

ARTS TALK

Colour Supplement

Number 15

January 2024



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A real mixed bag for the first edition of the New Year. We spent some time in Amsterdam in December seeing the Light Festival and discovering the eccentric KattenKabinet. We saw a couple of really good exhibitions in The Hague and got a copy of the splendid book/catalogue on the current Hilma af Klimt/Mondrian exhibition at the Kunstmuseum. It is always a pleasure to see the Nederlands Dans Theater at the Amare in The Hague and NDT1's current piece is dedicated to the American choreographer William Forsythe.

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Cover

Some of the *Twelve Artificial Figures* at the Amsterdam Light Festival. Photo by Janus van den EIJDEN

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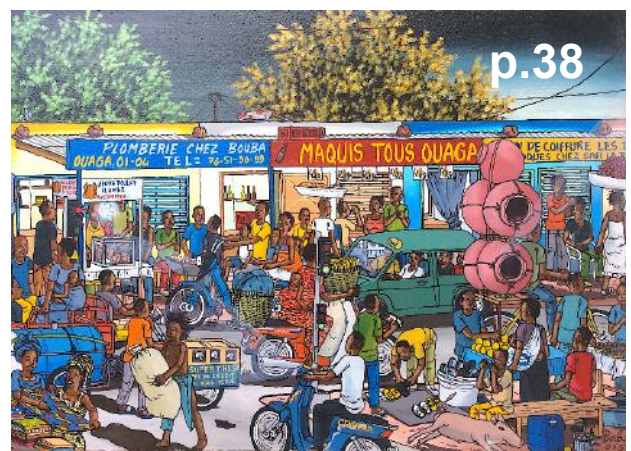
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A pied à terre in Amsterdam

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A night photograph of a canal in Amsterdam. The water is dark blue, and three glowing white figures are standing in the canal, their reflections visible on the water's surface. The background shows a street with trees and buildings, some of which are illuminated with warm lights. The sky is a deep blue.

Amsterdam's **FESTIVAL OF LIGHT**

Michael HASTED

Photos by Janus van den EIJDEN





Illuminations are as much a part of Christmas as Santa Claus and while most towns are happy to have their streets and trees decorated with lights and tinsel, Amsterdam takes the idea to a whole new level.

This is the twelfth year that the Amsterdam Light Festival has invited artist from all over the world to show light-based installations in and around the city's canals. The theme of this year's glowing extravaganza is *Loading . . . Revealing Art, AI and Tech*.

The Festival asked artists to think about the effect of technology and artificial intelligence on our everyday lives. How we communicate, connect and create is all influenced by technology and AI. What is the impact of this on our humanity? How is society changing due to this digital evolution? And where are the boundaries?

There are more than twenty installations ranging from the huge and spectacular like the cascading lights the projected onto the Het Scheepvaartmuseum (the National Maritime Museum) to small ones like the figure trapped inside an, albeit giant, iPhone.

Water, and its reaction to the lights, plays a crucial part in the Festival with reflections constituting an intrinsic part of many of the installations. There is one, entitled *Water*, which consists of multi-coloured strip-lights only three centimetres deep mounted under a bridge, where all you can see is the reflections unless you are in a boat passing under it. We saw the installations from a boat but all of them can be seen just as well, and probably better, on foot. They are spread out around the canal network but there is a concentration on the Amstel, especially between the station and Het Scheepvaartmuseum.

Some of the pieces are interactive, reacting to input from the viewer. There is one, set up on the footbridge that leads to the Nemo science museum that projects a giant avatar on the sloping side of the building, the movements of which are controlled by any spectator who cares to do it.

While most of the artworks are single pieces of different sizes and complexities there is one installation can be seen all around the circuit. The illuminated *12 Artificial Figures* are slightly larger than life and can be seen in or near the water, either alone or in small groups. The identical all-white translucent male figures wearing suits, stand with their heads bowed contemplating the water below them and appear in the most unlikely places, but are always easy to spot as they glow in the dark

Now, while the Amsterdam Light Festival is not at all about Christmas and the artists' brief was to create something that related to technology and, more specifically, to Artificial Intelligence, the timing of the show in December/January is not by accident and all the brightly coloured installations around the city certainly feel quite festive. Obviously the installations need to be seen at night but some of them work quite well in daylight too ☐

The Amsterdam Festival of Light can be seen around the city until the 21st January.





Baha Görkem Yalım

MULCH SLEEP

at 1646 Experimental Art Space
in The Hague

Eva LAKEMAN

Photos by JHOEKO

To stroll through a novel is to take time to immerse yourself completely into a literary world at a leisurely pace. But how does one do so if language is absent? Well, Baha Görkem Yalım, a visual artist from the Netherlands and Turkey has attempted to do just that. In the exhibition, *Mulch Sleep*, Baha creates an in-between world to dream anew. A world where everyday objects are made grotesque or strange in a sort-of confrontation with reality.





