



Roberta on the Arts

The Art Institute of Chicago: In Sight - Contemporary Dutch Photography

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***The Art Institute of Chicago: In Sight - Contemporary Dutch
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**In Sight: Contemporary Dutch Photography
from the Collection of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
([Stedelijk Museum Website](#))**

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Quick! Free associate with the word "Dutch". Betcha tulips, little boys plugging dikes, stolid burghers, and heart attack making still lifes of food popped into mind. Clichés like these can be discarded when you visit *In Sight*, the newest photographic installation at The Chicago Art Institute.

With about 100 large formatted color and black and white selections drawn from the collection of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, 13 contemporary photographers are represented and there is not one pretty, candy box image in the lot.

Subjects as disparate as portraits of girls, land pollution, middle-aged soccer players, and rooms, revealed nuances of a common human experience and vulnerability in varied guises.

At first, *Michael Matthews* appears to be a sequential study of the ribbing and texture of a large tropical leaf. Then the head, shoulders and protruding spine of a man dying of AIDS, become apparent in the intimate portraits by Koos Bruekel. Unrelentingly, the disease is disassembling the subject who becomes less substance and more basic form until the final frame of the series. There, a haughty over-the-shoulder glance informs us, a spirit still resides in the body.

Rineke Dijkstra's group of portraits reveals full frontal nude shots of women who had moments before delivered the babies they are clutching. The tender dichotomy of fierce protectiveness and their complete nakedness is no more clear than in the photograph in which one of mothers has a thin stream of blood running down her leg. Each holds her newborn in a grasp that obscures the baby's face and leaves her own nakedness available to the viewer.

In her *Beach Portraits*, Dijkstra gives us a latter day version of [Bottecelli's *The Birth of Venus*](#). The girl in her photograph though, stands awkwardly with her long-limbed frame not quite able to find the nonchalant pose a young teen would likely strive for. She is beautiful without artifice, and her expression of unease is as uncloaked as the women in the previous series.

Using available light to produce a nimbus effect in several black and white views of cold and constraining spaces, Wijnanda Deroo, creates a sense of entrapment and forlorn abandonment. Even in the brilliantly painted rooms from *Patzcuaro* in Mexico, a feeling of departure permeates the warmth of the tropical colors.

The focal point of Elspeth Diederix's *Blue Ridge* is a red ear. Centralized, it illustrates what happens when one lies too long on one body part. Razor-like blades of grass surround the prone male whose livid ear forces us to stare. Unlike Wyeth's [Christina](#) in her world, however, the man is not surveying his environment. One wonders if he has flipped over to his other side to even out the shading of his ears!

Waiting, waiting, waiting. *Hong Kong Reporter* fidgets with her hair, wipes perspiration from her lovely face, tries to be nonchalant as traffic and noise swirl around her in Gerald van der Kaap's video. It's easy to imagine his subject thinking: I'll count to 100 and then he'll come. OK. I'll count again. The film loops seamlessly and hypnotizes us with the unrelenting fixedness of the woman while everything else around her is moving on.

A little house abides in the lee of a dune, water encroaching almost to its door. But wait! That's not beach water. On inspection, boards have been placed to give footing through oozy muck. And the dune is dirt or slag of some sort. The little dwelling is caught in a flanking movement by forms of pollution. Wout Berger has given the title, *I.B.S. code 130.003 Haarlem, Waarderpolder*, as a reference to the nature of the toxic substances on the site, in this part of a damning series.

Also by Berger, a very painterly rendering of reedy stemmed filaments and weakling colors, document the growth of tender flowers sown to... prevent erosion! This makes a swell companion piece to the signature image of the show, *Azalea*, by Diederix. A bush heavy with blooms, vigorously bursting forth in colorful profusion, on closer inspection is brilliant with plastic bags that substitute for flowers! So much for the beauty of nature!

Several brave men permitted Bertien van Manen to photograph them in their bedrooms. The intimate messiness of their unmade beds, shoes and more shoes, items strewn on chairs and bedside tables and the men themselves, asleep or half clothed, made me want to step in and straighten up. Get that guy a blanket! Fix that bed! You'll get a draft! Put on your pants! Whew! Please, let there be no sudden death that obviates the opportunity to put things to rights before the neighbors peer in!

One comprehends that one is, well, not quite so young anymore, yet the "power" has not entirely deserted the old bod. Men will be boys and they will play soccer. And get into predicaments. Want the ball to come to them sooo badly. Get hurt. Have to figure out how to fish an errant goal from a canal. It's not just a game the way Hans van der Meer sees it. It's life and

it's male.

Is there anything as hopeful and despairingly unlovely in a girl's life as that interlude between pre-puberty and adolescence? Uneven skin tones and general lumpiness contribute to the uncertainty that anything will ever be fine when Hellen van Meene runs it through her lens. In their minds' eyes, did these children envision themselves as swans? This writer hopes a follow-up series will show them in eventual beautiful feather.

Hans van der Meer's picture of a solitary sheep, centered in a fog enrobed field, emphasized, one final time, the theme of vulnerability. As the last photograph of the show, the loneliness of this creature, a prey animal, after all, separated from the protection of its flock, depicted an apartness extending even to the animal kingdom.

A term for a national sense of vulnerability is much needed here. If there were such a word, I would use it to express the omnipresent feeling I had as I looked at so much of *In Sight*. Yes, the title is a double entendre, and I wonder at the purposefulness of the selections to convey this. Can a people exist, living as the Dutch do, under the watery Damoclesian sword of the North Sea and not sublimate a sense of impending attack?

That is what I most like about the exhibit. Through the power of their lenses, these insightful artists challenged me to consider the surface and explore beyond. Did I say before that there were no pretty images? That may be, but the empathy I felt with so much of this show was a powerful experience. And that was a beautiful thing.

Teachers and parents will be delighted to find a treasure trove of material on the museum's web site. Tours, lectures, guides and lately, more interactive resources are amply available. Speaking with a representative in the education department, I was excited by some especially creative ways the museum is responding to the public to make a visit a multi-sensory experience in coming exhibits.



Rineke Dijkstra (Dutch, born 1959). Kolobrzeg, Poland, July 26, 1992.
From "Beach Portraits," 1992. Chromogenic color print; 167 x 140 cm.
LaSalle Bank Photography Collection, partial and promised gift to The Art
Institute of Chicago, 2003.89.4. (c) 2005 Rineke Dijkstra, courtesy Marian
Goodman Gallery, New York, G23192



Hans van der Meer (Dutch, born 1955). Hoogmade/MMO 3 - Alkmania 3 (Dutch Fields), 1995-1998. Chromogenic color print; 20.1 x 29 cm. Collection of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 2000.4.0707(1). (c) 2004 Galerie van Kranendonk, Den Haag, G23197

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