday through May 8

Where: Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan

Tickets: \$7-\$12 (suggested)

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It's an image of scrupulous neutrality, whose dispassion can strike the viewer as either ironic and calculated or, rather, as a shy but stubborn refusal to manipulate or tell you what to look at. *This is simply what was there*, the photographer seems to say. Or, closer to the mark, *This is what was in the viewfinder. Take it or leave it.*

Whatever's behind it, this coolness is the dominant mode throughout "In Sight," which features about 100 prints from the Stedelijk, a major European collector of photography since 1958. (The exhibition, which also will be traveling to sites in Europe, Asia and South America, is supplemented in Chicago by 11 images from the collection of LaSalle Bank, a

subsidiary of the Dutch conglomerate ABN AMRO, a longtime Stedelijk sponsor that helped fund the show.) Whether looking at van der Meer's soccer fields, Wijnanda Deroo's eerily unpopulated spaces or contemporary art star Rineke Dijkstra's formal, quietly emotional portraits of beachgoers or new mothers and their babies, you feel called upon to make your own decision about what, if anything, the images mean, because the photographers aren't saying. It's what might be called the art of getting out of the way.

"In the past decade, the camera as a tool has become more important than the photographer as an auteur," says the Stedelijk's Hripsime Visser, who curated the exhibition in consultation with the Art Institute's David Travis. "In the '70s and '80s, a lot of Dutch photographers were taking a much more theatrical approach, elaborately staging photographs in a highly deliberate, conceptual way. But in many of the photographs here, there's a kind of simplicity in which the images are clear-cut and not very complicated. It's as if the photographer is saying, 'This is it. Look at it. I'm showing you something.' "

A few of the images in "In Sight" hark back to the more densely composed, overcooked photographs of the previous generation, but even these apply visual spice with a light hand. Elspeth Diederix, for example, experiments with impish dabs of saturated color -- a man lying in a field with his ear a surreal, throbbing scarlet, or a shrub dotted with plastic shopping bags like giant blooms -- but there's nothing about the images that's loud or insistent.

That isn't to say that some of the photographs, for all their preference for the everyday over the extraordinary, don't contain subtle, implicit dramas. Dijkstra's series of nude portraits of mothers, some taken only hours after the women gave birth, speaks of triumph and trauma. One 1994 portrait shows a woman holding her newborn with equal parts tenderness and awkwardness; unless you look closely, you might miss the trail of blood trickling down the inside of one leg.

"She doesn't mean to shock you," Visser says of Dijkstra. "Her work is very sober and classical, but I think what she's mainly interested in is the possibilities of photography for showing how you can be affected by emotion. These women are saying, 'This is me, this is the truth.' And it's a truth other than the more common mother-and-child images that we already know."

This down-to-earth, clear-eyed quality is also evident in many of the exhibition's photographs of the Dutch landscape, which are often the opposite of the touristic imagery of canals and windmills that have confirmed our notions about rural Holland for centuries. Wout Berger's 1989 photograph of a house all but engulfed by industrial waste from a sand-dredging operation is a startling portrait of the effects of development -- as is his deceptively bucolic image of a golf course created on land polluted with metals leached from chemical waste.

"I fell in love with these pictures," says Travis, the Art Institute's curator of photography. "For some reason, the Dutch have more than their share of good photographers, and this exhibit gives us a great look at them."

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