



Margriet Smulders

Margriet Smulders

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Page 6-7: **Love is a Hazardous Liquid** | 2010 | 100 x 162 cm
Meringue | 2010 | 134 x 110 cm



Charles Baudelaire
Parfum exotique

Quand, les deux yeux fermés, en un soir chaud
d'automne,
Je respire l'odeur de ton sein chaleureux,
Je vois se dérouler des rivages heureux
Qu'éblouissent les feux d'un soleil monotone;

Une île paresseuse où la nature donne
Des arbres singuliers et des fruits savoureux;
Des hommes dont le corps est mince et
vigoureux,
Et des femmes dont l'oeil par sa franchise
étonne.

Guidé par ton odeur vers de charmants climats,
Je vois un port rempli de voiles et de mâts
Encor tout fatigués par la vague marine,

Pendant que le parfum des verts tamariniers,
Qui circule dans l'air et m'enfle la narine,
Se mêle dans mon âme au chant des mariniers.



Parfum exotique | 2011 | 100 x 300 cm | 70 x 210 cm



Lait exotique | 2011 | 100 x 300 cm | 70 x 210 cm

Wouter Kloek
**Margriet Smulders
and her perspective
on 17th century
still life art**

Wouter Kloek was senior curator at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam until 2010. In 1999 he curated the exhibition *Still Life Paintings from the Netherlands 1550-1720*, which featured seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes and flower paintings.

When in 1999 Margriet Smulders visited the exhibition *Still Life Paintings from the Netherlands 1550-1720* in the Rijksmuseum, she was so inspired that she subsequently produced a magnificent series of works on *stilleggent leven*, to quote an old Dutch term for the phenomenon *still life*. At the exhibition on Jan van Huysum, which was held in Delft's Prinsenhof Museum in 2006, I in turn became gripped by the large, shining artificial worlds with flowers trapped in indefinite spaces, which Smulders presented to a public that had travelled to Delft primarily to see Jan Van Huysum's lifelike flower pieces. On that occasion it occurred to me that there were more differences than similarities between Van Huysum's striking, true-to-life arrangements and Smulders' crystal clear but almost annoyingly inscrutable realms. I was more inclined to consider her work as a welcome contemporary commentary on Van Huysum's paintings than as a continuation of its 17th century tradition.

As can be seen from the first photograph of Van Huysum's work, the bouquets are larger

and prettier than they would have been in real life. Yet every single flower is portrayed with incredible precision and great finesse, imitating the real thing in such detail that you forget that the entire work reproduces an almost impossible authenticity. In Smulders' work, everything appears larger than life, as a reality that is absolutely improbable. Yet, this reality has been photographed and must therefore have existed at some time or another.

Furthermore, Smulders devotes herself to flowers, whereas still life painters of the 17th century tended to focus their attention on a much wider range of objects, such as books, skulls, ink wells, smoking tapers, old documents, cheeses, shells and so on. And flower still lifes at that time were considerably less common than representations of food. The 'fruit of the land', all that is edible and freely given by God's goodness, was a far more popular motif than a vase of flowers.

There are quite evident parallels with the flower garland by Daniel Seghers, the painting in the

Come to Me | 2010 | 190 x 150 cm | 144 x 113 cm



Jan van Huysum | **Vase of flowers on a garden ledge** | 1730
oil on panel | 80 x 65 cm | private collection (courtesy of Noortman Master Paintings, Amsterdam)



Daniel Seghers | **Garland with Saint Catharine of Siena** | 1650
oil on canvas | 126,5 x 96 cm | Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp



