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Wolken aus Holland

Willem de Rooij, Valkenburg, Centraal Museum, Utrecht

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Dirk Valkenburg malte mit Vorliebe Jagdstillleben und Portraits der Amsterdamer Eliten. Um 1800 verbrachte er ausserdem ein paar Jahre in Surniame und hat dort Szenen holländischer Plantagen-Kolonien auf die Leinwand gebracht hat. Willem de Rooij hat dreissig Werke von Valkenburg im Centraal Museum in Utrecht ausgestellt. Ich war da und hab mich umgehört.*





Details unterschiedlicher Gemälde der Ausstellung *Willem de Rooij, Valkenburg*, Centraal Museum, Utrecht, 2025.

These paintings show clouds you cannot find in Suriname.[1] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A1foot]

This exhibition is about what you don’t see.

In Suriname there are hardly any clouds. The clouds in Valkenburg’s paintings are very Dutch. He paints Suriname as if it were a Dutch landscape.[2] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A2foot]

> Holländische Wolken am Himmel von Suriname. Wer hat sie nur dahin gebracht? Dirk Valkenburg, der den Himmel seiner Gemälde dem damaligen Stil der niederländischen Malerei anpasste? War es Frage der Komposition? Dirk Valkenburg, Amsterdamer Künstler, bestens vernetzt mit der Elite des niederländischen Empires, bekannt für seine Jagdstilleben und Portraits der High Society, verbrachte im frühen 18. Jahrhundert zwei Jahre auf drei Zuckerplantagen in Suriname. Er dokumentierte die Anwesen und übernahm verschiedene verwalterische Aufgaben. Während dieser Reise entstanden mehrere Zeichnungen und Bilder, von denen acht noch heute existieren.

Valkenburg was among the first Europeans to depict Surinamese plantations. These idealized images conceal the oppression of Indigenous and enslaved people, exposing the ‹white› gaze.

> Sehnte sich Valkenburg die Wolken als Schutz vor der Sonne herbei? Oder malte er sie für seinen Auftraggeber, den Plantagenbesitzer und Sammler Jonas Witsen, um die fremde Landschaft heimeliger zu machen?

This exhibition and the accompanying publication project provide the first comprehensive scholarly exploration and presentation of the work.

> 15. November, Centraal Museum, Utrecht. Es ist eiskalt hier. Und ungewöhnlich dunkel in diesem hintersten, obersten, letzten aller vieler verschachtelter Ausstellungsräume dieses Museums.
>
> Verwirrend: Künstler dieser Ausstellung ist Willem de Rooij, der Titel ist Valkenburg – ein Thema, Motiv, Werkzyklus von De Rooij? Was beim Besichtigen der Ausstellung allmählich klar wird ist, Willem de Rooij (* 1969) hat 30 Werke von Dirk Valkenburg (1675–1721) ausgewählt, arrangiert, platziert. Man könnte auch sagen, er hat die Ausstellung kuratiert.

In my opinion, it’s an exhibition of Valkenburg and at the same time a work by Willem de Rooij. It’s also de Rooij’s way of positioning himself. He has been obsessed with Valkenburg. That’s also what you see.

> Ich habe mir ein kaltes, nieselregnerisches Novemberwochenende für meinen Ausstellungsbesuch ausgesucht. Wie ich mir vorgestellt hatte, waren die Räume des Centraal Museums hell und von Besucher:innen-Strömen bevölkert. Alle bis auf die Ausstellung Valkenburg. Sie sitzt im Dachstock des Museums. Nur wer die richtige Nebentreppe erwischt, findet dahin.

In this museum, people are constantly asking themselves: Have I missed something?

> Raum 1 ist eine Art Ahnengalerie.



Willem de Rooij, *Valkenburg*, Ausstellungsansicht Centraal Museum Utrecht, 2025. Photo © Jens Ziehe.

The two paintings on the right belong to each other. They’re future husband and wife. But the painting on the far right, Portrait of Sara Munter with a Green Parakeet, is hanging a little bit lower than its counterpart, Portrait of Jan Wolters. This would freak an Old Masters curator out.

> Wenn Gemälde unterschiedlicher Grösse in einer Reihe aufgehängt werden, sind sie gewöhnlich entweder an ihrer Ober- oder Unterkante oder an ihren mittleren Längsachse ausgerichtet.