The art pieces question what it means to be within close quarters with ordinary objects as things that typically seem to be a space of safe relation turn to foe . . .







Until 7th January, Baha turns 1646, an experimental art space in The Hague, into an audio-visual exhibition where forms of expression through the written word have lost all significance. The *Mulch Sleep* exhibition is a way of communicating that translates the constraints of everyday language through the means of sculpture, video, sound, and installation practices. They present an auto fictitious environment, a mutually conflicting narrative form that amalgamates autobiography and fiction which results in an experience out of one's own.

Moving through Baha's exhibition, one encounters daily devices that seem foreign to the objects you come across per diem. For example, one design is a clothing rack where coats filled with flowers are hung on thorn like structures or a table where you share your daily bread stands on the weight of a sweet potato but what for? The art pieces question what it means to be within close quarters with ordinary objects as things that typically seem to be a space of safe relation turn to foe.

The dreamscape that Baha created takes the metaphorical phase 'strolling through a novel' and makes it literal. A sound-piece based on Austrian composer Franz Schubert's music plays on a loop which creates an eerie atmosphere to the occasion. Each gallery goer is bound to have a different experience as the art pieces conjure up associated memories in every mind in the absence of language □





The

KattenKabinet

in Amsterdam

Astrid BURCHARDT

Photos by Michael HASTED

en van gemis van jou.