Abraham Mignon | **The overturned bouquet** | 1670
oil on canvas | 89 x 72 cm | Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



second photograph. At first sight, this painting shows flowers randomly scattered in small, loose sprigs on an anthracite base. Looking more closely, one sees two garlands suspended on an ornamented stone relief bearing the image of the *Vision of Saint Catharine of Siena*. The relief is starkly juxtaposed with the flowers, serving virtually the same purpose as the mirrored base motif that Smulders uses throughout her work. It is, after all, the background that causes the flowers to radiate, but it also creates confusion. In Seghers' work the relief provides an additional layer of context. Saint Catharine is depicted during a vision when she faces a choice between earthly riches – a crown and jewellery – and a crown of thorns, symbol of the suffering of Christ. That choice is reflected in the garlands, for among the roses are thistles and thorns, giving the painting a clear religious message. Smulders also looks further than the realism of true-to-life flowers, as evidenced by the poems and expressive titles that bear references to Baudelaire and Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Goya and Maria Callas. Further depth is added by

quotations from the Bible: *Genesis*, the *Song of Solomon*, *Revelation*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Like Seghers, Margriet Smulders addresses other layers in the viewer's consciousness by means of contextual associations.

When considering the question of similarities and differences, the wonder of an illusory reality set on a flat plane is important, both for the 17th century painters and for Smulders. During the 17th century, viewers were astonished at how three-dimensional spaces could be conjured out of flat canvasses. Although a great deal had been painted by then, they were still amazed when an artist was able to convincingly depict an interior, a human face or a vaseful of flowers, transforming some paint on a piece of wood or canvas, into a remarkably lifelike image of the real world. That situation has changed: today's art lover knows all about the possibilities of photography, and is aware that most artists no longer focus on creating a virtual world on a flat surface, but instead seek to portray their own unique take on reality.

The miracle of still life art of the 17th century partly takes place on another plane. The painting materials that artists used were not always easy to come by, and they sometimes deliberately chose a limited palette. By appealing to the imagination of the viewer, a single dab of paint could in one moment be a damask tablecloth, and in the next a candle, a white wall or even the reflection of a window in a green glass. The painter's skill in using the same palette over and over again to evoke the impression of totally different materials must have been a constant source of astonishment to people of the 17th century. Today we have the impression that the old masters painted in a very precise manner. In fact the effect was not achieved by obsessive attention to detail, for this could lead to a lifeless whole, while a generous daub of paint could add a wonderful shine to a gleaming object.

Smulders' work draws you into that uncanny world, often using a chaos of colour and one suddenly realises that she must have put an immense amount of effort into preparing this wild water flora. The same applies to the work of the 17th century artists, notably the carefully staged tables on which objects were displayed with apparent nonchalance. Floral pieces require a combination of close and distant reading. A large vase bouquet needed to be carefully arranged and would seemingly have meant waiting for particular flowers to come into season. Also many flower arrangements consist only of a front-facing design. One wonders how such an enormous bouquet could ever have fit into a single vase: the overfill seems impossible, nor can one see how the bouquet could be reduced to a plausible round whole. Smulders would not have been able to wait either, even though, unlike artists of the past, she could have flowers flown in from all over the world rather than having to wait for them to come into season. She must have experienced a moment when, like a photographer, she had to make a final

decision and release the shutter. In her desire to capture such grand efflorescence in every piece, she joins those painters of the past who were constantly striving to create beyond the boundaries of their day.

In some 17th century paintings reality is already somewhat disjointed. A single flower sometimes lies beside the vase – a device the artist used to emphasise their transience and immortality. A similar ploy is used in Smulders' works. The flowers seem to be detached from everyday reality: their vulnerability has been transformed into permanence, into an immutable world that remains forever fragile. The viewer wonders at the flowers that bloom in her indefinite worlds, reflected on a glistening surface, probably water but perhaps a mirror or even both. It is often unclear where the border lies between the reality that is photographed and its reflection, which results in chaotic and exuberant opulence. She gives viewers the impression that they are looking into a world behind the mirror, as in *Alice in Wonderland*, an illusory world where flowers

and plants, frogs and goldfish are larger than life and everything seems eternally disconnected from the natural cycle of growth, blossom and decay. The perfectionistic finish of the work is in stark contrast to the impermanence of the tangible reality of wilting flowers, ebbing water, a darting fish or a frog vanishing into a dark pool.