But why did De Rooij hang her portrait one centimeter lower? Because he aligns these paintings on a horizontal line matching the eye level of the sitters depicted in the paintings. We need to really, really put our Superman eyes on it to be able to see that. And that is exactly what only a contemporary artist, in my opinion, could do. That is where you kind of restructure almost the appearance of these old masters, and they become like your actors in

the theatre.

They are all wearing the same stuff, exactly the same clothing, probably they even use the same hairbrush!



Willem de Rooij, *Valkenburg*, Ausstellungsansicht Centraal Museum Utrecht, 2025. Photo © Jens Ziehe.

I was completely unaware that artists, when they had a successful subject, would repeat that subject: the animals, the clouds, the background landscape.

The artists organized themselves in shared workshops. Around 1692, Valkenburg joined the workshop of his teacher, Jan Weenix. During this period, Weenix developed his ‹trophy› formula.

This painterly approach to the game still life had a specific iconographic framework and would become the signature style not only of Weenix, but of all the artists from his workshop.

> Niemand macht hier ein Selfie.
>
> Hier sind es die Augen der Hasen, die eine Linie bilden.

The second rabbit from the left is the only work in the exhibition that belongs to the Centraal Museum. It was purchased in the 1950s, mistaken as a work by Jan Weenix. Many of Valkenburg’s paintings that remained after his death were deliberately signed and sold as works by Weenix, because the artists from the workshop knew you could make more money with a painting by Jan Weenix than by Valkenburg. The Centraal Museum would never have acquired a Valkenburg painting, because Valkenburg was based in Amsterdam, and as per exhibition policy, artists in the collection need to have a connection to Utrecht.



Dirk Valkenburg, *Hunting Still Life*, ca. 1700. Utrecht, Centraal Museum.

One of these four paintings is indeed a Weenix. Can you figure out which one?

It is the one on the far right. It’s actually from a German collection. But you see how similar they are, right?

> Wie passt die Ausstellung zu unserer Zeit, dem Jahr 2025, zum Museum, zu Utrecht, zu den Besuchern, zum Novembernebel?
>
> Die Ausstellungsbesucher:innen. Wenn jemand die Werke gegenwärtig machen kann, dann sie. Durch jedem Blickwechsel werden die toten Hasen und Schrotflinten in die Gegenwart gezerrt. Und dann, was tun sie hier in einer ihnen ganz unbekannten Zukunft? Und die Besucher:innen? Werden sie umgekehrt in die Vergangenheit gezerrt?

The presentation seems a bit random with all the dead animals.

> Überhaupt macht hier kaum jemand Fotos. Die einzige Person, die heute Fotos macht, macht eigentlich keine, erklärt sie mir. Sie fotografiert die Werke und sucht per Google Bildsuche nach Informationen zum Künstler. Sonst weiss man ja nicht, was das ist, sagt sie.

I don’t like this (the rabbits) and I don’t eat this!

I have no problem with this depiction of dead animals. Back then it was natural to hunt. Compared to factory farming today, I think these animals had a good life. And at least people knew where the meat on their plates came from.

How can an artist invest so much care into the painting of dead animals? There’s a strange relationship between care and cruelty in these works.

> Wenn ich genug lange hier stehe, reden dann die Hasen zu mir?

Those are rabbits, not hares. You can tell by their short ears. And that’s a falcon, very important for hunting.

What’s this?

It’s decoration. Maybe moss, yes, it must be moss.

It looks like a net, for fishing.

Or for the hares. Back then, they used the net to catch all kinds of different animals.

That’s a flute. And that’s a partridge.

Are you yourself a hunter?

No, no, but I see things.

Is it always the same hare?

No, look, the fur is always painted differently. Very carefully.

> Abwesend: Die Jäger

What are the interests that lie behind these paintings?

How did Dutch elites use art to justify colonialism?

> Sind diese Kunstwerke historische Dokumente? Sind es Artefakte, die aus bestimmten Gründen und mit bestimmten Absichten geschaffen wurden? Was ist mit der Eigenwilligkeit, mit der, wie oft behauptet wird, uns Kunst die Welt mit anderen Augen sehen lässt? Ich suche nach diesem Eigensinn.

First you see only dead animals and then you see the richness of details.

Every time I look at the paintings, I discover new things, like the birds. They are not from here.

> Abwesend: Die Jäger:innen

We are not really chatting, we are analyzing the paintings.