Hugo Claus,

Gedichten dl. II

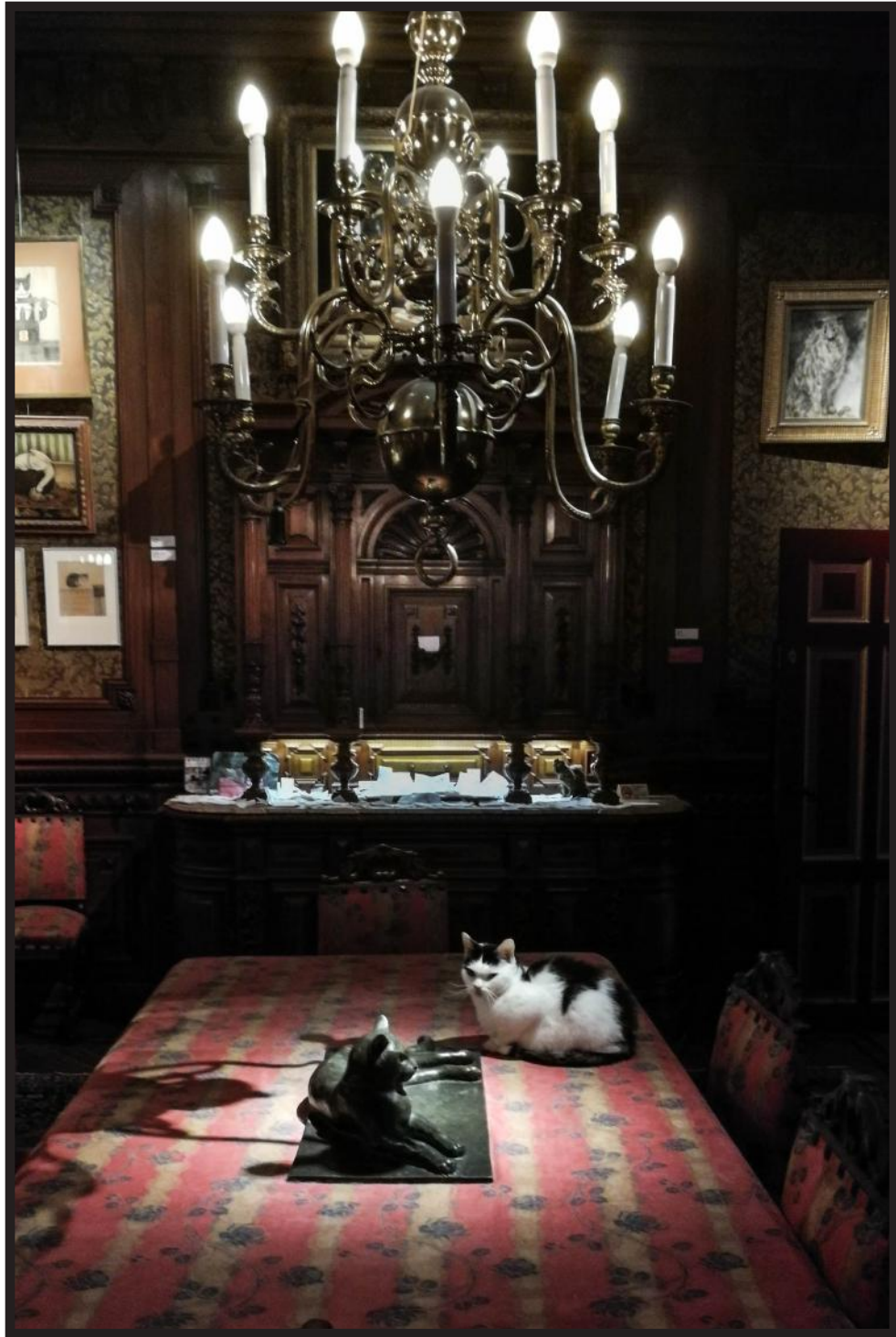
De Bezige Bij,

Amsterdam 201



Even Lenin loved his cats, and don't forget the evil Ernst Stavro Blofeld in the James Bond film You Only Live Twice. Cat's soften even the hardest hearts . . .





There can hardly be anyone who has not heard or seen something about the famous musical *Cats* which features a motley collection of feline friends, all based on T S Eliot's poems. But, unconventional as the show was in illustrating cats and their social relationships, there are some echoes in what we discovered recently on a trip to Amsterdam. Almost by chance, and, admittedly being life-long cat lovers (not the kind who creates the equivalent of a luxury hotel for them in our home as seems to be the fashion now), we happened on the KattenKabinet - the Cat Museum on the city's Herengracht.

Established in 1990 the KattenKabinet is unique – it claims to be the only museum in the world entirely dedicated to cats. The ground and first floors (or first and second floors if you are American) of this canal-side private mansion are crammed full of all things cats, including a room full of photos of cats with their famous owners ranging from Picasso, one of whose cat-depicting ceramics is also on view, to Ernest Hemingway and a one-hit-wonder pop singer from the early 1960s – who's he you may wonder. Even Lenin loved his cats, and don't forget the evil Ernst Stavro Blofeld in the James Bond film *You Only Live Twice*. Cat's soften even the hardest hearts.

The museum is overflowing with moggy related paintings, books, illustrations, *objets d'art*, etc. etc. There are lots of posters too showing products and advertising campaigns that featured cats – black cats seemed to be particularly popular. Reproductions of many of the posters are available in the small shop along with lots of postcards and other catty bits and pieces.

But that's not all – real cats actually live in what can only be described as Victorian splendour, thanks to the aged lady owner of the building who still occupies the upper floors. The live ones (cats, not elderly ladies) even have their litter trays discreetly, though not invisibly placed in dark corners so the museum even smells of cats which adds to the appeal, though not perhaps for everyone.

There was something deeply gothic, Dickensian even about this bizarre museum. It is astonishing that a handful of privileged cats can be entitled to occupy these large, ornate rooms in the middle of Amsterdam in what must surely be a multi-million euro property.

We did not see that many cats roaming around and those we were able to stroke and tickle seemed rather blasé – no surprise there. Cats are experts at playing it cool, ignoring people who approach them as if they were stuffed toys to be cuddled. Cats choose people, people don't get to choose cats, so if you walk into their world, don't expect them to leap up at you like enthusiastic puppies or even acknowledge you are there.

You don't have to be a cat lover to love Amsterdam's KattenKabinet, but it helps. You will also like it if you are a fan of the quirky and eccentric □

Heringa/Van Kalsbeek

Spring Tide

at Kunstmuseum in The Hague

Liet Heringa and Maarten van Kalsbeek have been collaborating for 25 years under the name Heringa/Van Kalsbeek. Their sculptures contain a strong element of spectacle, and there is always a suggestion of movement. “What on earth has happened here?” you can hear people think when they see our work’, the pair say of their sculptures, which they make from steel, synthetic resin, rope and other materials. ‘We constantly push the boundaries of materials, and the possibilities are endless.’

Spring Tide, which the pair have made specially for Kunstmuseum Den Haag’s Projects Gallery, is based on the three *Splendor* wall sculptures that were recently donated to the museum. They in turn were based on a 13th-century Japanese sculpture of a king-guardian.

The dynamism in Heringa/Van Kalsbeek’s work sometimes seems to create chaos, but there is always a clear structure in the proliferating forms.

This structure comes from the use of colour, or from repetition, or from a compelling form. At the same time, the dynamism causes visual surprises. Although the work has its own pronounced visual language, it is also rooted in certain influences, both from nature and from all kinds of cultures, with a pronounced leaning towards blossoming and decay.