The point regarding the portrayal of movement is, for Smulders as well as for the 17th century painter, a tense one. The artists at that time were thoroughly aware of this issue. The fact that a wanderer in a painting would never reach the village in the distance was not a problem, nor was the knife immobile halfway through slicing a loaf. However, these frozen movements presented all sorts of other complications. For this reason, laughing was more or less a taboo in portraits. Many painters did not know either how to deal with rippling water: they painted the reflections of entire ships on the waves during a strong breeze, while we know that a flawless reflection is only possible on a windless day and when water is as smooth as glass.



For Jan van Huysum I | 2006 | 52 x 70 cm



Jan van Huysum II | 2006 | 89 x 100 cm

There are moments when this motion is so controlled, or so charged with emotion that the actual movement is no longer of any consequence. When Judith lifts the sword to kill Holofernes, we know what is going to happen, and when she plunges the sword into the victim's neck and blood gushes out, as Caravaggio depicted in his painting, we accept that the blood seems to flow eternally. Another example more closely connected to still life art of the 17th century is Johannes Vermeer's *The Milkmaid*: no one is bothered by the motionlessness of the trickling milk. It gives us the feeling that we are there, part of that particular moment in time.

The margins of what is acceptable when using 'frozen movement' are explored by Abraham Mignon who, in *The Overturned Bouquet*, paints a cat that overturns a vase full of flowers on its hunt for a mouse (photo 3). The cat hisses, water pours from the vase, the mouse escapes, and all is captured for eternity. One feels that Mignon's painting should have been called *A Cat Overturning a Vase*.

Such static moments are also present in Smulders' works, though in a way that relates more closely to Vermeer than to Mignon: there are ripples on the water and the occasional bubble that seems as if it might burst at any moment. As with the 17th century artists Smulders' *stilleggend leven* is quietly present, disorderly yet executed with finesse and a barely concealed tension. No matter how long we continue to look, we will never discover what this wonderful world is about and although we are sure that there will be no movement at all, the tension seems close to discharging. Even though Smulders' larger-than-life world sometimes expands to huge proportions, it remains an unfathomable mystery.

Wouter Kloek

Cited literature | Notes

Alan Chong, Wouter Kloek, *Het Nederlandse stilleven 1550-1720*, Amsterdam/Cleveland (Waanders, Zwolle)1999. The oldest names for still lifes are discussed in Alan Chang's essay page 11-13; *stilleggend leven* is a quote from Rembrandt's inventory of 1656. For the exhibition on Jan van Huysum, see Sam Segal, Mariël Ellens and Joris Dik's, *The Temptation of Flora*, Delft (Waanders, Zwolle) 2006. Part of the exhibition that was dedicated to Margriet Smulders is reflected upon by Daniëlle Lokin and Robbert Roos in *Get Drunk! Margriet Smulders*, Nijmegen, 2006. In the exhibition *Still Life Paintings from the Netherlands 1550-1720* the total number of works shown was seventy eight, fifteen of which were flower pieces. Food was the main subject of over thirty paintings.

You are in my Heart | 2010 | 144 x 109 cm | 120 x 91 cm





Secret of the Sky | 2010 | 125 x 286 cm | 53 x 120 cm

Matthias Harder
Opulent orchestrations

Matthias Harder has been working as chief curator at the Helmut Newton Foundation in Berlin since 2004 and has been teaching at the Free University of Berlin since 2002. His work is regularly published in respected international magazines and he has written numerous articles for books and exhibition catalogues. Margriet Smulders is featured in his book *Flower Power*.

Beauty and transience, love and death: no other living thing is used more frequently as a symbol than the flower. In art history, the history of the flower picture is one of the most exciting and complex themes. This may seem surprising yet even contemporary art photographers are turning more and more to this centuries-old motif.

