

Beyond Narrative

This exhibition brings together sculptures, paintings, engravings, and mixed media works by Dutch artist Jacqueline de Jong (1939). The selection provides a window into an artistic oeuvre that has spanned more than six decades – in dialogue with, and advancing, some of the most important post-war artistic movements in Europe, including art brut, Pop Art, New Figuration and Postmodernism. Aged 19, De Jong became involved in the revolutionary, radical, avant-garde movement the Situationist International, and from 1962 to 1967, she was in charge of *The Situationist Times*, its English-language journal. The Situationists' aim was to break free from the spectacle of capitalism and to create encounters with the world that were adventurous and self-directed. When De Jong describes the movement in a letter in 1964, she identifies “détournement (distortion), dérive (getting lost) and modification (change)” as its most important tools.¹ To this day, these processes still characterize the artist's distinct approach. De Jong's shapeshifting work is playful, erotic, funny, dark and, above all, always finely attuned to the various heres and nows of which she has been part.

When I spoke to De Jong in preparation for this text, she walked me through the list of works for the exhibition. In reference to her *Trains* series, she talked about abandoned tracks lost somewhere in the countryside between Moulins and Montluçon in rural France, tracks on which coal was once transported from the nearby mines, now defunct. She talked about the abandoned little train stations alongside, still in perfect condition, though they have no function now that the trains have stopped running. As she spoke, I pictured giant toy houses and trains sitting out in the French countryside – out of place in a world that has moved on, somehow absurdly cute. To me, this sort of observation goes right to the core of how De Jong sees the world and how she captures it in her art. Her curiosity goes out to incongruities: dissonant realities that exist in parallel and clash in weird ways. She draws us to moments when a cohesive worldview trips, falls onto and over itself and tumbles through absurdity, which, though they can result in humor, may also lead to violence, acceleration and force.

Atypically of De Jong's oeuvre, the works shown here have no direct relation to political events. Many of the artist's works seem to have absorbed moments of crisis and terror, moments in which order dissolves and something bigger, more terrifying takes over. Wars are frequent subjects, as are murder scenes – the lithograph *Quasimodo and Queen Kong* is an example of the latter. Often, distortion manifests itself in humanoid figures depicted as skeletons, monsters, animal-human hybrids. *NONSENSE*, *NO WAY*, *Attack*, *Dancing Pool* and some of the works in the *Potato Blues* series all show different versions of these characteristic figures, which, though they do not reference specific events, nonetheless conjure fear and macabre joy in equal amounts. Though of a different affective order, the erotic has a similar power in Jacqueline's work. In tandem with the notion of play, it generates heat and glee and movement, as if carrying the energy of a Futurism made somehow empathetic, more grounded, having taken a turn towards the living and the interconnections between beings.

Jacqueline de Jong has a relationship with Switzerland. De Jong was born in 1939, in Hengelo, The Netherlands, into a Dutch-Jewish family and to a Swiss mother – Alice Weil, who had grown up in Zürich. De Jong and her mother fled the Netherlands when the war broke out. They eventually found refuge in Switzerland and lived in Zürich for several years

¹ Jacqueline de Jong, “Letter on the Situationist Times,” in: Prestsæter Ellef and James Horton, *These Are Situationist Times!: An Inventory of Reproductions Deformations Modifications Derivations and Transformations* (Oslo: Torpedo Press, 2019): 16.

while her father remained in hiding in the Netherlands. When Jacqueline and her mother returned to Hengelo in 1947, De Jong had to re-learn Dutch. Her parents would later move to Ascona, on the shore of Lake Maggiore. In the 1960s, when De Jong was living in Paris, she would visit them there in the summer. She had a studio there, and room to paint and sculpt.

Popular culture and entertainment have provided important, and recurring, points of reference for De Jong. These include: TV images (particularly those of the moon landing in the *Astronaut* series); the pinball machine, with its chance play and twists and turns (as seen in the *Pinball Wizard* series); cookbooks, and their hidden, erotic agendas and visceral images (as depicted in *Eet Meer Aardappelen* and *Mange ta Soupe*); and various films, which have triggered paintings and engravings (such as *Flying Daggers*). The *Objects* link to her *Astronaut* paintings, which feature patterns in bright, contrasting colors. The same colors and patterns were used for the vinyl sculptures made in her studio in Ascona.

There are explicit references to other artists in her work. She has drawn from and been inspired to paint by, for instance, Goya's depictions of war and human monstrosity, as well as Kitaj's treatment of space and figuration. Kitaj is even mentioned in the titles of two of the works in this exhibition: *Raincoat (after Kitaj)* and *After Kitaj*. In a different series, De Jong drew on Malevich, and Bacon is certainly an important reference as well. She has also often collaborated with other artists. She organized happenings with Jean-Jacques Lebel in the 60s, worked intensely with artists such as Roberto Matta, Wilfredo Lam, and Jacques Prévert for the *Situationist Times*, and staged a cooking performance together with Daniel Spoerri in the 70s.

Since the mid 2000s, De Jong has grown potatoes at her home in the French village of Buxières les mines, where she lives intermittently, having chosen to divide her time between rural France and Amsterdam. She takes intense pleasure in these vegetables and the ways their forms change as they sprout, shrink and dry up. She takes potatoes that have been dried for two years and plunges them into gold to create her *Objects de Jong*, sculptural objects that she has also turned into jewelry. She worked with photographs of potatoes to create the series *Potato Blues*. For these mixed media works, she drew on the printed photographs with oil stick, fluorescent gel, and pumice.

While talking about the works for this exhibition, and what had triggered her to make them, De Jong finally said, "You know that I don't like to talk about my art". I told her that yes, I knew. Later, I thought that, despite her paintings often being referred to as "narrative" in character, they are actually only ever marginally "about" something. Yes, there is a point of reference, and yes, this is important, because it shows a commitment to the here and now, which often also means a political commitment. What is even more important, however, is what De Jong does to her content: that specific, and often mischievous, *détournement* of hers, which raises the temperature, exposes a particular friction, and creates movement and agitation. Susan Sontag once wrote, "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."² I am sure Jacqueline de Jong would agree.

² Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2013): 10.