Alongside *Splendor*, this exhibition includes a number of other wall sculptures, which occupy a place somewhere between collage, sculpture, drawing and painting. There are also a number of freestanding sculptures, all with a plinth or backdrop. This theatrical setting perfectly suits the baroque style of Heringa/Van Kalsbeek. Their sculptures can often be viewed from multiple sides, so they are displayed in the exhibition in such a way that the back is also visible □

Spring Tide continues until 18th February



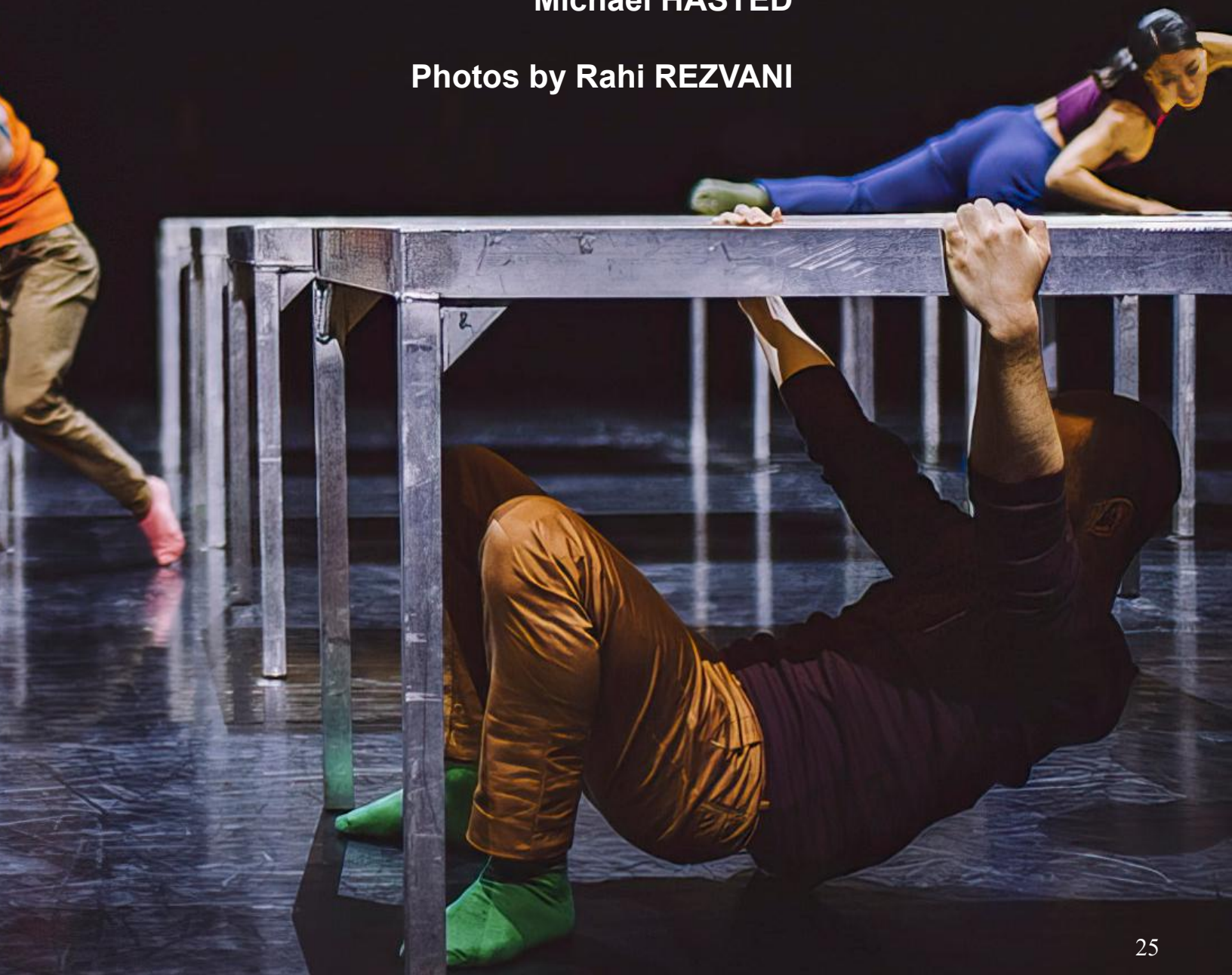


One Flat Thing, Reproduced

Nederlands Dans Theater
**A WILLIAM
FORSYTHE
EVENING**

Michael HASTED

Photos by Rahi REZVANI





Of Any If And

Many years ago I went to Barnum and Bailey and Ringling Brothers three ring circus at Madison Square Garden in New York. Very spectacular it was too. The only problem was that there was so much happening that if you looked in one direction you missed what was going on in another. *One Flat Thing, Reproduced* was rather like that. Frenetic hardly describes it. It starts with twenty metal framed tables being noisily dragged and arranged on stage to form, what were virtually, several other, mini-stages. And the action never stops, jumping on and off, sliding and spinning around, the fourteen dancers hardly have time to catch their breath as Tom Willems' unrelenting, mainly percussive score drives them on. It was like an office party that got out of hand or a riot in a canteen.

