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## Interview Paul Kooiker

Catherine Somzé

Lauded and awarded in the Netherlands, visual artist working with photography Paul Kooiker (1964, Rotterdam) forms part of a generation of talented Dutch practitioners who contributed to the recognition of Dutch photography on the international contemporary art scene since the early 1990s. In 1996 Kooiker won the prestigious Prix de Rome and last year, he was honoured with the A. Roland Holst prize for his oeuvre.

In a bright studio situated nearby the Vondelpark in Amsterdam, Kooiker talks in exclusivity for ZOO Magazine about his passions, obsessions and his way of approaching photography.

**Catherine Somzé:** Many of your photographs exude a sense of heightened intimacy and directness. It is as if you were looking at something you were not supposed to look at. Where does the fascination for this kind of taboo looking come from?

**Paul Kooiker:** It is inherent to the medium of photography. When I photograph I am looking through a keyhole, quite literally. The presence of the camera has the power to transform the situation at hand into a private scene. In this sense my photographs are always more than just images; they are devices to understand what I perceive to be the voyeuristic nature of photography itself. Peeping is the essence of photography.

**C. S.:** Is this why you often choose for an aesthetic that reminds amateur photography?

**P. K.:** Could you be more specific?

**C. S.:** Your images have often a very grainy quality as if they had been taken with a non-professional camera. And there is the candid nonchalance of the poses, as if everything that was happening was real and in no way staged.

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**P. K.:** My work might look casual but I couldn't call myself an amateur photographer, even if I wanted to. My aesthetic choices form part of a reflection on the status and interpretation of photography.

**C. S.:** Some have compared your work to that of the Czech photographer Miroslav Tichy. He used to build his own cameras, which gave his photographs of mostly women and young girls a dream-like quality.

**P. K.:** I don't build my own cameras but I often play with the possibilities and limitations of the medium in terms of colour and sharpness. In *Hunting and Fishing* from 1999, a series of outdoor nudes, I was trying to see the extent to which viewers would keep on believing what they are seeing despite the extreme out-of-focus. In a sense *Hunting and Fishing* was all about probing the limits of figuration.

**C. S.:** Does this have to do with the fact that you prefer working in series?

**P. K.:** It does in a way. Working in series is a very important part of the way I see myself as a photographer who interrogates the nature of the medium with his work. Photography is about repetition and seriality. To be a photographer is to be a collector. In a second time, it is the ability to choose, combine and manipulate the photographs.

**C. S.:** This is when a series comes into being. But why do you choose to create series with very similar photographs?

**P. K.:** I want to address the issue of stereotyping or, to put it in a different manner, the idea that looking is always a form of interpretation.

**C. S.:** Could you elaborate on this?

**P. K.:** The way you perceive a swan, for instance, is preconditioned by the many swans you've seen before, not only in real life but on postcards, books and other media. You bring to the act of looking this whole visual memory, which conditions what you will think and feel. This was the idea behind the colour series *Black Meat* from 2008 that exclusively featured swans.

**C. S.:** But swans are a pretty unusual subject matter for you. You prefer portraying the female nude.

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**P. K.:** Well, this sounds a little too classical. The imaginary I maybe most relate to is that of the surrealist artist Hans Bellmer. He was using self-made life-size dolls as props for his photographs.

**C. S.:** Bellmer's visions are pretty tormented tough. He omitted to give his dolls a head, or a personality for that matter. They were assemblages of body parts, visions of misshaped bodies. Your photographs never display your models' face and rather focus on their bottom and breasts. Don't you think this amounts to a kind of visual dismemberment?

**P. K.:** I guess so...but if my instinct wants me to portray women in that fashion I embrace that. I don't want to be politically correct. After all, Bellmer and other surrealists tried to free their unconscious. And although this is not my aim, I do try to balance between concept and instinct.

**C. S.:** Even if this involves a certain degree of visual violence?

**P. K.:** When an obsession comes up, you shouldn't be afraid of it. That's why I love so much the work of Paul McCarthy with its over-the-top aesthetic of the grotesque. A work like "Saloon Theatre" that was made in the 1990s is really sensational.

