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## **Jos Looise: An Idea**

Jos Looise is more than a story, more than an artist who keeps reinventing himself. He has created an amazing oeuvre, but looking at that alone would not do him justice. Jos Looise is an idea – an idea whose meaning has barely been articulated.

It has to do with craftsmanship, with his mastery of many crafts. Without such craftsmanship he would not have found his voice, artistically. With the help of that well-stocked toolbox he can give free rein to his imagination, doing so with an energy which seems oblivious to whatever technical or practical problem may present itself.

When I came to know Jos he was already ‘an artist’, a man who experiences the challenge of each new commission with enviable optimism, exploring its possibilities, plumbing its depths, then finding ways into it which no one could have anticipated. Although friendship has inevitably caught up with any attempt on my side to be objective, I remain fascinated by the phenomenon Jos Looise – the man who, at fifty, wanted to make this book, ‘his’ book, to better understand what he calls ‘the cacophony’ which sometimes arises from his own versatility.

Looise is one of those rare artists who has been able both to make a living from his work and to control his artistic development. He respects his clients, and will always try to surpass their expectations; at the same time Looise experiences each phase of his creativity at the pace he deems necessary. He sees his life as a missile, with its many stages: ‘With each stage left behind I advance a little’. After this book he will move on, lighter, farther.

If one could think of anyone less likely to grow into an artist, in terms of his background, it would be Jos Looise. The anxious atmosphere of his parental home, touched upon so movingly in the autobiographical sections of this book, provided no familiarity with any artistic skills, the only proficiency being the wielding of an oilcan in the engine room of the Hook of Holland-Harwich ferry. Looise’s mother could manage five dishes, one for each working day of the week; at weekends the kitchen of the Looise home was closed. Creative endeavor was not the custom there. In the Netherlands we can certainly appreciate such a life story. However, if someone develops to such an extent that he can make a perfect portrait, a breathing still life, and a seventeenth-century genre painting, when he can decorate a dance hall, produce a social reportage in oil, and make life drawings which do not flinch from touching on the poignancy of (human) nature, we tend to feel disoriented – all the more so if that individual decides to present such a very detailed record of his own efforts and achievements.

People who make a book about themselves: this is actually regarded as something ‘not done’ in the Netherlands. But Jos Looise does not care about such norms and rules, about acting like everyone else – although this doesn’t mean that he looks down on people. He emerged from the sandy world of Hook of Holland, and he keeps going. As he dances over dunes he has himself thrown up and painted these past fifty years, he adds relief to our delta’s flatness: Go with him.

Marc Chavannes

## **The Seventies 1972-1980**

These were the years when I discovered photography. I began with my surroundings, and with myself. Irene was a rewarding subject, also when she modeled in fashion shows.

Next to photography I also liked to experiment with silk screens. I found out that they could be done on different supports, and I practiced on glass and on newsprint.

I wanted to make a silk-screen print of the front page of a newspaper.

Taking a blank sheet of newsprint I created a 'newspaper'- page which was in fact a silk-screen print, and not the result of regular offset printing.

I also discovered that the ink used for silk-screen printing is acid proof – and so, if I wanted to make a silk-screen etching, ink would be a good substitute for beeswax. I called such etchings silk-screen etchings, and made one based on a newspaper photo of Mick Jagger and Keith Richard.

A commission from a greenhouse firm got me started printing on glass – Glass Tomatoes in Crates on Glass.

First I photographed wooden tomato-crates lined with corrugated paper and made a silk-screen print on glass. The silk screen had the color of the corrugated paper, i.e. grey. Then I worked up the wood of the crates in transparent glass-paint, making the crates look almost real. I made a mould of a cut-open tomato, and filled it with phenolic resin. I polished the resin tomatoes till they shone like glass, then glued them into the crates, at random. Because the crates with their glass tomatoes were printed onto glass, the effect was three-dimensional – it seemed as if the crates floated in space.

For a dentist I made a silk-screen print on glass of six slot machines for chewing-gum .

The many mirrors in Irene's apartment became my new subject. Using my immediate surroundings, seizing the moment and transforming it into art will prove characteristic for my entire oeuvre. I made a series of watercolours and designs for silk-screen prints on glass with Irene as model – Irene wearing shiny satin or silk trousers. Even as far back as those beginning years I was already fascinated by the workings of glistening fabrics. To create the effect of a gleaming glass figure I sometimes anointed my model.

When doing the watercolours I also experimented with photo-negative.