One Flat Thing, Reproduced was the final part of a trilogy of pieces to celebrate the work of American choreographer William Forsythe under the banner of *A Forsythe Evening*. You would have been forgiven for experiencing a sense of *déjà vu* as the same programme was presented in December 2021 with the name *Woven State*. That was rather spoiled by the pandemic so the show has been brought to the stage again, albeit with a few adjustments.

First up was the enigmatically called *N.N.N.N.* danced by four male dancers. This was actually the original concept of the piece - in the 2021 version it was danced as *N.N.N.N.N.N.N.N.N.N.N.* with twelve boys and girls. The reason being that during the pandemic Forsythe wanted to have as many dancers as possible participate in the creation process and the performance.

Danced on the vast black space which is the Amare's Dance Theatre stage, it was rather disconcertingly performed to complete silence. It can be alarming to be robbed of one of ones senses but the effect is that it concentrates the others. One was aware of every squeak of the feet on the floor, of every breath and every slap of flesh touching flesh, every nuance of movement. The four boys were all in more or less street clothes. There was much intertwining, with arms playing an important part. Legs were also tangled, putting me in mind of the old three-legged race we used to have at school sports days when I was a child or the cat's-cradle game with a piece of string interlacing between the fingers.

But for me the high-spot of the show was the 1995 equally enigmatically titled *Of Any If And*. This really demonstrated Forsyth's creative genius. The curtain rose to reveal the familiar black stage but at either side, at the back, was an office chair beside a black box. From the boxes emerged our two dancers in a piece which was an extended *pas de deux*. Mainly classical in style to more music by Mr Willems, the two dancers were unfazed by the next development. Lowered from above the stage about a dozen batons slowly descended.

Attached to each one were three or four cards each bearing a random word, together making a meaningless phrase – hence the title of the piece. The batons then took it in turn to stay down for a few moments while the others disappeared into the darkness above like a pair of yo-yos.

This was like the Surrealists' party game *cadavre exquis* in which three or four members of the group would



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would add his own
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n contribution without seeing what
final reveal the poem would be read
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ederlands Dans Theater. *A Forsythe*
ell as a programme with each of the
onstrating that bringing together
es can make a very satisfactory and

□





I am sure we all remember from school the contrast and compare questions in exam papers. They were a good exercise in objective thinking and presenting your ideas and opinions in a logical way. I think if the questions was contrast and compare Hilma af Klint and Piet Mondrian (I'm talking here about the Mondrian we all know and love), one would be able to get off to a very good start. The differences are very clear to see and describe. To put it simply, af

Klint is all pastel, often subtle shades and lots of curves, Mondrian is all prime colours and hard straight lines. On the face of it they couldn't be more different. Chalk and cheese.

A fascinating exhibition entitled *Hilma Af Klint & Piet Mondrian - Forms of Life* opened at the Kunstmuseum in The Hague at the beginning of October after a successful run at Tate Modern in London. To accompany the exhibition(s) there is a splendid book/catalogue

edited by Nabila Abdel Nabi, Briony Fer and Laura Stamps. Originally published in English by Tate Modern it is also available in hardback (in Dutch) published by the excellent Hannibal Books, a fine art publisher in Belgium. The 240-page book is mainly reproductions accompanied by essays by the three editors. Both editions are available in The Netherlands

Ms af Klint (1862-1944) and Mr Mondrian (1872–1944) in their early years – we are talking about the first decade of the last century – were interested in plants and flowers and the beginning of the exhibition has dozens of almost botanical studies by both artists of flowers and plants as water colours, drawings and finished oil paintings - although it must be said that af Klint's drawings were much more botanical than the Dutch artist's and the reproductions in the book illustrate this perfectly.

Around 1908 Mondrian became fascinated by trees, by their mystical powers, almost to the point of obsession. The Swedish painter also believed in the mystic powers of nature. After the death of her sister in 1880, she became interested in spirituality, which was also reflected in her art. While studying at the Academy in Stockholm, she met like-minded and spiritual women with whom she formed the group De fem (The Five) with her work becoming very personal and esoteric.

Around this time both artists, who never actually met, were painting fairly conventional landscapes, probably because they could be sold more easily than the freer, less resrenational work that was beginning to emerge from their studios. Af Klint is often cited as one of the creators of abstract art and by the middle of the 1900s she had already established a fairly recognisable style. Her major series of large canvases from around 1908 clearly demonstrate the direction in which she was heading.

Mondrian's work was also becoming more abstract at this time, although often still based on landscapes. However, six or seven years later the seeds of what was to become his signature style were already beginning to sprout and by 1919 the first joined-up squares in bright colours appeared. Oddly enough, a few years before, af Klint was also painting coloured squares and the two series of watercolours entitled *The Ether*

Convolute and *Parsifal* of 1916 could easily have been tentative first steps by Mondrian. Her series of small oils from 1920 employing thickly applied paint to create geometric shapes one could almost believe to be early works by him. That same year the Dutch artist had already established the style that was to make his name and for which he would always be known.