> Die Ausstellung hat die Gestalt einer Raumflucht. Ein langer Gang bietet Abzweigungsmöglichkeiten in jeden Ausstellungsraum. Es ist eine Ausstellung, die ich besuchen kann ohne mir kaum ein Werk anzuschauen. Abzweigen in die dunklen Räume der holländischen Geschichte oder weiter gehen?

It depends on which side you enter the exhibition. If you start from the east, the first thing you see are the wealthy patrons, the rulers of the Dutch empire. But if you start from the west, you look at the paintings of enslaved people first.

Often, visitors don't find the exhibition and if they find it, they don't understand it because they miss the booklet that explains the exhibition. There is a video in which the artist explains the work. It should be at the very beginning of the exhibition.

When people tell me they come for the De Rooij exhibition, I always advise them to take the booklet. But this only happened once today.

Because this is a highbrow exhibition. The target audience are people who are professionally involved in art. You can't attract large crowds to an exhibition like this. We are aware of this at the museum and we accept it. We have many other exhibitions in the museum that are very popular.

Meaning is there to be discovered in Valkenburg's landscape paintings, if only one knows how to attend to it.[3] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A3F]

I like that this exhibition is sitting on top of the museum's permanent collection.

I find it a bit dry. The booklet is very well written, but the paintings would need a bit of extra, a bit of juice. Because I think Valkenburg was not the best artist. But I am maybe not the average visitor. I am a curator.

It's a pity that you're not writing about another exhibition. There's so much to say about the Nature exhibition on the first floor.

> De Rooij hat die Gemälde nicht direkt an den Wänden angebracht, sondern an grossen freistehenden Paneelen. Sie geben dem Raum etwas Abstellkammermässiges. Ein aufgeräumter highbrow Speicher.
>
> Ich verstehe die Botschaft dieser Geste so: Achtung, das ist nicht einfach eine herkömmliche Ausstellung; die Paneele sind räumlich gewordene reflexive Zwischenebenen. Manche von ihnen sind leicht schräg im Raum platziert, so dass dahinter ein Zwischenraum entsteht, ein toter Winkel. Schau hinter die Bilder, sagen die Paneele zu mir. Geh diesen Bildern nicht auf den Leim.
>
> Bevor ich mit den Leuten sprechen kann, sind sie schon wieder weg.

People who don't know about the background of the exhibition just pass and don't really look at what the works depict. They think they're some random Dutch old paintings and that's the end of the story.

> Alte Meister wollen zeitlich eingeordnet, in ihrer Geschichtlichkeit verstanden werden. Und dann weiter.

Es riecht heute nach Kartoffelstock und Bratensauce. Als wäre die Temperatur um ein paar Grade gestiegen und ein Hauch von Leben unters Fell der toten Kanninchen gekrochen.

Abwesend: die Tierschützer:innen?

Eine ältere Gruppe erkundet die schweren goldenen Bilderrahmen und entdeckt schliesslich darauf den Namen Valkenburg.



Dirk Valkenburg, *Gathering of Enslaved People on One of Jonas Witsen's Plantations in Suriname*, 1706–1708. Öl auf Leinwand, 58 x 46.5 cm. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst.

This painting, probably produced between 1706 and 1708, has undergone several title changes since its creation. It is unlikely that Valkenburg gave the work a formal title. The first so-

called title appears in a 1790 auction catalogue as Black People Making Merry in Suriname. Since then, collectors, curators, and scholars have adopted or rejected its existing title based on their observations and expertise, as well as their personal biases, which were additionally influenced by the cultural context in which they lived. The most recent title of the work Gathering of Enslaved People on One of Jonas Witsen's Plantations in Suriname invests the individuals depicted with greater agency. This represents an important change in the way enslaved individuals are discussed in public and scholarly discourse.[4] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A4F]

Kein anderes Werk wird in der die Ausstellung begleiteten Publikation so intensiv diskutiert.

This painting is special because it was produced explicitly for the owner of the plantations. It gives insights into how early modern Dutch colonialists wanted to be seen.[5] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A5F]

In 1707, the Witsen plantations had a total of 321 African enslaved people.[6] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A6F]

Due to the lack of slave lists from that period, most of them are not known by name. This does not apply to the men who appeared in judicial records due to the well-known 1707 Palmeneribo rebellion. They included the brothers Mingo, Wally, and Baratham, and furthermore, Charle, Kees, Mando, Harry, Prins (Prince), Jappy, Joseph, Artas, Yems (James), Claas, La Fortuyn, Mingiuel (likely Miguel), Jack, Tam (Tame), Andries, Toonie, Jobbe, Joris, and Naro, all belonging to the Palmeneribo plantation, and Dorinda, a woman from the Surimombo plantation. Part of the process of enslavement included the imposition of a new identity upon the enslaved. An enslaved African could no longer autonomously determine their own identity; everything, including their name, was dictated by their owner. Only a first name was given, akin to the naming of a domesticated animal.[7] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A7F]

Der Aufstend der versklavten Arbeiter in Palmeneribo im Jahr 1707 ist historisch gut dokumentiert. Mehrere Arbeiter konnten danach in den Regenwald flüchten.

