

THE ONGOING CONVERSATION #2.1

MIRJAM WESTEN IN CONVERSATION WITH MARIEKE ZWART

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Hi Mirjam,

I really enjoyed meeting you yesterday to talk about Nola Hatterman's and my work.
Attached are the questions that I would like to ask you.
To an inspiring conversation!

Greetings
Marieke

Jan 26
Marieke:
What is your relationship with Nola Hatterman's work?

Mirjam:
My interest in Nola Hatterman started during the preparations for the exhibition *Elck zijn Waerom*, a show about female artists from Belgium and The Netherlands between 1500 till 1950. We organized that exhibition together with the Museum for Fine Arts in Antwerp and the university of Leuven in 1999 and 2000. Ype Koopmans, my former colleague conservator, put my attention on her work. He showed two works by Hatterman in the exhibition *Magie and Zakeļijkheid*, the beautiful painting *Op het terras* (1930) and *Het stilleven met borstplaat* from 1929. For *Elck zijn Waerom* we chose a few drawings and a quite unknown painting.

Marieke:
Is there a painting of her that personally attracts you?

Mirjam:
I think *Op het terras* is very good. It is beautifully painted and the perspective is alienating, also the large hands of the black man sitting on the table with a beer really stand out. You see large hands often in her portraits. What I also find interesting about the painting is that Hatterman initially used the work for an Amstel beer commercial but Amstel decided not to use it. A black man promoting Dutch beer was probably something that wasn't considered normal around the 1930's. It was denied and she decided to use it as an autonomous work. Also special is that Hatterman, different to many other painters of black people, gave this work a title that did not refer to the skin colour of the painted person. And further more, compared to for example someone like Henriette Pessers that painted two female black nudes, she painted black women and black men.

Marieke:
What was the role of her work in the exhibition in Arnhem back then?

Mirjam:
In regards to the drawings I think most important are her drawings 'Vrienden' and the 'De vervolgden' (1952). In 'Vrienden' we

see a white and a black man sitting next to each other at a table. And in 'De Vervolgden' she embodies the fear of a black family for the colonial oppressor (or this is how I interpret it). These works were very relevant in the exhibition *Elck zijn waerom ...* I looked a long time for work of female artists that expresses a sort of colonial critique and some sort of societal engagement. Marie de Roode-Heijermans for example broached upon prostitution in the painting 'Het slachtoffer van de ellende' (1897). Hatterman was one of a few in the first half of the 20th century that did not only paint black people but also addressed issues such as equality. You have to imagine that in this time many commercials still had caricatural images of black people, also in fine arts these stereotypes were used. The ordinary going about everyday representation of black people, from worker to nurse - not as caricature or an exotic appearance - must have been special back then.

Marieke:

Did Hatterman mostly paint her models of herself? Dit snap ik niet.. wat staat hier? Could Hattermans models be considered to reflect her own self-image?

Mirjam:

Probably as starting point she chose her models to express her involvement with the black community or marginalized people in society. I should investigate more where that drive came from; maybe there is a relation with her background (relatives of her family were working as merchants in Surinam since the beginning of the 19th century) and the fact that she had a long relationship (and married) the Jewish actor and writer Maurits de Vries, who stood up for the outcasts of society in his books.

Marieke:

How relevant is her work for today's society / contemporary culture? (And why did Museum Arnhem buy the painting 'Jazz'?)

Mirjam:

I think her work is still topical. We talk about the post-colonial era, but some presumptions live on just as before. The way our image culture represents black people contributes to that. All images that go against that are relevant. Especially if they discuss the historical representation of black people. And her work belongs to that. The work 'Jazz' I came across by chance in an auction catalogue. I think it's an extraordinary painting, which expresses the love for jazz music. It is not depicted in the book about Nola Hatterman. Since the museum had no work by her yet in the permanent collection, the auction offered an opportunity to acquire a work by Hatterman.

Marieke:

What would have been different if a male painter exclusively painted black models?

Mirjam: For what I know Hatterman did paint mostly black models. Do you mean a male white painter in contrast to a female white painter? Hatterman was focussed in the end of the 30's, 40's and 50's on painting black human beings, man and woman. Maybe people looked different at that, and

maybe it was risky for artists, since national socialism was getting more aggressive.

Marieke:

How would you relate my video 45° made in 2014 to Hatterman's portrait (*Arbeider, Neger*) dated 1939?