Not quite a stroke of genius to bring these two, on the face of it, unlikely artists together in an exhibition, but almost. It must be said that I am not the greatest of Mondrian fans and I was not familiar with the work of Hilma Af Klint, but *Hilma Af Klint & Piet Mondrian Forms of Life* demonstrates that preconceptions can be, and usually are, misguided, that two things which at first sight seem miles apart can, surprisingly, have many things in common. It turned out comparing of Hilma af Klint and Piet Mondrian was a much more satisfying and easier task than contrasting them.

The influences of Mondrian, even now, are everywhere to be seen in The Netherlands in all forms of design and in everyday objects from sweet wrappers to T-Shirts. *Hilma Af Klint & Piet Mondrian Forms of Life* demonstrates that there was much more to the Dutch artist than just the bright colours and hard black lines. It is also fascinating to learn about one his lesser known contemporaries and the parallel path she trod.

The book, although ostensibly a catalogue, certainly stands in its own right as a complete and comprehensive appraisal of two innovative artists of the early twentieth-century. If you can't see the show, the book will be a good second best. If you do see the show it will provide a very valuable companion □

Hilma Af Klint & Piet Mondrian - Forms of Life

Edited by Nabila Abdel Nabi, Briony Fer and Laura Stamps Available (in Dutch) from Hannibal Books or Amazon

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Pied à Terre in Amsterdam

We discovered a charming little apartment in the heart of the city only three minutes from the Museum Quarter and Leidseplein

Michael HASTED

There are two prerequisites necessary to qualify for one of our occasional hotel reviews. Firstly, it must be close to the city's museums, cultural venues, theatres etc. and secondly it must have a lot of character, something that makes it stand out from the myriad other places to stay.

Our previous Amsterdam hotel reviews have been for quite expensive, albeit fairly luxurious, hotels. However, not everybody can afford €400 a night, especially if you have already paid for concert or theatre tickets and have





This is not a hotel or even a bed and breakfast per se, but is in fact your own tiny self-contained apartment with direct access to the street . . .





been to a couple of museums. So, this time we stayed at the more affordable Prinsengracht Museum B&B while we were in town to see a couple of exhibitions and take a boat trip to see the Amsterdam Light Festival.

Although this is not a hotel *per se*, the giveaway is in the name. This is a tiny self-contained apartment with direct to the street situated, as you may have guessed,

on Amsterdam's beautiful Prinsengracht only three minutes' walk from the Rijksmuseum and not much further to the Van Gogh and Stedelijk museums. The theatre district around Leidseplein and the nearest tram stops with direct lines to the station are only five minutes away. Between the apartment and the Leidseplein are dozens of restaurants packed into the narrow streets.

Big hotels are fine but no matter how good the service and how friendly the staff, you don't have the connection, you lack the personal touch. It's not like home. Now, while Prinsengracht

Museum B&B is not self-catering in as much as there is no kitchen, you do really feel part of the city with your own front door opening onto one of Amsterdam's famous canals.

The B&B is bit of a misnomer as you don't actually get breakfast although, of course, there are tea and coffee making facilities in the room and a small fridge. This is not a problem as there are plenty of excellent cafés just a stone's throw away as well as a supermarket and a couple of bakers. Just two houses away is the

pretty Spiegelgracht and, just over the bridge Nieuwe Spiegelstraat is full of antique shops and galleries.

The apartment is the lower ground floor of the house at Prinsengracht 552 which is owned by Roy and Jacob. They live upstairs with their three children so are usually there to welcome you and show you around and are on hand should you need them.



The room itself has a large comfortable double bed, two antique armchairs and matching chest of drawers containing everything you might need including a pack of cards, a china tea service and a sewing kit as well as a shelf containing what appears to be CDs of every opera ever recorded – and there is a small CD player/radio on which to play them. The bathroom, although small, seems very new and is beautifully done and quite luxurious.

As well as the big museums there are a couple of smaller ones nearby which we hadn't seen before.

The Museum Van Loon, a beautifully preserved private mansion with a wonderful formal garden, is just a few minutes' walk away on Keizersgracht and a bit further on the eccentric KattenKabinet, or cat museum, is on Herengracht.

