

Helen Frik

Press

Paper is for Helen Frik, a thought-field. She creates associative scenes, wherein she seems to unravel the mysteries of life. The melancholy and the poetical absorb Frik.

Making the elusive tangeable, could also be a central motto in Helen Frik's work, which can be seen at The Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Sometimes you don't know what to make of her drawings. They are simple, commonplace, but at the same time something is bubbling under the skin. Frik knows how to present the normal so suggestively that you automatically start the search for a double meaning. A block of wood, for example. One nail is hammered in, four contorted nails stick out. The indentation from the missed hammer blows are plainly seen in the wood block. Is this what it is? A block of wood where someone has been ramming nails into without reason? Or is it a metaphorical scene? Does it stand for trying and not succeeding in life? These are the sort of questions which bring you to doubt the meaning of Helen Frik's drawings.

The English artist has become increasingly nimble in her imagination. At the beginning of the 80s she worked with abstract forms on paper, now she uses much lighter, contour-type drawing, where more pictorial elements are combined. Sometimes Frik works with collage techniques, where she uses fragments of paper, and even snake skin. More often she writes fragments of text, or single words on the paper. They are to complete the metaphorical content of the whole. 'I'm leaving' is on a billowing form, which is attached to a sort of tree. Further on the same paper are sentences written over each other. They intermingle so much, that they become nearly illegible, but not so much that you cannot understand that they are hopeless jottings. Who wrote this down? Is there a connection?

Frik belongs to the generation of Marlene Dumas, Ansuja Blom and Mariette Lindres. They are involved with the subjective picture, with an emotional component that is difficult to define. Frik is the one who enjoys riddles the most. The drawings appear to be an unending stream of intuitive thoughts, similar to a drawn diary. It is about the power of looking, of observing. Not only her own, but also that of the viewer who interprets the drawings.

In the long run we only have limited entry to the symbolic that lies wrapped in her world of thought. We can use our own fantasy to come some of the way, but to understand completely proves difficult. In the catalogue which accompanies the exhibition, Frik says: 'Am not involved with 'Art' in order to conduct an ongoing search for what art is for others, and what art has been. Am involved in making - each product will contain information about myself, my functioning and the manner in which I react to all other sorts of information I come across.'

This quote is printed along with others, in place of the usual art-historical text. Frik mixes her own writings - observations of the art world and everything to do with it - with quotes from others. Frik is unusually critical about art criticism. A world is sketched where the inhabitants analyse art until it dies, and are not content to allow the work to be what it is, with all the secrecy which accompanies it: '

'Humour and compassion' Dutch Financial Daily News, 30 december 2000

translation:

These are words, scraps of text and lines verging on poetry which the British artist Helen Frik associates with feelings which she translates into drawings, collages and sculptures. Rebelliousness, humour and compassion relieve each other, and associations are allowed free flight.

'There is a side to my work which seems to be logical, but at the same time it forms the denial of a system of logic.' she says.

Helen Frik studied at Brighton College of Art from 1978-1981 and followed the advice of one of her tutors, the sculptor Nicholas Pope, to go and study at the Ateliers '63 in Haarlem. In 1992 she worked for three months at the European Ceramics Centre in Den Bosch.

The Stedelijk Museum curator Jurrie Poot invited her to make a solo exhibition in 1996. Spread over the ground floor in four rooms, and the print room, she showed sculptures and over a hundred drawings and collages. Frik teaches since 1984 at the art college in Enschede. She lives and works in Amsterdam. Frik works with differing materials and technique. She makes 2D collages and sculptures and installations. Commissioned in 1998 by the Zaandam council, she made a monument for Carry van Bruggen (1881-1932) sited in the redeveloped Spoorbuurt area, near to the Oranjestraat where the non-conformist writer and her brother Jacob Israel de Haan grew up.

In the exhibition 'The Show: Dutch art in the royal palace', curated by Queen Beatrix, her drawing 'Some people live like this' hangs, which the Stedelijk Museum purchased in 1996.

Gallery Metis in Amsterdam has recently moved and is now at the Espace location. In the new space on the Keizersgracht Helen Frik exhibits her most recent drawings and collages. The drawings are from small to wall-sized. Frik is not interested in the aesthetically attractive. The subjects are not about beauty, they put existence into perspective, and are increasingly concerned with 'human short comings' and the absurdity of life.

Take the work 'We poor people', a collage with dimensions 1.35 x 1,50m. Through the space of a theatre decor, a human ape is swinging like an acrobat on a rope of wool en hemp. To his left, in a 19th century sky box, a three-man audience is sitting, dressed in pompous high hats. On top of a bookcase made from bookcase motif wallpaper with titles of world literary works, stands a group of haggard looking folk. They are huddled together, undisturbed by the knowledge under their feet.