In preparing for a number of silk screens on glass I shot, with the technical assistance of Pieter Vandermeer, two series of photos in the attic of my studio: Irene's Legs and Striptease.

## **Matter Paintings 1981-1984**

My Matter Paintings are full of symbolism and have a tragic quality. I was rounding off a hectic and often difficult period of my life and this is reflected in the works: large dramatic canvases, and no cheerful scenes. I wanted to express the futility of our existence, and the outer surface or 'skin' of the painting played an important part in this. To achieve an effect of layeredness I mixed oil paint with paste, and with other matter – with rust, soil, rotting plants or the inner strings of electric wiring, in short with materials which emphasize life's mutability. I smeared the mixture in thick layers onto the canvas, then painted on the images – the representation, as it intermingled with the underlying layers, would thus appear fragmented.

The process resulted in a number of large and 'loaded' canvases: Head, which was based on a magazine picture, and Struggle, a bloody nude for which I used myself as model, with a naked female figure with the head of a horse. Pompei came next, and the damaged human shapes inside glass boxes in a cosmic landscape of water, fire, gases and nebulae I called Orion Nebula. Utopia depicts the rusted interior of an abandoned waterworks building in Rotterdam, and in Sea I gave the naked figures insect wings. In both Utopia and Sea the figures are all seen adopting the same stance, as if they are pushing away something. The Greek helmet in Curved Space (an astronomy term), was painted with the coloured wires of electric cord.

I photographed Irene, Beatrijs, and myself, and used those photo materials for study.

The Jockey of Artemision was done at full speed, in streaks of paint which made the horses in their peeled skins take off in a gallop.

The paintings depicting a Mick Jagger figure in motion were the last of this series.

### **Flushing: Remembering the Landscape ... 1985-1986**

As a young child I used to dream my way into the photographs of Flushing which hung in my parents' living room – pictures of the boulevard at storm-time, the whipped up waves spouting up. There was one photo which showed the statue of Michiel de Ruyter, with a beacon and a truck, the latter leaving double sprays of water in its tracks. The other photo was of the seawall and the wild waves, and a row of wooden pilings. The sun creates a column of light on the river Scheldt, and ships are searching their way in this 'tempestuous rage'. In the foreground are two men, their backs turned to the viewer: are they taking a picture of the spectacular scene? I do not know – they've been absorbed in the moment, as if in a brief lull. I can still hear the pounding of the waves.

In 1985 I photographed the two pictures, from different distorting angles, like a skimming bird. I attached the resulting photo to my canvas, and thus marked my starting-point. The painting grew as I added images from my dreams, and as I continued painting the photo-image was set in an ever-expanding perspective. This is how The Jockey of Artemision came into being, in which my own shadow, photographed on the beach in Flushing, symbolizes some present-day human presence. To produce a thickish texture I mixed the oil paints with paste, and with sand from the beach at Flushing – what emerged was a coarse-grained world of paint, with a rugged expressivity. I called the photo in the painting Remembering the Landscape.

### **Lost Light: 'The light of the moment is lost in time' 1990-1992**

My interest in physics and astronomy led me to the phenomenon 'light'. I studied the seventeenth-century Dutch masters in the collection of the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam, and was especially intrigued by Bartholomeus van de Helst. His marriage portrait of 1654, depicting the prominent cloth merchant Abraham del Court and his wife Maria de Keerssegieter, became the source of inspiration for my Lost Light series.

Maria de Keerssegieter's face struck me as a bit doll-like – the porcelain-pale skin, the oval shape, the pulled-back hair, the slightly bulging eyes – but it also made me think of an insect. Her satin

gown was painted with such precise realism that you could almost hear the rustling of the shiny fabric. I admired the way in which Van der Helst had rendered the satin quality of cloth and drapery - painted in a highly controlled manner, layer over layer, the top-layers running into each other as if the cloth's reflections are in motion. It made me think of the effect of a blurred photograph, as in the paintings by Gerhard Richter.

Lost Light\* has everything to do with the phenomenon of light – daylight, reflection, photography, photocopy. I interpret, manipulate, and cite whatever I experience at any given 'moment of light'. The light of the moment in 1654 has been lost in time. Van der Helst has depicted the paint of the past in light of the present. There were few possibilities in the seventeenth century to render one's experienced reality other than in paint.

As the Lost Light canvases developed, my thinking accompanied the process. The first painting I called The Beginning – it is the mother painting, to which all the subsequent paintings in the series refer. I painted The Beginning in the same realistic manner as Van der Helst, concentrating on gown and faces. Instead of Abraham del Court and Maria de Keerssegieter I depicted myself and Beatrijs. When all was done I photographed the canvas through the glass doors in my studio. I called that photo 'So it was...'