Margriet Smulders plunges her unusual floral arrangement **Bloody Roses** into shades of crimson but we can also find a few pink rose petals and in complementary contrast green stems as well. Smulders brings a new element to the traditional visual topos: she photographs flowers neither in nature nor close up as single blossoms in a vase but rather arranges them in illusionistic installations. The spaces she fills with water and glass are more than mere attributes. They build the stage for a sensual spectacle that remains uniquely positioned within the realm of contemporary floral still life art.

Yet alongside the beautiful and sensual there reigns something morbid in these large landscapes. The notion of vanitas slowly sneaks in, that recurring motif in the history of art and photography through which the composition becomes an allegory for mortal decay. In Smulders' still lifes we encounter not only flowers but also fruits. Pomegranates open to reveal angular seeds whose red colour could fade to black, thus becoming the deep red fluid in the picture's foreground. Similar to the rose, this fruit symbolises love and temptation, blood and death. In a figurative sense, its multitude of swollen seeds stands for fertility. Here, the moment of fullest bloom may be understood as sensual climax, prior to potential fertilisation. After all, blossoms are, biologically speaking, created to attract pollinators. Butterflies, honeybees, bumblebees and beetles are meant to land on or crawl into them in order to eventually fertilise them. Thus flower still lifes can also be understood as a symbol for sexuality in nature.



Bloody Roses | 2007 | 181 x 240 cm





Amor Omnia Vincit I | 2005 | 162 x 125 cm

Marina Aarts
**Amor Vincit!,
Margriet Smulders
and the classics**

Marina Aarts studied art history at the University of Utrecht. For twenty-five years she headed the Old Masters and 19th Century art department at Christie's in Amsterdam. Marina Aarts has been working as a fine art consultant since 2003 and also writes articles for *Tableau*. She has always followed Margriet Smulders' work intensively. The piece she describes below hangs above her bed.

In 2005 Margriet Smulders made a series of four works entitled **Amor Vincit Omnia!** One of these works – an 11 x 1.25 metre photo – was commissioned by Dutch law firm Houthoff Buruma¹ to be displayed in the entrance hall of its new head office in Amsterdam.

At first sight the work appears to portray a huge aquarium. The deep blue colour of the water, the fish and the frog reinforce this impression. However, close observation reveals that it cannot be an aquarium because so many wonderfully arranged lush flowers would be completely out of place there. And why, for that matter, are there so few fish? Something draws our gaze beyond the flowers into the depths where there are disturbing movements of light and shadow. But what? Why do these flowers obscure the hidden depths? Something mysterious is at work here. This is no portrayal of everyday reality but a truth conjured up by illusion.

Smulders has given this perfect illusion the charged title of *Amor Omnia Vincit*, which

is a near quotation from Virgil's *Eclouges*²: *Omnia vincit amor, nos cedamus amori*, which translates as 'love conquers all; let us yield to love'.

Such a message might be thought to be relevant in the entrance hall of a lawyer's office where clients have come for the resolution of a conflict. Margriet invites them to abandon their present concerns while they wait, and to yield for a while to their innermost thoughts about Amor, Omnia or Vincere.

In the series *Amor Vincit Omnia!* the sensuous menace of the flower still lifes of 2000-2001 has been supplanted by a sense of triumph. These earlier flower compositions were inspired by the Sirens, those sea nymphs first famously described by Homer and then by Ovid³. Part bird part woman they lured mariners to their deaths with the irresistible melody of their song.

The Sirens were dangerous and so they appear in Margriet's works! In the *Wtlegginghe*, a

Python | 2004 | 100 x 80 cm



Jan Derksen
**In the context of
Margriet Smulders
work 'My Dream'**

Professor Jan Derksen is a clinical psychologist and psycho-therapist. He is a practicing clinician, researcher and lecturer at Radboud University Nijmegen and the Free University of Brussels.

Creativity is something that we as psychologists wish to understand. As in most probable topics of interest for academic psychology, there is an abundant tradition of research. As researchers we try to perceive our subject as objectively as possible, then measure it, translating those issues into as many numbers as possible in an effort to acquire statistical significance. In doing so, we hope to understand a little bit more than before we started. In this way the creativity of psychologists is replaced by scientific method.