In the foreground vaguely represented but clearly recognisable, stand the only 'normal' people in this Théâtre de l'Absurde. It is a disturbing scene. Not the people, but the ape swinging around is the only one who can break with convention and looks down with compassion at the scene below.

The drawings are the sediment of Frik's personal observations. They form an associative linking of thoughts: 'When I see something, it triggers a chain reaction in my brain. This has usually travelled far before I use it.'

At the root of everything lies her inquisitiveness and surprise at what people do to themselves and to others. Frik observes and registers the banalities of existence, sometimes with irony, often with compassion and always comparatively.

'There is no point trying to categorise my work into a style or movement. I use everything which is in reach, and I am inspired in the widest sense by life, I use humour and comparison as tools.'

In the gouache from 1999 titled 'Weight I' there is a woman lying - literally and figuratively - under the weight of a black cloud which impedes her view. On this black cloud a man with a hollowed-out head is lying, he is near to exhaustion. His formidable genitals lie listless and still.

It is obviously not a happy couple. She suffers under her hopeless life, and he pays the toll for his promiscuity. Both are victims of their own destiny. In the drawing Frik adds the ominous words: 'Everyone gets weighed down by something'.

Karel Ankerman

Sandberg prize 2001 - prize awarded by the city of Amsterdam to a visual artist for a presentation in the year preceding the prize.
Awarded to Helen Frik, for her works presented in the Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague

jury rapport

'Have you seen this? Have you even looked?' These questions, printed as hand writing, are on the cover of a book which was published to commemorate the ten years Helen Frik had lived in Holland, a period begun in 1981 at the Ateliers '63 in Haarlem.

This hastily written text Frik set down then still bears relevance ten years on to the way she views and continually questions the world around her. It's not really about substantial or deeper questions concerning the meaning of life. Everyday life is difficult enough. So difficult in fact that it is not to be captured in one picture or in one story. Helen Frik 'jots down' her observations as associative strings, series of pictures and short summings-up of thoughts and brain waves. Her works mirror this process.

Frik collects and combines diverse materials and objects which stem from normal daily surroundings: second hand goods, clothes, wool hanks, carpet, pieces of wood. The materials however never function purely as themselves, as 'objects trouvés'. And if it does not completely conform to what Frik wants, she will remake it herself. The way in which she builds her works can make them appear temporary and unfinished. This is not to say that the works might have ended up differently, but that they also can be questioned by the viewer, and also by the maker.

Many works possess two sides - literally. In 'He meant it well' a friendly looking man, cut out of red felt, shows a girl a felt box containing an enormous penis. The girl, resembling from behind Alice in Wonderland, is a sorrowful, kneeling woman when viewed from the front. An uncomfortable, far from uncomplicated sculpture. Many of Helen Frik's works are about human shortcomings: stagnating in a relationship or the incapacity to communicate. Figures hold each other in a strangulation grip, or are unable to reach each other in their awkward, silent anger. A sculpture such as 'can't won't' shows two figures, one with a clenched fist, the other straining to turn its head away, in a helpless body language conversation. In the series Hard Workers, fervently working personages find themselves in a difficult situation, or rather become entangled in their own zealousness. 'The Hardworker', a stocky figure sitting in front of a computer screen, is pathetically misplaced in his surroundings - a public garden in Apeldoorn.

Helen Frik is a good observer, and possesses the capacity to put things into perspective. Even when the topic is sad or serious there is a smile slipped in between. The body of work which she has built up over the last twenty years bears the mark of her personality. By visualising themes on which she dwells, she shows herself as vulnerable. Her work is autonomous and totally singular, whilst at the same time offering the viewer the recognisable. Or, as she puts it in one of her notes, it could be about "no-one in particular, my boss, your

aunt, someone in the paper, perhaps even yourself’.

the jury,
Anke van der Laan
Lisette Pelsers
Auke de Vries

Jury Rapport

The jury, comprising Marieke van Schijndel from Rabobank Nederland, Deborah Wolf from ABN AMRO and Hester Alberdink Thijm from Akzo Nobel, were given the task of choosing a winner from the selection of candidates for the West of Art Now Award 2000.

Just like every jury is supposed to say: It was extremely difficult to choose the best artist. We would prefer not to speak of the best artist, we don't believe that this exists. Different nationalities and media were purposely selected by the jury. The contemporary art debate is being held inside and outside our borders, from more than an aesthetic view-point.

Cultural backgrounds such as those of Meschac Gaba and Voluspa Jarpa take an equal role beside the limitless fantasy and perfected use of materials by Lie van der Werf and Robin Winters.

Interdisciplinary skills and a strong visual language are present by Wouter van Riessen and Han Hoogerbrugge. The portrait which forms the starting point in his work is also the main inspirational facet for Elly Strik's work. Her work, for all its monumental format, is certainly no less sensitive.