It is no longer so...I did something quite drastic to the painting which at that point actually was finished. I wanted to add my own time to the painting. I put the canvas flat on the floor and poured a solution of thinned zinc white over the upper edge and the faces. Using a hair drier I blew against the resulting white puddle, which created a flashlight effect. I then painted a bird-feather into the puddle, symbolizing time-travel. The faces were by now barely visible, yet still recognizable. I let the canvas dry for a long time, then applied an extremely thick layer of clear varnish, which worked like a mirror, reflecting the immediate surroundings: the light of the moment was literally being captured. As the thick varnish starts to crackle, this light will disappear over the years,

I have used the face as a painterly given in the Lost Light series – the face as a kind of fingerprint of our being. I rarely paint fantasized faces. Instead I opt for the faces of people who inspire me, faces which convey a sense of the mystical. Painters like Bartholomeus van der Helst and Gerhard Richter, and the physicist Stephen Hawking are inspiring human beings as far as I am concerned, and I therefore have portrayed them. The face which to me really exudes a sense of the mystical is Maria de Keerssegieter's, which I have therefore used again and again.

Another face I would call 'mystical', although for a different reason, is that of the girl in Girl with a Red Hat, attributed to Vermeer. But is the painting Vermeer's? And who is the girl? She is unknown, but the portrait calls her into being – no matter who made the painting, the girl exists. The notion of the face being 'the fingerprint' of our existence was given form in the Lost Light series.

## **Satellite Paintings and Floral Wallpaper 1990-1992**

The floral wallpaper in my boyhood room used to stir my imagination. I pictured myself floating high above the earth while the floral pattern turned into continents, the spaces in between into the world's big oceans. Satellite images evoke in me comparable associations.

At the same time as the Lost Light series I made a number of paintings based on satellite images. Satellite photos of our planet are real(istic) pictures of 'this' time, and while they give concrete views of the earth they actually suggest abstract expressionist paintings. I felt challenged to paint the earth from such satellite images, especially since it seems nearly impossible to represent the atmosphere (those cloud formations) realistically.

I began transferring a topographic likeness of the earth onto my canvas, in all its exact detail. After this phase I took large quantities of thinned oil paint and turpentine to paint on the earth's atmosphere. Sometimes I added, in a third phase, a layer of shellac mixed with gold dust to convey the glittering of the sun in water. It turned into a directed alchemical process.

In some of the paintings the alchemical process has gained the upper-hand. Both in *The Arrow of Time* and in *In Red*, I'd left out the topography and flowers began to appear, and a Vermeer painting - symbols of a human presence perhaps, symbols of our existence

## **Celestials 1994**

'Painting is like stirring in a sink full of too greasy dishes'

The works in the Celestials series were made in spontaneous reaction to the overabundance of pictures in the media. This profusion, or 'Horn of Plenty', caused in me great doubts about the future of painting. Is painting all but dead? I am a painter, and therefore I paint. I am actually not really that interested in 'pictures', but rather in the process, the act of painting itself.

Celestials grew out of a random collection of subjects and ideas, and the paintings were done in a motley mixture of techniques. I let myself be led by sensual images from the past - the heavenly horses of Francesco Primaticcio (1540-1570), a woman with parrot in Nicolaes Berchem, or a female letter writer in Vermeer. But also by more recent pictures, from the National Geographic for example, or by photos of my travels, or an erotic polaroid-photo made in my own studio.

As I worked on this series, the subjects seemed at first quite haphazard, and arbitrary, until I realized that the images I had selected all related to my thoughts about a disappearing primeval world - the snow on Mount Kilimanjaro, the death throes of a buffalo surrounded by a pack of hungry lions, a jellyfish holding a shrimp in its tentacles, or an intimately erotic moment in the privacy of my studio.

Many of the Celestials paintings show several pictures in transparent layers through and on top of one another, such as, in the *Horn of Plenty* canvas, the images of the Twintowers and of Salomé, by Regnault. I painted with medium, turpentine, and varnish, using these materials because they evoked in me an association with the particular figuration. Thus the glassy quality of a jellyfish was rendered in a congealed puddle of shellac. A dying bumblebee against a wet window-pane, in a

louring Scottish landscape, was done by making turpentine trackings in the wet layer of varnish, like drops of water on the pane.

