

Dreams and Utopias

PROFILE Nan Mulder visits Marcelle Hanselaar's London studio to discover how her painterly prints capture the make-believe world of the child

To enter the studio of Marcelle Hanselaar, you first walk through a small room full of treasures. Her favourite self-portrait is on the wall next to prints by other artists, some works standing on the floor due to lack of space. There are skeletons of birds, small altars, photographs, elegant wraps, hats, odd objects and a comfortable settee full of warm red carpet cushions. This womb-like room is where Marcelle relaxes or has deep conversations with her friends. It was in this room, many years ago, that she showed me her drawings. She had always been an abstract painter, but there were so many untold stories inside her. After the death of her parents in 1992, she started to scribble with a pencil in a sketchbook. With one eye on the TV, late at night and half asleep, she made her drawings. It was in such a state that her subconscious could freely surface, that the child in her could make itself heard, a practise she had become used to during the many years of being psychoanalysed.

I had looked in amazement, on that earlier visit, at the sensitive and shameless sketches of the strange adventures of a little girl. This kind of pure drawing, where every searching line seems to hold an emotional tension, I found deeply moving and beautiful. It was these drawings that found eventually their way to zinc plates. In 2000 Marcelle joined the Artichoke Print Studio after an etching course at Morley College. She put a ground on the plate, an etching needle in her hand and with her sketchbooks next to her, started to draw. As she says herself: 'In my paintings I am the adult, but particularly

the early etchings belong to the world of the child'. In her approach to etching she remained a painter. The image emerges slowly and in many layers. Often five or six times grounds are needed to shape the composition and add details. Aquatints are scraped away, re-laid or faded away though spit-biting.

Hanselaar often works in series, which again serve as layers to explore all the depths of her subjects. After the childhood etchings of 2001, a large group of etchings about unfulfilled longings followed. She had rekindled her affair with an old lover, and that provided her with a rich source of inspiration. It is around this time that animals start to appear in her work: monkeys, dogs, rabbits and wolves. They seem to express the true nature of what takes place, which is why sometimes only their skin or part of their body is sufficient. They can also provide an active or howling audience. Slowly, over the years, some of these animals have become part her shorthand iconography, her props in the theatre of the absurd. These images (among them a bed of nails, masks, etc.) take her straight to that part of the unconscious where undiluted feelings reign.

Different worlds

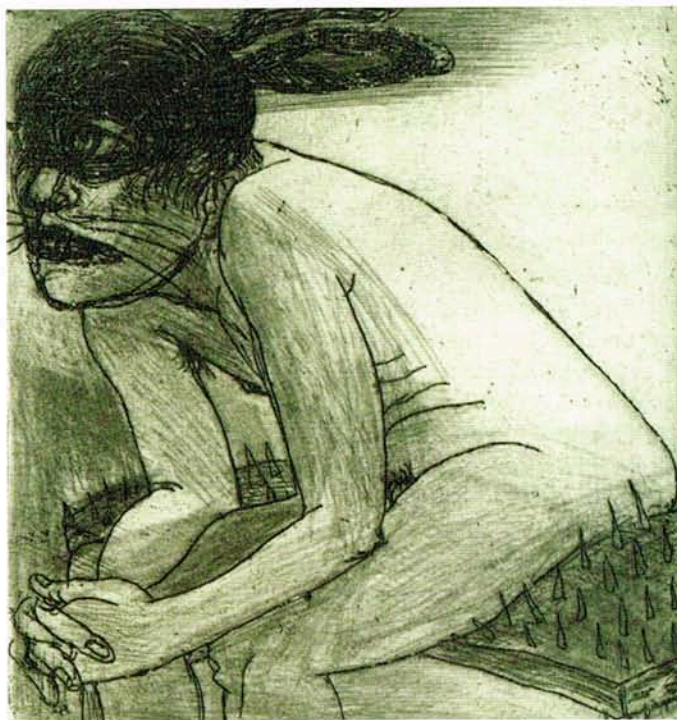
It was the break-up with her lover in 2005 that initiated a frenzy of work and Hanselaar made 19 plates in two months, calling the series *La Petite Mort*. Five of these etchings would later appear in her artist's book *Notes from an Incomplete Journey, Travels behind the Net Curtain*. The etchings sometimes look gruesome, but comic relief is never far away. And the tortured protagonist is not always alone. The little girl of the earlier etchings makes her entrance again, now as a little helper, as facilitator. Hanselaar has a great affinity with Rembrandt. She has looked carefully at his famous painting *The Night Watch*, in the left-hand corner of which a bright little girl runs between all the importantly dressed men. She facilitates between the grown-up world of 'reality' and the make-believe world of the child. She moves between two worlds: that of the light and the dark, of the day and the night. A lot of Hanselaar's work belongs