So, as you can see, Prinsengracht Museum B&B fulfils all the requirements – it's a comfortable, unique place to stay with a lot of character that is well situated for museums, theatres etc and with a couple of genial hosts as a bonus □

STREET ART

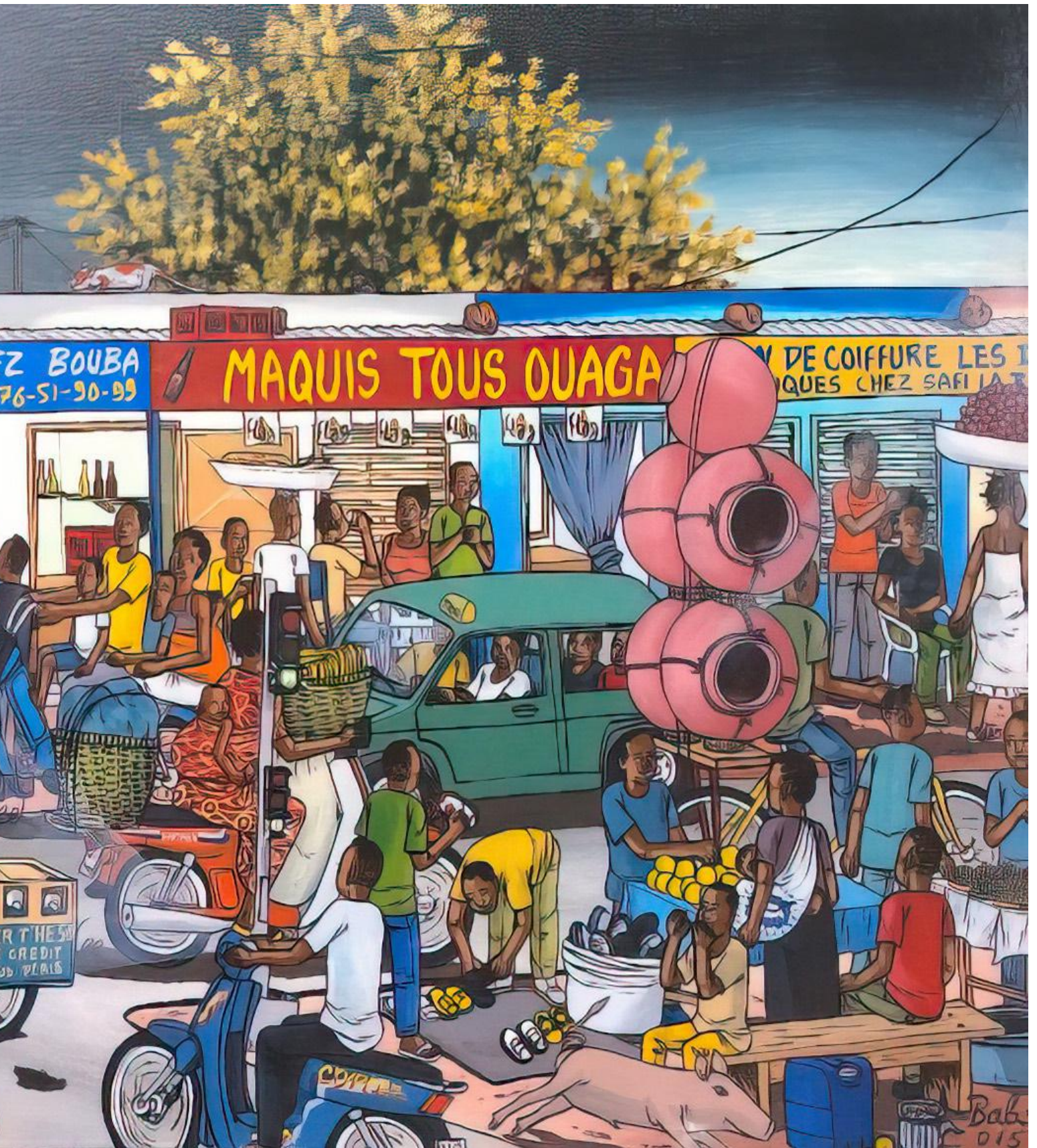
from Burkina Faso at Acme Studios in The Hague