In an overview of Margriet Smulders' work and in particular the work **My Dream**, the whole enterprise appears to be a hopeless endeavour guaranteed to fail. By and by, *My Dream* does not portray every dream. At the turn of the last century, Sigmund Freud wrote in his elaborate dissertation *The Interpretation of Dreams* that dreams are in the end the result of repressed desires. However, those desires can sometimes be so terrifying that we are roused from sleep in the middle of night by dreams that are a direct consequence of our angst. In her work,

Margriet Smulders takes us away from these anxieties and completely immerses us in our pool of yearnings. Even the knife, a symbol usually able to cause some anxious or violent fantasies, is in this work unable to stimulate any fear or aggression in our psyche. Margriet Smulders, herself a trained psychologist, makes us unconsciously aware when she confronts us with everything we desire, while leaving us with a strong feeling of cheerfulness and pleasure. The longing she reveals in her work awakens all our love and warmth thereby ensuring we remain in a dream state.

Furthermore, her work presents psychologists another unavoidable truth, that is, trying to understand creativity in a scientifically responsible way is fine – after all it keeps us pleasantly preoccupied – nevertheless being able to enjoy its products is preferable. The impression *My Dream* leaves you with cannot be satisfactorily explained or substituted with psychological insights into creativity.

My Dream | 2001 | 125 x 125 cm



Johan van de Woestijne
The face of a university

Johan van de Woestijne is Head of Corporate Communications at Radboud University Nijmegen. In his former role as editor-in-chief of the university magazine, he commissioned Margriet Smulders to create seventy-five university portraits to mark the university's 75th anniversary.



The year is 1997. Twelve months before the then Catholic University of Nijmegen is set to celebrate its 75th anniversary, the first of a series of 75 photos by Margriet Smulders is published in the university magazine. The collection is intended to represent the public face of the university. These images still adorn the walls of its buildings today and are also present in the Reffer, the restaurant of Radboud University, as it is now known. As diners queue for warm meals, between the vegetarian menu and the menu of the day they see a photo of three cooks holding two fish and five loaves in their hands. The photo is framed by the edges of the stainless steel buffet equipment that is commonly used to keep food warm in establishments such as these. Did the cooks have any idea why they were holding precisely five loaves and two fish? There is nothing to suggest that they did. They are clearly enjoying themselves; that much is sure. One of them may have suggested having his photograph taken while holding a prime cut of meat, or some fruit to add colour and make

the image more luscious. Nevertheless, the photographer has stuck to her original plan and the result is actually rather droll. It goes without saying that Margriet Smulders stuck to her plan; she orchestrates everything we see in her photos with such inimitable style. Nothing in her work is left to chance, whether it relates to her series *Maternité* (1988-1994), or to her later, equally colourful and sensual flower compositions. To create these compositions she uses a mirror with a raised edge that causes water to run across its reflective surface, thereby reinforcing the hallucinatory effect of her images. This approach also reveals her desire for control and precision. During photo shoots her assistants have been known to entice fish to swim in the right direction, since leaving them to their own devices would only disrupt the composition.

So the five loaves and two fish do hold significance; that much is clear. In her quest to find the face of the Catholic University of Nijmegen, she was either unable or unwilling

Brigitte Lardinois
Gentle forces
The family pictures
of Margriet Smulders

Brigitte Lardinois worked for ten years as Exhibition Organiser at London's Barbican Art Gallery, specialising in photography. In 1995 she joined the staff of Magnum Photos, where she set up and headed the Cultural Department in London. In 2006 she left Magnum to become Senior Research Fellow at the University of the Arts in London. Brigitte Lardinois has written and edited several books on photography, recently *Magnum Magnum*.

