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Natasja Kensmil

LES FLEURS DU MAL
25 March to 13 May 2023

In the end, a painting must comprise layers of accumulated images, added together to create a new image ... It is a process of redigesting material and ideas.

– Natasja Kensmil

andriessse ~ eyck gallery is proud to present the solo exhibition *Les Fleurs du Mal* with new paintings by Natasja Kensmil.

Art historical images and iconographic traditions are an important frame of reference in Natasja Kensmil's work. For Kensmil, painting is a way of critically examining the past and historiography. Fascinated by the hidden and enigmatic, while painting she unravels the myths and clichés surrounding themes such as power, oppression, war and loss that are embedded in these historical images. Her paintings add a critical new layer to our collective memory, challenging deeply ingrained images and steering them in a new direction. The same holds true for her new series of paintings *Les Fleur du Mal*.

The central motif in the *Les Fleurs du Mal* series is the classic figure of the reclining nude. A well-known variation on this theme, and a favourite subject in 19th-century Western painting, is the odalisque, the seductively enticing oriental slave girl reclining on a divan. In 1814, Ingres painted his *La Grande Odalisque*, as did Manet and Matisse some years later. In the painter's studio, the models' naked bodies were moulded to conform to the male ideal of beauty. The stereotyped and sexualised image of the odalisque was a product not only of the eroticising male gaze, but also of the exoticising western gaze.

With *Odalisk*, *Muse*, and *Myth*, the three large paintings at the heart of the exhibition, Kensmil pays tribute to the age-old tradition of the female nude. However, Kensmil's naked females are not eroticised, nor do they embody a male ideal of beauty; her bodies appear frigid, cold, stiff and dead. The paintings are accompanied by still lifes with flowers, the classic 17th-century Vanitas symbol that served to remind viewers of their mortality and impermanence. The combination of reclining nude and flower opens up a spectrum of possible interpretations surrounding the status of the female body today. But, the artist argues, the flowers in the

galerie



Vanitas paintings were often exotic specimens from the colonies, symbols of status and wealth, and thus also refer to the exploitation and abuses of the colonial history of the Netherlands.

The title of the exhibition *Les Fleurs du Mal* is taken from the seminal book of poetry by Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) in which the French poet reflects on the beauty of evil and other dualities that define man and the world around him. This dualism and the ambivalence of our view of (art) history are also recurring themes in Kensmil's exhibition - and in her artistic practice as a whole.

Natasja Kensmil (Amsterdam, 1973) studied at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and at the Ateliers in Amsterdam. She has held numerous solo exhibitions including Natasja Kensmil en/and Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, Kunsthal KAdE, Amersfoort (2021), Monument der Regentessen / Monument of Regents, Amsterdam Museum at Hermitage Amsterdam (2020), Gospel Walkers, andriessse~eyck galerie (2016) and Crying Light, Gallagher Gallery, Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin (2013). Her drawings and paintings have been featured in major national and international group exhibitions such as Icons, Friesmuseum Leeuwarden (2021); My whole body changed into something else, Stevenson, Cape Town (2021), In the Presence of Absence, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2020); Freedom: the Fifty Key Dutch Artworks since 1968, Museum de Fundatie, Zwolle (2019), and No Man's Land: Woman Artists from the Rubell Family Collection, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Miami USA.

In 2021, Kensmil was awarded the Johannes Vermeer Prize, the Dutch state prize for the arts, for her oeuvre. Her work is included in the collections of major museums, including Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; Amsterdam Museum; Dordrechts Museum and Centraal Museum Utrecht, and in international private collections such as the Rubell Family Collection in Miami, USA.