What were the people in the painting thinking? Were they simply drinking and dancing to disguise their escape plans, or were they simultaneously celebrating their upcoming escape, or something else unrelated? Was the man on the right simply making out with his lover, carrying their child, or was he kissing her goodbye, or was he whispering in her ear how she herself could follow him once the child is older?[8] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A8F]

Even though the individuals depicted in the scene are barely clothed, the color of their clothing is of utmost importance. Blue cloth relates to the Busi Ingi, the spiritual beings that are the guardians of the forest and who provide protection to those venturing into the forest. [9] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A9F]

The white ribbon traditionally marks places where ancestors are honored, and it represents a connection between the living and the dead, a reminder that the ancestors continue to influence and protect the living. The white ribbon thus marks a threshold that should not be crossed lightly. Still today, white ribbons may be tied to poles or placed at sacred sites to mark important locations, such as burial sites or places where rituals are conducted.[10] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A10F]

Das weisse Band schlägelt sich vom Baum bis zur Bildmitte und küsst dort den Rauch des Feuers.

The whole picture is characterized by poverty, unrestrained pleasure, drunkenness, and sexual desires. It says something about the cliché that poor people are pleasure-seeking. It says nothing about the actual reality of life for slaves in Suriname. It is a completely European construction of the Other.[11] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A11F]

Liegt nicht auch etwas schüchternes im Blick des Malers, eine Zurückhaltung vor dieser Zusammenkunft, die ihn so gar nichts anging? Oder ist das meine Schüchternheit?

Ich kann dieses Bild nicht richtig ansehen und ich möchte lieber Andere darüber sprechen lassen. Es ist mir nicht recht, teil dieser Szene zu sein. Ich gehöre hier nicht hin.

The painter blocked out the harsh labor during the colonial and slavery period. His paintings and drawings do not even show the actual produce of plantation labor: sugarcane, coffee, and cotton.[12] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A12F]

The sexualization of Black bodies was placed in the colonial binary whereby, to the white gaze, Black bodies were supposed to be simultaneously abject and overly sexual; untouchable, yet readily available.[13] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A13F]

But didn’t Valkenburg depict black people in all their beauty? Just look at the full muscles, strong bodies, shiny black skin.

Heute auf dem Weg ins Museum: Viele geschmückte Boote mit verkleideten Menschen fahren die Utrechter Oudegracht hoch. Trommelrhythmen vermischen sich mit Popmusik, die aus grossen Lautsprechern kommt. Menschenmengen säumen das Ufer. Ich denke an Karneval oder an die Schweizer Garde im Vatikan. Die Menschen tragen alle fast identische Kostüme.

We are celebrating the arrival of Sinterklaas! According to legend, in mid-November he arrives by steamboat from Spain. He will be on the roofs of the city until the actual Sinterklaas feast takes place on December 5. During that time kids place their socks by the chimney and Sinterklaas fills the socks with presents. But this early arrival has mainly commercial reasons, and the thing with the chimney is an American invention. And you see that all these costumed people on the boats wear black face paint. They all show up as Black Petes. I don’t know if you’ve heard about Zwarte Piet. In the Netherlands he’s the helper of Sinterklaas and traditionally blackfaced. But in the last decades this blackfacing has become controversial. Some, mainly young folks and people of color, say it is racist and that it goes back to slavery. So that is why today the Piets are not wearing large gold earrings, afro-style wigs, red lipstick anymore. And, as you can see, they replaced the black faces with sooty faces (referring to the chimneys).

Diese «sooty faces» haben so gar nichts gemein mit den stolzen Figuren in Valkenburgs Gemälde.



Ankunft von Sinterklaas in Utrecht, 16. November, 2025.

> But Zwarte Piet was always blackfaced in this tradition?

Yes. What about the tradition in Switzerland?