Mirjam:

In many ways I think. Just like Hatterman, you direct your view intentionally on portraying a black person in a respectful manner. A big difference is that you escalate (wat betekent dat woord?) exaggerate? it: you asked him to pose naked; something that Hatterman did not do with male models. You succeed in portraying somehow the tension between the black male nude model and you, the white female, dressed, artist quite well. With Hatterman it is more about the ease and her motivation to show the 'ordinariness' and the beauty of the black human. Your video is not only about being fascinated with black humans, but you also seem to question this fascination of a white artist for a black person. I don't know yet if Hatterman ever said or wrote something about this tension, or reflected about this in any other way.

Jan 26

Hi Mirjam

Thanks for your elaborate answers!

I am curious what you want to ask me after our talk and seeing my work? That one question was indeed meant to be a male white painter. I wonder what the female perspective does to her work and her model choice.

Furthermore in our conversation the question came up whether the traditional painting style of Hatterman has been functional/productive in some way, on a conceptual or societal level. Did you have some thoughts on this?

Greetings,

Marieke

Mirjam:

I am not quite sure how to answer that. Hatterman went through a development in her work; going from a realistic and neo realistic style towards a more expressionistic style that became dominant after she moved to Surinam. The realistic style made it possible to represent the black figure in his completeness and not like in cubism, where it was sometimes unrecognisable, or fragmented, or like in surrealism deformed in some way. Maybe Hatterman used this realistic style to pay homage to the black figure in art without making a caricature of it, as was common in those days. There was a discussion in the art world about what style fitted the 'people' best. The appearance of a black person in daily life was considered to be special. The same counted for artworks that did not directly depict a recognisable reality. More abstract forms of art were considered to be more progressive and more innovative by some artists and critics than the more realistic styles. Besides that, in Paris there was a big interest for black people and black culture, for example the black Harlem culture from New York became popular in Paris. Hatterman

did not devote herself to abstraction. To be honest, her realistic paintings are sometimes not as attractive as her themes are.

Mirjam:

And now my questions. Here they come:

Why are you interested in Hatterman? Since when? How did you come across her work?

Did you see it hanging somewhere or did you read about it?

Marieke:

I saw Hatterman's work for the first time in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in the summer of 2014. It struck me that the only paintings of black people were hanging quite close together in a corner of the museum room. Strangely enough, because of this unbalanced presentation my interest in Hatterman's work increased. I was reading a lot about the relation between artists and models back then. Nola Hatterman consciously painted mostly her Surinam friends and acquaintances because she considered them to be much more beautiful than her Dutch friends. She felt related to the marginalized position of Surinam people in the Netherlands and she wanted to change the Western ideal of beauty in the art world. I found it interesting that she questioned racial relations in society with portraits that were painted in an old-fashioned style. Like you acknowledged as well when we met - the modernity of her work was more evident in her subject matter than in her painting method.

Mirjam:

Why did you want to do something with the black man, the naked black man in particular?

Marieke:

That idea came about in Curaçao. I did a residency at Instituto Buena Vista (IBB) and wanted, among other things, to make a portrait of an inhabitant of this island. I made portraits and interior portraits before and I was looking forward to get to know daily life at Curaçao this way. Through IBB I got to know Sharlon, a dark man, 20 years older than myself. We immediately made jokes together and I was curious to know more about his life. He agreed to my plan to make a portrait of him in his home. During the visit I decided I wanted to draw him in his bedroom since he told me he spends most of his time there with his TV. The first drawing session were already a bit uneasy/awkward. I asked him what he wears during his sleep and he answered, obviously, that he doesn't need clothes because of the heat.

In my studio I watched back the video material and I realized that by choosing his private room as my workspace and his body as my subject, I shouldn't be afraid to take one step further. Why not a nude portrait? I found it interesting to research this traditional art genre.

I asked Sharlon if he would be willing to pose in another drawing session, this time without clothes. He laughed at first a lot, but then he agreed on one condition: I was not allowed to point my camera at his naked body.

Mirjam:

Up till what level do you, as a woman, find it a burden to draw a man naked?

Marieke:

Being a female, I don't experience it as a burden to draw a naked man. My motivation to draw naked men, instead of naked women, (till now) is rooted in the social inequality that I experience as a woman. There are so much more male than female artists known and even more female than male nudes these last centuries. It feels meaningful and funny that this might change in the future.

Mirjam:

Do you experience some kind of tension when you as a white woman draw a black man?

Marieke:

Yes, I was tense about some issues. This has gone now. I expected to come across sensitivities in the making of the work. Things I would not have come across if I had drawn a white man naked.

Mirjam:

Can you describe that tension?

Marieke:

Sometimes I feel as if I am on thin ice. That tension I experience right before and right after the drawing session. In Curaçao there is of course more at stake than differences between skin colours and different cultures. You can feel the colonial history on the Island. And because I am also a white woman, there is a chance that people will react negatively to it, and interpret my intention solely as a kind of exoticism- like Gauguin - story.