to the night. Her images are not memories of real events, but show the way dreams transform memories into a sometimes shocking, symbolic reality. Just as the language of dreams has its own logic, so do the etchings of Hanselaar. It is this fearless walking in the dark, this brave call on witnesses to this experience, that makes her such a fascinating artist.

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But her work is not confined to one interpretation only, and while her visual graphic language develops, so does her field of references. Bible stories, which have strong, sexual women, are retold: Lot, drunk but with his eyes wide open, is mounted by his daughters; commander-in-chief Sisera is surprised in his sleep, when Jael hammers a tent-peg through his temple. These images are not the result of reading the bible, but follow the study of paintings by Baroque masters. This indirect approach makes the work subjective rather than literal. So Rembrandt's drawing *The Preaching of St John the Baptist* is the inspiration for her very own series *Ways of the World* (2010). In Hanselaar's version St John is not the holy messenger in the desert, nor the preacher against the promiscuity of Herod, but a hypocrite. Like Oscar Wilde, who creates an incarnation of obsessive lust and power in his play *Salome*, Hanselaar uses the Biblical context to create a battlefield of sex and slaughter, where John the Baptist succumbs to his voyeuristic needs.



Images

Ways of the World 4 (2010) Etching and aquatint, 500 x 400 mm
Child Soldier 1 (2013) Etching and aquatint, chine-collé, 300 x 250 mm
Lot's Wife (2004) Etching and aquatint, 215 x 260 mm
Endless Nights 7 (2011) Etching, 80 x 80 mm



War Games

These complex larger etchings (many are 400 x 500 mm) led the artist in new directions. Based on myths and other people's stories while still using images from her own subconscious shorthand, these etchings and the ones that followed found a way out of the subjective dream sphere. By moving from the inner to the outer world Hanselaar is however also confronted by a different brutality. In 2011, as a direct result of the Arab Spring, she makes a series of six etchings called *Loss of Innocence*. What all started so utopic, turned into a terrible civil war, where ordinary people had to become soldiers. Whole countries lost their innocence in an effort to gain freedom. By inviting us to look at the horrors Hanselaar asks us where we would stand if we faced such a war. Would we become soldiers or wash our hands in innocence? At the Krakow International Print Triennial in 2012 Hanselaar won a prize for her print *War*.

It was this deeply felt concern with the victims of war that brought the artist to the subject of child soldiers. Some evocative paintings on the theme led, in 2013, to the series of prints *Child Soldiers*. Two, quite similar, plates are printed in many different ways, often as unique prints. Both depict a little boy who wears Mickey Mouse ears instead of a helmet. He is not trained to be a soldier, but he had no choice. He is forced by horrible adults to play a 'game' he does not understand. Hanselaar tries to express this in the barest and most essential

way. In one of the plates her child soldier stands lost in a desolate burning landscape, in the other he simply faces a wall. Her *White Collar Black Man* (made after the painting *Head of Black Man* by Govert Flinck) places the boy in a historical context, through its reference to the colonial 'civilization' process. Printmaking, with its possibilities in black and white, its restrictions and technical difficulties, can enrich and challenge the visual vocabulary of a painter. One can support the other and vice versa. The etchings of Marcella Hanselaar are a convincing example of this.

Further information

www.marcellehanselaar.com

Marcella Hanselaar's work can be seen in *Facing History: Contemporary Portraiture* at the Victoria and Albert Museum (Displays, Gallery 88a) until 26 February 2016

Images

- Lot and his Daughters 2* (2007) Etching and aquatint, 200 x 250 mm
- Loss of Innocence 4* (2011) Etching and aquatint, 500 x 400 mm
- La Petite Mort 14* (2005) Etching and aquatint, 200 x 250 mm
- Jaël & Sisera 2* (2007) Etching, 220 x 280 mm