Celestials was a battle with paint – the paint curdling with the different varnishes and turpentine, the thick layers sometimes bubbling and curling over. It was like stirring in a sink full of too greasy dishes.

## **Copper 1995-2004**

The chemistry of painting fascinates me, and when a friend gave me a stack of yellow and red copper plates I took this as a new challenge. I knew that copper had been used as a support for paintings in the sixteenth century, and I wanted to see how the copper reacted to oil paint: the paint works differently, I found, much more directly than on linen. It was exciting to leave the copper visible, and because I wanted the warm reddish color to play its part in the painting I chose to work on red copper. This was different from what was done in the sixteenth century, when artists used the copper solely as a support.

Before I started painting, each plate was pretreated very carefully, and with great precision. First I used copper polish, then I burnished the plate till it had a clear mirroring shine. I then degreased the plate with turpentine, and applied a ground of painter's medium with a touch of zinc white. This somewhat reduced the mirroring, and it also conserved the plate. As soon as this under-layer had dried I began sketching, putting on a first draft.

I applied the paint in thin layers, and due to the transparency of the oil paints the copper continued doing its work, giving a special luster to the 'skin' of the painting. The oil paint didn't absorb the way it does on linen, and so each brushstroke remained clearly visible – it was as if the paint floated, as if it lit up. The zinc white acquired a rosy hue.

Each brushstroke had to be right, for painting on copper demands a different way of working than painting with oil on linen. On linen I can keep going, layer upon layer, but on copper this won't work: the copper would disappear, and that's exactly what I wanted to prevent from happening.

My first paintings on copper were variations on the face of Maria de Keerssegieter, the woman in Bartholomeus van der Helst's sixteenth-century picture. Sometimes I made the face partly disappear by using paint thinner, consciously creating a 'defacement'. At other times I encircled the face with flowers, or applied gold leaf or mother-of-pearl paint. Faces are recurring themes in my work. For the time being, whenever I work on copper, I only paint faces.

## **Stilled Décor: reality exaggerated... 2000-2001**

The paintings in the Stilled Décor series grew out of my taste for 'dressing up', for putting myself into someone else's shoes. This 'dressing up' probably was an attempt to escape the narrow world of my parents.

In the nineteenth century people could get away from their humdrum lives by having themselves photographed in settings quite unlike their everyday reality – everyone in their Sunday best. A woman from Zeeland, for example, who has herself photographed in her traditional costume, with

all her precious jewelry, or the snapshot of a foursome who look as if they are about to take to the skies in an airplane. Unrealistic images.

Cindy Sherman is an artist who similarly manipulates reality – photographing herself in the guise of a seventeenth-century aristocratic lady, or as a woman who obviously has undergone plastic surgery.

In the Stilled Décor paintings I have wrapped reality in a setting, or décor.

Beatrijs, in a gown borrowed from an Ingres picture, with an alabaster skin and the long neck of a giraffe, leaning against a lion's skin which is draped over a stool covered in leopard-skin fabric. In the background we see a male torso, floating in front of velvet wallpaper. The hair is adorned with feathers, the ears have gold earrings. At her throat we see a jeweled lion's head, holding the head of a man in its wide open jaws.

In Metropolitan Roof I joined the present day with the seventeenth century, from the roof of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, with its Central Park view - the roof of the Museum with a sculpture by Rodin (Citizens of Calais), and the figure of a woman, done after the seventeenth-century painter Nicolaas Ter Borgh. Placing this classic Dutch woman within the present-day reality of the viewing roof of the New York Museum creates a strange effect.

Reality which isn't real – but staged, extravagantly so.

## **Drawing is like painting in the nude**

Drawing is a wonderfully direct way of working. I am not tied down by all kinds of technical procedures, as is the case when I use oil paint. All I need is paper, pencil, red chalk, and of course a model. All I have to do is concentrate on the model, and try to get down on paper something telling and exciting. I do not find this easy. It requires much effort, and also much practice before one's hand will follow what the eye sees, and before this results in a good drawing. It was a long time before I started to keep the drawings I made.

A drawing is good when it is well-placed on the paper, when it achieves the right sort of tension, and when the lines suggest a sense of depth-in-space / a three-dimensional sense of space. Every line counts, sometimes by being omitted.

I mainly use watercolour pencil and red chalk for my drawings. They suit me fine for what I wish to express, and they allow me to make sensitive lines in a single gesture. Occasionally I will rub a little, and I suppose that has something to do with my being a painter, too. Drawing, I feel, is like painting in the nude.