> We have Schmutzli, helper of Samichlaus. They come and leave on December 6. Schmutzli is traditionally wearing a dark brown costume, similar to a monk’s habit, but I never saw a blackfaced Schmutzli in Switzerland. Still, he’s a dark figure. He never says a word, but he would put kids in his huge bag if they wouldn’t behave, as our parents told us.

I would characterize the Zwarte Piet the same way.

But was he traditionally a black person?

No, no. There is no connection to slavery.

Actually, there is a connection to slavery. This is why Zwarte Piet is nowadays called colored Piet.



J. G. Kesler, Illustration aus dem Singbuch *Sinterklaas en Pieterbaas* von S. Abramsz, ca. 1911 (dritte Auflage, 1926).

Glistening black skin, sweat, bare breasts, muscular bodies, physical touch—given the sensuous elements of Gathering of Enslaved People on One of Jonas Witsen's Plantations in Suriname, we can only speculate about the interiority of the image-maker. Very likely, the painter himself perceived the erotic charge of the scene he would later depict with more or less imagination.[14] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A14F]

Looking at this dynamic from a queer lens, Valkenburg's choice of gestures, positions, and body parts and their shapes also point to a gaze of desire and the subsequent construction of eroticism.[15] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A15F]

This painting was never revealed alongside his other paintings. Instead, it was relegated to a Wunderkammer. And we can speculate that part of the reason was because the viewer would also feel in themselves the erotic charge. And we have to question why they were so afraid of it.[16] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A16F]

I disagree. Witsen hung the painting in his cabinet of curiosities rather than in his painting gallery because it was created purely for its documentary value.[17] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A17F]

Do you see the coconut trees in the middle of the composition? Yet why the coconut trees? Couldn't they have grown there? A tropical flora in the Surinamese tropics? In fact, coconut palms were not native to equatorial America. But by this time coconuts had become exotic things, at least in the eyes of Europeans, the intended audience for these paintings.[18] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A18F]

Also, the presence of coconut trees had a positive impact on the reception of plantation scenes. The owners were not interested in showing their properties in foreign countries as places of hard work and mistreatment. Seen in this broader context, coconuts reframe the

colonial economy as something quasi decorative – thus, ‹decorative colonialism›.[19] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A19F]

Once, a mother explained this picture with the enslaved to her child. She said that the other people portrayed in the exhibition became rich by enslaving these people. That made a big impression on me.



Jan Verkolje, *Portrait of Johan de la Faille with Servant and Dogs*, 1680er Jahre. Öl auf Kupfer, 41 x 31 cm. Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. Koloriert von Jakob Preisig, 2025.