I first came across the family pictures of Margriet Smulders in 1994 when Val Williams, the late Carol Brown and I curated an exhibition called *Who's Looking at the Family?* for the Barbican Art Gallery in London. Of the many works we gathered for that show these photographs have somehow stayed with me the most. In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition Williams describes the pictures as a comedy with the home as the stage. She writes that 'In one photograph, made when eight months pregnant, she poses as a languorous pin-up amongst a pile of scattered underwear, but her expression, querulous, embarrassed, belies the pose. In another self-portrait Smulders lies on the shelf of a wardrobe, while her child plays beneath her. Both seem oblivious to each other, but the connection between the two is undoubted; lost in their own worlds of preoccupation and reflection, the identities of mother and child merge and then separate. Like all mothers of young children, Smulders seems to have a notion of both paradise and pain.'

Recently, an article appeared in *The Observer* newspaper under the headline 'If you expect children to make you happy, you will be disappointed'. It neatly sums up how we construct a narrative in family albums that somehow sanitises the reality of family life. Journalist Kate Kellaway observes 'If I look through my family snaps, there is scarcely a face not smiling, a day that is not sunny. We appear to be leading an uninterruptedly harmonious life. It is the story I would like to be true. And as a parent it is much easier to feel happiness retrospectively: back from a holiday, after a birthday party, once the noise has stopped and the children have been tidied into bed. Photographs have silence on their side.'

Patricia Holland echoes these sentiments when she writes in her introduction to a compilation of essays entitled *Family Snaps* 'Recording an event has become part of that event – and perhaps the most important part; for however untidy and or unsatisfactory the experience, we can ensure that the picture will project

Maternité II | 1988 | 70 x 70 cm | 40 x 40 cm





Margriet Smulders' **Family Pictures**, taken in the late Eighties and early Nineties, reflect her own feelings about motherhood. They hint at unspoken emotions, underlying issues, forcing us to look at our own families – the ones we come from and the ones we have created.

She and I were born around the same time, not far from each other, both in large well-to-do Catholic families. The kind of family that looked, and sometimes felt, perfect. Our mothers looked solid in their flowery dresses, nipped at the waist, and very grown up with their curly hair. In the family pictures we would all smile contentedly into the camera. I have a personal photo album, my mother made for each of her children, and in it there is only one picture where, at three years of age, I look cross; it only survived the gentle censor because it somehow looked cute, so wilful or 'eigenwijs' as the Dutch say. There is no doubt that had such a cross picture been taken ten years later, when I was thirteen, it would not have survived the cull.

Margriet's staged pictures subtly hint at emotions that are not usually found in albums – feelings other than happiness and togetherness that are also part of the reality of family life.

She and I both attended Dutch universities at the end of the Seventies and we both remember reading Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*, which was blisteringly critical of the role that women and especially mothers played in our patriarchal society. This book was an eye opener for many of our generation, women and men alike. She recalls vividly the pressure at university against wearing make up and elegant clothes, which she resisted and to which I succumbed. Margriet studied psychology and wrote essays about women artists and their struggle for recognition. In 1983 her graduation thesis stated that it is important to develop the right side of your brain – where feeling and creativity reside – to balance the analytical and verbal world of academia.

In the meantime cracks were appearing in her real life family picture. Margriet's gentle father became increasingly troubled by the after effects of the war years, during which he joined the resistance and later the RAF. In addition to this, one of her sisters, Charlotte, suffered a mental breakdown. At one stage, both were admitted to a psychiatric unit. Margriet's mother was a tower of strength throughout these trying times, quietly soldiering on for better or for worse.

As a young psychology student, Margriet felt powerless to change matters at home and sought refuge in art, enrolling in evening classes at the Academy of Fine Arts in Arnhem. After graduating as a psychologist in 1983, she continued her studies at the Academy for a further two years. A tradition of admiring and engaging with art already existed within her family. Several of the female members of the family had studied art at some stage, although few had reached degree level. University was often the place where women met their future husbands. Margriet's own parents met at the

Disfrutar | 1990-1992 | 137 x 94 cm