(leg kort uit)

Tension during the making of a work often does give me the feeling that it is worthwhile to continue. It's very important that I really question my own position in my work.

Mirjam:

What went through your head when you were drawing the man? Did it coincide with what you expected from that process, or did unexpected situations happen, did unexpected feelings appear or sensitivities? If yes, which ones?

Marieke:

Once we had set up the drawing session, I was especially happy that I could finally start drawing and didn't have to think if I was doing the right thing anymore. The political (racial?) sensitivities seemed to have disappeared. The drawing went quite fast and we were chatting about all sorts of things. There were some moments that I experienced sexual tension in that bedroom, but also a social tension: did I not burden him too much with all my questions, my instructions and presence? It was very clear that there was someone watching us all the time: I was watching the model, the camera followed my movements. A portrait is always made for public; the model or the artist wants to position him or herself with it. During the making of the drawing and the shooting of our conversations, we were both very aware of this. This awareness made all the sensitivities between us even more present.

Mirjam:

Did you talk to black female artists that portrayed the black male nude?

Marieke:

No, I haven't. I did talk to Patricia Kaersenhout last week, an artist from Amsterdam that I know because of her works on the black body and femininity. She also made a series 'angry black men'. We talked about the dominant Western European aesthetics in the art world and how Patricia deals with heavy (political?) subjects in her work without forcing the beholder to see only one thing. She has never made a black or white male nude drawing or painting.

Mirjam:

Where does the title of the video come from? What do you want to express with it?

Marieke:

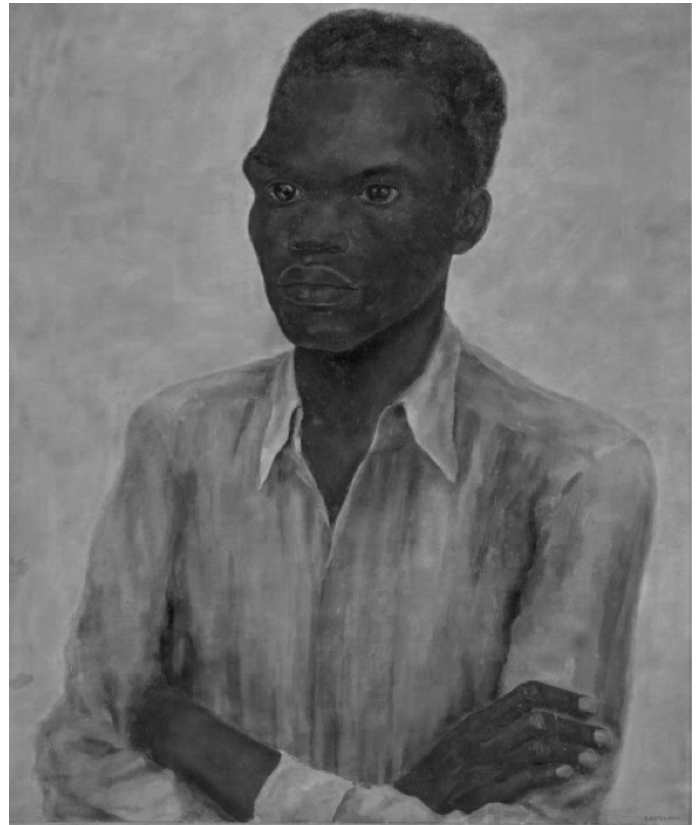
The title is mainly directing towards the heat in the room. Next to that I wanted to point out that I explored the traditional artist and model relationship in the arts. The verticality of the artist positioned against the horizontality of the model allows for a viewing perspective from top to bottom and vice versa. You might say about 45 degrees.

Mirjam:

In the Seventies and Eighties portraying the naked man by feminist artists was put to the agenda to make a statement about the way our society objectifies the (mainly naked and eroticised) female body in the arts and media. (think of the American painters Joan Semmel and Sylvia Sleigh for example) What are your considerations to draw naked men? Is there a critique hidden in there? If yes, can you explain it?

Marieke:

I think the female perspective deserves much more space in our present society. My criticism does not only address the many ways female bodies are being objectified; there are many beautiful female nudes painted and represented in the arts. Because of this the male gaze is perhaps overemphasised. I believe, however, that women like to look at men just as much as it is the other way around. (dit begrijp ik niet goed. Wat bedoel je precise?) The view from some kind of outside, the 'being looked at', mainly has to do with the feeling that there exists something like a dominant view; the western European, or the male for example. The difficulty is that this view is not always tangible or visible for people sharing this perspective. I want to investigate this one way or another in many of my works.



Arbeider, Neger (1939) by Nola Hatterman. Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.