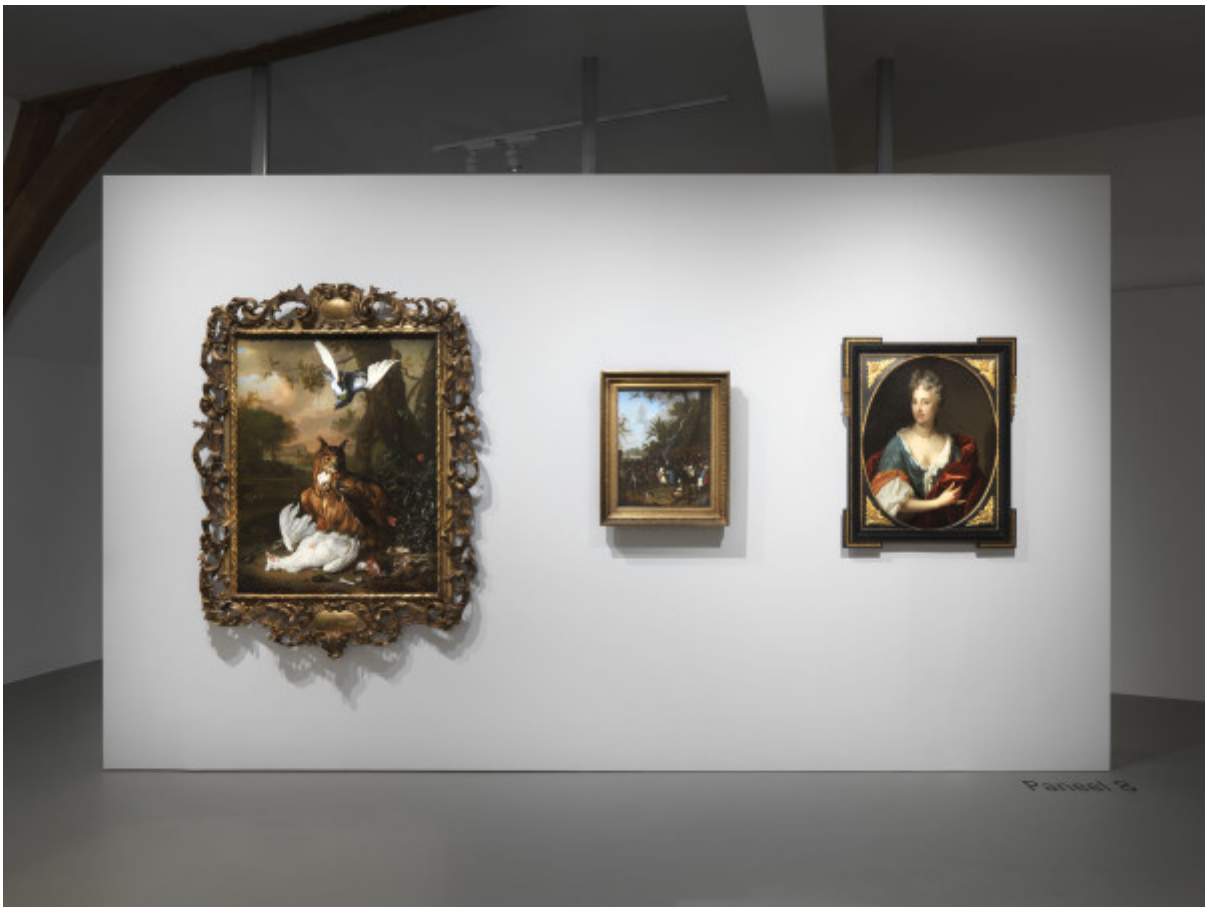


J. (12 Jahre) fragt, was ich lese. Ich zeige ihm die Publikation, die zur Ausstellung erscheint. Wir scrollen gemeinsam durch die Seiten, schauen uns die Abbildungen an. Bei Jan Verkoljes Gemälde *Portrait of Johan de la Faille with Servant and Dogs* bleibt sein Blick hängen. J. nimmt mir den Stift aus der Hand, mit dem ich gerade Textpassagen markiere. Er koloriert das Bild und holt es in seine Gegenwart. Johan de la Faille, - J. nennt ihn Gucci guy - dessen Familie ihren Reichtum dem Handel an der Mittelmeerküste Westasiens verdankte, wird hier als angesehener Jäger portraitiert. Ein anonymer schwarzer Hundehüter blickt unterwürfig zu ihm auf.

We white Dutch people can identify ourselves with the white people in the portraits. And we see them posing and being proud of their wealth. And we also see the distanced gaze towards

the enslaved Surinamese people in this painting. And at the same time, people of color will identify automatically more with the colored people in this picture. So these relationships are all still there, right?

Ich weiss eigentlich in dieser Ausstellung die ganze Zeit nicht, wohin ich schauen soll, geschweige denn, mit wem ich mich identifizieren sollte.



Willem de Rooij, *Valkenburg*, Ausstellungsansicht Centraal Museum Utrecht, 2025. Photo © Jens Ziehe.

In preparation of the exhibition, we also worked with a group of sensitivity experts, like artists or academics with a Suriname background, to discuss what we were doing and to listen to their feedback. And what stays with me forever is when someone asked, «Why do we have this enormous scale of brutal still lifes and dandyesque portraits and why are the paintings depicting my country Suriname squeezed into these tiny frames»?

So, why do you want to show this?[20] [/b-n-l-de/wolken-aus-holland/pdf#A20F]

There was also a lot of alertness, like «Hey why is there a white artist dealing with this subject?»

Whose alertness was that?

It came from us as a museum but also from outside. The moment we posted the first things on this exhibition we immediately got this response.

> Wem gehört die Geschichte?
> Welche Geschichte?
> Wem welche?

I’m visiting this exhibition because I just spent my vacation in Suriname. But here I cannot find a lot of the Suriname I visited. Some of the houses in the drawings you can still find in Suriname these days. Not many, most of them are gone. Some of them now have different functions. We’ve visited one that is now used as a museum.

If you come to Suriname as a Dutch tourist today, people are very friendly and welcoming. That was astonishing considering the cruel history. They say, «We very much suffered under the Dutch empire, and we will never forget about that, but we have to move forward.» And they have a very high opinion of the Netherlands. They know everything about Dutch culture and history and even watch Dutch television.