Marian Bijlena's work manifests itself as does a web on the surface: refined, but absolutely strong.

The paintings of Peter Davis are reigned back to the essentials of painting: minimal landscapes of material and colour, where the nuances invite the viewer for a more thorough investigation. But exactly this, the viewer himself is the central figure in Helen Frik's work. She has already an imposing oeuvre of drawings, collages, and sculptures. Her work is convincing, with her drive and research into the best materials suited to represent the essence; above all it's her willingness to work with emotionally laden themes. Human emotions fascinate her. Her winning entry is symbolic: two strange folk standing fighting (be)for(e) a fruit tree. Is the fight a symbol for art and the fruits it brings? In this case yes, this work is the reason for the jury choosing Helen Frik as winner of the West of Art Now Award, 2000.

The jury chose ten nominees out of 91 submissions.

Trouble and Strife mousse

Trouble and Strife, Deaf Dumb and Blind, Can't Won't. In Kunstvereniging Diepenheim Helen Frik gathers these and other handicapped figures in an allegorical procession, where humour and gravity hold each other in balance. They are contemporaries of Hughey, Louie and Duey and many more of those cartoon characters who embody such remarkable characteristics. This colourful parade is typical of the mentality of the English born artist Helen Frik. life and work are inseparable in the objects and drawings of Frik. Whatever she sees happening, thinks or registers, she turns it into art. Thinking and doing are the same side of the coin. Things experienced, disturbances and finds are the basis for sculptures where nothing is as absolute as it superficially appears. Unlike no other, Frik is able to relativize.

No humour without seriousness. That is certainly true of the works which can be seen until 5th November in Diepenheim. Whereas the emphasis lay on drawings in her show in 1996 in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, it is now the sculptures which are profiled. Made from wood, textile, bronze, glasfiber, an old armchair, a blow-up toy - nothing is too banal to be used. Through truer similarities to comic figures, they do not appear fundamentally different from the strange creatures which inhabit the drawings. And yet Frik enters a domain in the sculptures which remains closed. Ready mades are distorted, adapted, transformed and placed in an unusual context. Shapeless clay is kneaded into touching figures.

Frik likes the migration of souls. Engagement, associations, ready use of language fragments, bizarre twists and unexpected events form a basis for her work. The necessity to communicate is always the mainstay and coincidence is a welcome guest. Without a personal engagement and the need to form a dialogue is art unimaginable. ' Art is not a one way street. You live by grace of others. My sculptures are there to says something, to deliver a message. During my student days We were constantly confronted with the inheritance of conceptualism. Since that time I have been working away from those constraints.

After her study at Brighton Frik went to the Ateliers '63 in Haarlem. She lives and works in Amsterdam. In her recent works she she clearly announces her opinion, with the caricatural elements taking care of the comparative. Her works are not dictating. Despite the engagement, nothing is forced upon one. The viewer is allowed enough play-room to make up their own thoughts. Humour is the best guarantee that that even the heaviest of subjects can be served in easily digestible portions. This in no way makes the work less serious.

Art and Value, 5, nr. 1, 1999

3x young talent: bought by museums

They are young, ambitious and steadily on their way to the top in their discipline.

Helen Frik hates 'art for art's sake'. She lets herself be led by spontaneous thoughts stemming from observing people in the world surrounding her. Her studio breathes out a personal sphere. It is large and hung full with sketches and drawings. The central point is formed by a kind of living room, with a wood stove, carpet and a comfortable sitting area. Some of the works around us form part of the 'Frik collection': works which she will not sell. H.F.: 'some works are so special to me that I would not want to part with them. In the beginning I was happy if I could sell a work. Later on, when I could afford it, I began to think: I'm mad to get rid of my favourite works.'

The power of empty paper

The drawings and sculptures of Helen Frik are not all easily interpreted. In her paper works she often works intuitively. Sometimes she will sketch lines which only scarcely describe the contours of that which she wished to show. Sometimes she will combine text and stick bits of paper on. As in the case of 'erhmm...uhhh' which is in the collection of the Centraal Museum in Utrecht. H.F.: 'I began with a pencil drawing of a deep cooking pot and a dog-nose which was sniffing. The paper was large and empty, and I wanted to emphasise the space. I added other elements, such as the cut out photo fragment and the coloured, ripped-out piece of paper. These loose pieces individually already had a strange limbo-like presence. By adding the text 'erhmm...uhhh', something which people often say in a moment of pause, the whole work reaches a point of pregnant waiting.'

Holland becomes home

When Helen Frik came here from England in 1981 to study for two years at the Ateliers '63, she spoke not one word of Dutch and Dutch culture was unknown to her. 'After three weeks I was dreaming in Dutch, and after those two years I decided to stay here. If I don't agree with something, I say it in a direct manner. That is not appreciated in England.'