Astrid BURCHARDT

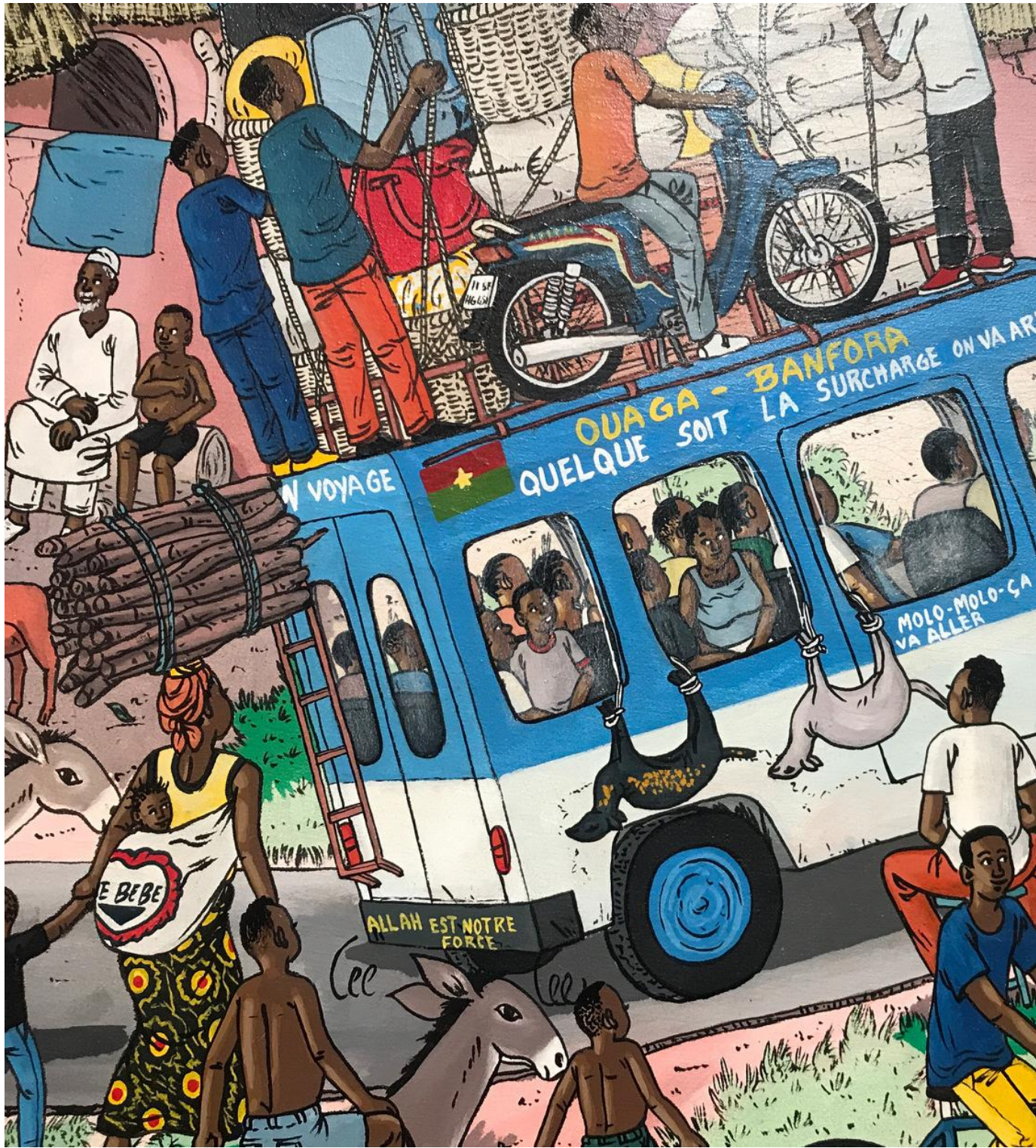
Calling this exhibition Street Art is maybe a bit misleading. This is not an exhibition of graffiti or Banksy type wall art but pictures depicting life on the streets of this African country.

The show is straight-up, honest social realism, sympathetically created by a school of artists from Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. The group was established by Mohammadou Zinkoné, professionally known as Babs, who began by simply making pictures for the tourist trade from his roadside studio, Dessin d'Art chez Babs.





Maquis Tous Ouaga by Babs (Mahamoudou Zinkoné), 2015 (60cm x 40cm)



Chez Tanti Marie (detail) by Madson, 2016 (200 x 110cms)



All the works by the artists in the exhibition joyously depict the brouhaha of daily life in the markets and streets of the city, from eating, trading, drinking, washing clothes and transporting live animals hanging from bus windows, not to mention motorbikes on the roof of overfilled buses struggling uphill. A woman with what looks like a load of firewood or fencing poles on her head has slung her infant onto her back with a sign saying *Le Bébé*, the equivalent of our *Baby on Board*, displayed in the back window of cars.

The buzz and frenzy of all human life is here and one can stand in front of each work and enjoy the glorious details of mountains of vegetables, fruit and the famous 'cure all' beer on offer. I saw parallels with Brueghel's depiction of Dutch people, of Lowry's workers hurrying to work in the 'satanic mills' of the cold industrial north west of England. But the style of these African paintings has more than a passing resemblance to Tintin comics or *les bandes dessinées* so ubiquitous in France. This is not altogether surprising as Burkina Faso is heavily influenced by all things French. I was surprised to see so many shop signs and messages in French which has remained the official language, even though only 15% actually speak it.

The four artists on show are – Babs, the initiator of this style of work, as well his pupils/followers Madson, Bisso and Isbil. It would be interesting to see how their work develops in the next decade. Perhaps, as is the case in the US and the UK, more and more black artists such as Lubaina Himid (the Turner Prize winner in 2017 with her colorful, almost Shakespearean figures) now explore their African heritage in a less cartoonish manner, evolving away from straight depiction with more political/historical agendas □

ARTS TALK

Radio

THE ARTS IN HOLLAND

NEWS, REVIEWS, PREVIEWS & INTERVIEWS