We are connected to histories, and we should be aware that we are connected to histories. And sharpen our thinking about what we are in contemporary world. In recent years we’ve been in a quite right-wing situation that I, as someone who grew up in the Netherlands, could never imagine happen here. And I think the exhibition mirrors so much of our time. We should mirror our history the whole time.

Today, many people in the Netherlands think we have an immigration problem. But the reason why the Netherlands has such a culturally rich and mixed population reaches further back in time. When in 1975 Suriname became independent from Dutch colonies, their citizens had to chose between Surinamese or Dutch citizenship with the option to emigrate up to 5 years after independence. Lots of people took this one-time opportunity. In 1975 alone, 40,000 Surinamese moved to the Netherlands. This led to a huge Surinamese diaspora in the Netherlands with one of its centers being in the Bijlmer, a neighborhood of Amsterdam.

In the exhibition we kept this link to the present deliberately out. I was kind of hoping that people in the Netherlands with connections to Suriname would pick up on that themselves. At the end of this month, we celebrate 50 years independence of Suriname. And that was a big debate. Can you kind of put that at the beginning of the exhibition? But then again, it is maybe problematic if a Dutch artist, white, living in Berlin, appropriates this history in that way. Certain aspects that are not necessarily connected to you as an institution, definitely not to you as a person.

> Die Rentner:innen berichten breitwillig und sind nicht in Eile. Von ihnen gibt es viele. Sie lassen sich Zeit auch beim Studieren der Werke. Ich rede auch mit Berufskolleg:innen, Kurator:innen, Kunsthistoriker:innen. Sie schauen ebenfalls genau und sind deshalb besser ansprechbar als all jene, die durch die Räume eilen.

We want to attract a younger audience. These days, 80% or 90% of visitors to the Centraal Museum are aged 65 and over. We want to get that number down to 60% and have 40% younger people, which takes a lot of effort.

During the week you have these school classes coming to the museum, where less than half is white. And we should be there for everybody.

As it happens, no public programs are scheduled for this exhibition.



Willem de Rooij, *Valkenburg*, Ausstellungsansicht Centraal Museum Utrecht, 2025. Photo © Jens Ziehe.

> Auftritt Petronella. Jedes Mal, wenn ich an ihr vorbeigehe, hält sie mich fest. Etwas in ihrem Blick fesselt mich. Ich kann ihn nicht deuten. Grösseres Bild gefällig?



Dirk Valkenburg, *Portrait of Petronella Merens (1673–1749)*, 1712. Öl auf Leinwand, 83 x 65 cm. Hoorn, Westfries Museum.

She is holding back. Fearfully? I can see fear in her gaze.

Fear, fame, fake. My smile is staged.

Was ist das für ein Ring und was macht er am kleinen Finger?

Soon she'll drop the cloak cape!

I do not know you and I do not trust you. I am a lady. You will never get me. And if you do, you will never really get me.

Sie hält den Umhang fest.

Sie sieht aus, als hätte sie keinen Bock auf dieses Porträtstitzen. Gleich steht sie auf und verlässt die Szene.

I can be nasty. I can seduce you.

> Das ist ein Amsterdamer Wappen.
>
> Ich habe mir heute Lockenwickler gekauft.



Willem de Rooij, *Valkenburg*, Ausstellungsansicht Centraal Museum Utrecht, 2025. Photo © Jens Ziehe.

> Furchteinflössend, Pertronellas Nachbarn, nicht? Im Hintergrund die immer gleichen Pappeln und antiken Statuen und prunkvollen Park- und Schlossanlagen.

Look at the décolleté of Petronella and then look at the chicken’s breast. Do you see any resemblance?

> Im Bildvordergrund liegen Messer und Rechen. Sie bilden das menschliche Pendant zu den Zähnen und Krallen der Katze. Eine Art Gleichnis und eine Demonstration der natürlichen Ordnung. Es gib die, die fressen und die, die gefressen werden. Menschen und Katzen fressen. Petronella und das Huhn gehören nicht zu denen, die fressen.

Do you think De Rooij wanted to suggest this comparison by placing the pictures in this way?