Helen Frik is also opinionated in her artistic profession: 'I fill in 'artistic profession' as being out of myself and for myself. In today's world this has grown to mean that as an artist you run your own business, whereby you have to work hard at the business side of things. Happily I work with two good galleries who share this view, and we can work well together.'

Translation newspaper artikel: 'Zwarte humor op papier' Karin Feenstra, Financieele Dagblad, 10/2/96

For the English born Helen Frik, text forms a substantial part of her work. The fragments of text in or next to the works give the drawings and installations a literary slant. 'Am not involved with 'Art' in order to conduct an ongoing search for what art is for others, and what art has been. Am involved in making - each product will contain information about myself (...)'

Her own selection of works is on show the whole of February in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Frik makes visual fiction, but with a high autobiographical content. In one of the corners of the print room of the Stedelijk Museum, a bronze sculpture is fixed to the wall. A child's head and two small arms stick out of a parrot's head and cloth. The sculpture bears the title 'it's only me' (1994).

This small bronze, combined with the drawings hung on all sides surrounding, are typical examples of Frik's work. They are Frik's imagination, the mocking bird. Helen Frik seduces her public with black humour on paper.

They remain imprinted on the retina: the 'family tree', 1993 (a pile of pig's manure, with a pig's nose at the top, and a mini apple tree), The 'Parrot and shadow', 1986 (pastel drawing of brightly coloured parrot's feathers against a horizontal black area formed with the same contours). 'Self', 1991 (skull with red lipstick lips), and 'Male/female/neuter', 1994 (a charcoal drawing in which organic forms contrast with inert material, movement with immobility). This last work was recently bought by the Stedelijk.

Bearing the title 'It really does matter' the sculptor, also a tutor at the AKI college in Enschede, selected the works for the presentation which is on view in the downstairs rooms and the print room of the Stedelijk Museum. It gives a retrospective of her drawings from the past fifteen years, supplemented here and there with an installation and ceramics.

Despite a strong leaning toward the absurd, which is only fully visible in a few works, the whole gives an overall serious impression. Especially when compared to Frik's last exhibition in the Pavilions in Almere. The rooms of the Stedelijk are not comparable, but the chosen works (drawings) are much less playful than the installations last year in Almere. Frik's works on paper give another impression, without the arte povera related idiosyncrasy.

The retrospective, which covers the period from the early '80's until now, shows an increasing inclination toward turning deep-lying issues in a micro level, onto a word-wide level. This becomes clear when the wall in one of the downstairs rooms is chosen as a starting point. This wall is hung from top to bottom with works on paper from the 1980's. Neither language nor symbol is to be found in these drawings. Instead there is a game with form. In a suggestive manner Frik shows us the effect of combining varying contrasting forms.

She uses these as metaphors for relationships. And not only sexual, but suggestiveness is such that this is the first association. And yet the work offers more. Frik invites the observer to make further associations. By placing benches in the downstairs rooms, and a cosy-corner in the print room, she consciously strove to induce people to take the time to look at her work. This is beneficial to the last named wall full of drawings. So much work in one

makes you impatient, especially if it has to be viewed standing. Once flopped down, the absence of text in the works - made after her time at the Ateliers '63 - forms the most striking aspect. This is because text forms such a dominant role in the recent works. Here we see how Frik in her former years used formal and conceptual methods, with the meaning growing by coincidence. The detachment which accompanied this, has disappeared along the way. Take 'Gas and dust', 1995. In what could be termed a stupid looking sand box with cactus-like, or phallic, out sticking forms, there is an orange reservoir full with water. At the bottom lie photos of a person she knows, an uptight person, she explains. He lies there quietly cooling off, without disturbing others or upsetting them.

In the recent drawings, Frik is herself in the picture. There are five versions of 'Portrait of an artist'. Possibly the series can be taken as referring to the Irish writer James Joyce, who wrote in a breathtaking way over his youthful years at a Jesuit boarding school in Dublin in his book 'Portrait of the artist as a young man'. A youth which was overshadowed by corporal punishment, theological philosophising, and sexual narrowness. It is the precursor to 'Ulysses', written in fragmented, associative prose. Associations, fragmentation, autobiographical references, and especially the cynical way when referring to sex or God, make one think that there may be parallels. Possibly she is not conscious of this. Whatever, fact is that Frik couples black humour with a resigned acceptance of the small, sad facts of daily life. Frik invites the public to share, sympathise, but also to make fun.

It is obvious that Frik is concerned with contacting her public. The art work functions as a communications tool. Even more reason as to why Frik installed the exhibition herself. She knows how to win over the viewer by dishing up melancholy trivialities. The only artificial goal being to realise an interaction between viewer and work, because 'Creativity is an alternative to introversion'.