**C. S.:** Yet, sadly enough, violence against women is often represented as glamorous in contemporary visual culture.

**P. K.:** Yes, but this is exactly what I want to talk about in my work. I want to tackle the issue of the violence inherent to the act of looking. I have tried to do that several times in my work since the series *Utrechtse Krop* in 1999.

**C. S.:** *Utrechtse Krop*, or Utrecht goitre in English, was your answer to an archive of historical medical photographs that had just been discovered, right?

**P. K.:** Yes, these medical photographs featured individuals with severe deformities. The archive dated back to the late nineteenth century. I had always been interested in the *cabinet des curiosités* phenomenon, the forefather of our museums, and in the role of photography in casting deviant identities.

**C. S.:** How photography was used to create documentation files on criminals and colonial subjects, you mean?

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**P. K.:** This is the history I want to address. I decided to shoot a series of close-ups of body parts we usual don't pay attention to. And I took the photographs in the manner of a scientist by always placing the camera at a 30 cm distance from its subject. Instead of turning medical cases into a spectacle as what had happened with the photographs from the archive; I was trying to turn the familiar into something unusual.

**C. S.:** A typical surrealist strategy again...

**P. K.:** Maybe. But I am always concerned with the idea of creating images that call forth different associations, which you can relate to many different visual registers and cultural references.

**C. S.:** Could you give an example? What about *Hunting and Fishing*?

**P. K.:** In the case of *Hunting and Fishing*, I was inspired by the German Frei Körper Kultur and...ads for shampoo from the 1970s! [Laughter] This series was quite picturesque in a way. It was fresh and colourful; people generally liked it. But I hope you also see the irony in them. The series is a playful recreation of clichés around nature and the female body that pervade the Western imaginary about paradise. It's all about layering the photographs. I search for the subject matters and ways of working that allow me to achieve that.

**C. S.:** How do you that?

**P. K.:** Most of the times it is a rather long process. I search for a new subject matter that I feel has the potential to address a broad range of issues. But sometimes, it also can go very fast. As it happened when I made the series *Seminar* in 2006.

**C. S.:** A series of close-ups of a woman's legs wearing pumps open at the back that was released exclusively as an artist book?

**P. K.:** Exactly. I was attending a seminar in South Korea. I was bored and noticed the exquisite design of the shoes of a woman working there. She didn't noticed I was taking the photographs.

**C. S.:** Do you always work in the mode of a candid photographer?

**P. K.:** No, not at all, this was a one-time experience. What I like when I work is to give myself a set of rules as I mentioned for the production of the *Utrechtse Krop* series. For

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*Showground* (2004), for instance, I decided that all the photographs had to be taken in my studio. Self-imposed restrictions give me freedom. I then try to explore all the possibilities this setting gives me.

C. S.: Like some sort of scientist...

P. K.: That's right.

C. S.: Your fascination for science and its relation to desire also comes into being under a different form in the 2008 series *Room Service*.

P. K.: For this series of more than a hundred clichés, I consistently shot naked women against a background of bookshelves. In this series I was trying to reveal the stereotypical relation existing between knowledge and sexuality in the Western imaginary. You could say that the desire for knowledge and power is comparable to sexual lust

C. S.: Isn't the use of sex here simply a way to sell photographs?

P. K.: First of all, I have to tell that as much as I am fascinated by the phenomenon of porn, I hate erotic photography. Besides, I'm not busy arousing my audience. During openings, I often hear men reacting quite strongly. Not only are these women "not their type" but men also often want to leave the exhibit. They feel uncomfortable around these images. As I already mentioned before when I photograph nudes, I try to work with the accuracy of a scientist. And maybe there is something confronting about that. You feel like a voyeur or, even worse, like the perpetrator of some unnameable crime.

C. S.: As in your latest series *Crush* in which women lay on the floor after some violent incident happened, or still has to happen...

P. K.: *Crush* has this 'scene of the crime' feeling, indeed. You just cannot fully grasp what is happening, you can only feel the danger. I think this series achieves in a more straightforward way what I always seek: to truly unsettle and make people ask themselves 'What I am looking at?'