> In diesen Jagdszenen sind die Jäger abwesend. An ihre Stelle treten die Tiere, die andere Tiere jagen.
>
> Es gibt in dieser Ausstellung:
> Tote Hasen: 4
> Tote Hühner: 3
> Tote Enten: 1
> Andere tote Vögel: 19
>
> Tötende Hunde: 2
> Tötende Eule: 1

Tötende Katze: 1



Dirk Valkenburg, *Eurasian Eagle-Owl and Pigeon in Flight with a Dead Hen and Animal Remains in a Landscape*. Öl auf Leinwand, 127 x 101 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

Maybe the birds symbolize female beings. They are free and wild, because they can fly!

Oder siehts du irgendeine Ähnlichkeit zwischen Petronella und der Katze?

I see this crazy reflection in the owl's eyes. Awesome!

Ich sehe Fantasien von Macht und Reichtum, sexueller Verfügbarkeit, Gewalt, Status, Eroberung.

With what eyes did Valkenburg see the world? Who was responsible for bringing these images into the world?

With what eyes did Petronella see the world? What was the position of women at the ruler‘s court?

Welche Augen, welche Welt?

Although this exhibition demands a certain kind of alertness, we hope that it hits people in the heart. And that they, in turn, can translate that experience for broader audiences.

*Mein Dank geht an alle Museums-Besucher:innen und Mitarbeitenden des Centraal Museum, die bereit waren, sich mit mir auf ein Gespräch über die Ausstellung einzulassen.

[1] Willem de Rooij, Dokumentationsvideo zur Ausstellung, Centraal Museum, Utrecht 2025.
[2] Iris Kensmil, Dokumentationsvideo zur Ausstellung, Centraal Museum, Utrecht 2025.
[3] Renzo S. Duin und Agir Axwijk, «Traumascapes, or When Dirk Valkenburg’s Landscape Paintings Are Seen from the Perspective of the Subaltern,» in Willem de Rooij, Dirk Valkenburg, hrsg. von Willem de Rooij und Karwan Fatah-Black (Amsterdam University Press, 2026) 177.
[4] Siehe Rebecca Parker Brienen, «Dirk Valkenburg’s Gathering of Enslaved People on One of Jonas Witsen’s Plantations in Suriname: A History of Renaming and Reinterpretation,» in Willem de Rooij, Dirk Valkenburg, hrsg. von Willem de Rooij und Karwan Fatah-Black (Amsterdam University Press, 2026) 109–111.
[5] Siehe Benjamin Schmidt, «Dirk Valkenburg’s Coconuts,» in Willem de Rooij, Dirk Valkenburg, hrsg. von Willem de Rooij und Karwan Fatah-Black (Amsterdam University Press, 2026) 206–207.
[6] Alex van Stipriaan, «Slavery as an Aquatic Still Life,» in Willem de Rooij, Dirk Valkenburg, hrsg. von Willem de Rooij und Karwan Fatah-Black (Amsterdam University Press, 2026) 187.
[7] Ebd.
[8] Will Fredo Furtado, «Dirk Valkenburg’s Gathering of Enslaved People on One of Jonas Witsen’s Plantations in Suriname: Meta Race Play and Historical Rescue,» in Willem de Rooij, Dirk Valkenburg, hrsg. von Willem de Rooij und Karwan Fatah-Black (Amsterdam University Press, 2026) 196.
[9] Duin und Axwijk, «Traumascapes,» 171.
[10] Ebd.
[11] Paul Vandenbroek zitiert in Brinen, «Renaming and Reinterpretation,» 117.
[12] Siehe Duin und Axwijk, «Traumascapes,» 177.
[13] Furtado, «Meta Race Play,» 196.
[14] Ebd.
[15] Ebd.
[16] Ebd.
[17] Siehe Sarah Thomas, «Labouring Bodies: Dirk Valkenburg’s Gathering of Enslaved People on One of Jonas Witsen’s Plantations in Suriname in Context,» in Willem de Rooij, Dirk Valkenburg, hrsg. von Willem de Rooij und Karwan Fatah-Black (Amsterdam University Press, 2026) 246.
[18] Siehe Schmidt, «Coconuts,» 205.
[19] Ebd. 206.
[20] Kensmil, Dokumentationsvideo.

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Barbara Preisig is an art historian and art critic whose research focuses on contemporary artistic practices and their social and political contexts. In exploring translocal, transdisciplinary, and nonacademic ways of writing and thinking, she addresses a range of subjects including artistic research, feminism, institutional studies, and the politics of authorship. Barbara Preisig is co-editor of Brand-New-Life.

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