





Hadassah
Emmerich created
the mural **Petals**
Pulp Papaya
Plunge for
Kunstmuseum
Den Haag.

Hadassah Emmerich's often
large paintings burst with
colour and sensuality.
Beneath that seductive
surface lies a deeper layer.

By Ellen Leijser

EXUBERANT & SEDUCTIVE

FOTO: GERRIT SCHREURS



In her studio in Saint-Gilles - one of Brussels' most vibrant neighbourhoods - people once danced. The barre is still there, but artist Hadassah Emmerich (1974) has covered the enormous mirrored wall. 'If I see myself all the time, I can't work.' For decades, Emmerich has been developing a colourful, sensual body of work that explores themes such as identity and femininity. Her latest feat, a monumental mural at Kunstmuseum Den Haag, caused quite a stir earlier this year. More on that later.

When she moved to Brussels about ten years ago, the Heerlen-born Emmerich had already worked in numerous places abroad. After art school in Maastricht, she continued her studies in Antwerp, followed by a master's degree in London. In Jakarta, she spent months working on a mural at the Dutch embassy. After a residency in Berlin, she stayed for years; both her children were born there.

Emmerich loves the energy and many colours of a city - the way she can disappear among all those different nationalities. As a young girl, with a German-Dutch mother and an Indo-Dutch father, she never truly felt she belonged in Catholic Limburg. 'I grew up in Nuth, a village near Heerlen. I attended the Catholic school, where in the 1980s the priest would come into the classroom to prepare us for First Communion. But I didn't take part; I wasn't baptised. I was the outsider in the class. The priest said so too: that I had a different background, that I was different from the rest...'

Miner

Despite her love-hate relationship with South Limburg, she has come to embrace the region. This is partly thanks to Het geluk van Limburg (The Fortune of Limburg), Marcia Luyten's book about the history of the Limburg mines, told through a turbulent family story. 'My maternal grandfather was a miner too. When I read the book, I was moved to tears. I thought: I should be proud that I grew up there and was given the opportunity to get this far - to work my way out. And it is as my mother says: you should never deny your origins and never forget where you come from.'

After her parents divorced, the young Hadassah spent weekends with her father, who was living with his mother again. Her Indonesian grandmother did not speak Dutch, and Hadassah did not speak her grandmother's language. Nor does she speak the Limburg dialect. 'You hover somewhere in between everything. I often felt alone.'

She pauses, then says: 'I think my artistic practice grew out of that isolation in my youth. I have no brothers or sisters. Spending a lot of time alone was normal for me. I was always drawing in my room, and I had a typewriter on which I wrote stories. That was my way of expressing myself.'

'As my mother says: never deny your origins'

Controversy about Petals Pulp Papaya Plunge at Kunstmuseum Den Haag arose before the work was even completed.





Recurring forms in Emmerich's work include tropical plants, flowers and tropical fruit.



Identity

It is hardly surprising, then, that identity is a central theme in her work. Her palette is exuberant, seductive and intense. Recurring forms include tropical plants and flowers, tropical fruit, and abstracted elements of the female body. Emmerich calls this a celebration strategy. 'For me, it is a strategy of celebrating exuberance, movement and dance; of allowing the body to be free. A woman should be able to enjoy her body.'

And that is urgently needed, she believes, particularly with the rise of the manosphere. 'It genuinely makes me angry. I was already working with the theme of the female body at a time when that regressive movement was not yet so prominent. That makes it even more important now to champion this theme and to be more explicit about it. It is deeply distressing to surrender freedoms that people fought so long to achieve.'

Controversy about Petals Pulp Papaya Plunge - the gigantic mural in one of Kunstmuseum Den Haag's monumental stairwells - arose even before it was completed. How could the museum contemplate painting over a mural by the German conceptual artist Günther Förg (1952-2013)? According to director Margriet Schavemaker, Emmerich's mural reflects the museum's ambition to diversify its collection and make it more inclusive. The work gives a female artist a literally prominent place in the museum, contributing to a broader and more balanced museum canon, Schavemaker says.

'For me, spending a lot of time alone was normal'

FOTO'S: SEBASTIAAN RODENHUIS, GERRIT SCHREURS

A challenging commission

Emmerich looks slightly uncomfortable as she says: 'Of course I found it a challenging commission, because an existing work had to disappear. But I also thought it was a wonderful commission. The dialogue with Berlage's architecture, the batik panels in the museum's Dijsselhof Room, and my research into ornament as a bearer of history, cultural exchange and colonial imagery are at the heart of the project. I notice that the influence of minimalist and conceptual art is still very strong in the Netherlands. It is becoming increasingly important to me to spread my mission as a female artist: one of colour, ornament and a more exuberant visual language.'

Vinyl

Since 2016, Emmerich has developed a distinctive working method rooted in her love of printmaking. She had always worked extensively on paper using mixed media - ink, acrylic paint and linocut. Then she began experimenting with a discarded roll of vinyl. Vinyl is lighter and more flexible than linoleum, and therefore easier to cut. She cuts stencils from it and rolls paint or ink over them. Choosing the colour is preceded by an intricate process of mixing colours.

Today Emmerich is working on a painting of voluptuous fruit and luxuriant foliage. On the floor of her studio, beside a stretched white canvas, lie several cut-out shapes, not yet inked. She designed the composition on a computer and then transfers it at full scale to the stencils. In this way she builds the work piece by piece - one stencil at a time.

'The influence of minimalist and conceptual art is still strongly present here'



Emmerich increasingly wants to promote her mission as a female artist: 'one of colour, ornament and a more exuberant visual language.'





Choosing a colour is preceded by an intricate process of mixing colours.



'Although I plan my entire composition in advance, I find that indirect process very exciting. When you paint, you can keep going indefinitely, whereas I really value the constraints of the printing process. Colour and motifs have become increasingly important to me - more so than a personal signature in the sense of an expressive painterly gesture.'

Ornament

In October, Emmerich will begin a practice-based PhD at KASK & Conservatorium, the School of Arts in Ghent, in collaboration with Ghent University. She will investigate how ornament can be more than decoration: how it can connect different historical, social and architectural contexts. The research dovetails closely with her current artistic practice.

'In recent years, ornament has taken an increasingly central place in my work,' she says. 'Identity certainly remains an important point of departure, but ornament has become much more than decoration for me; it is a way of thinking about history, architecture, power and cultural exchange.'

How will this research filter into her art? 'I expect it will allow me to position myself even more clearly - and to advocate my mission with greater conviction.'

MORE INFORMATION

The mural Petals Pulp Papaya Plunge by Hadassah Emmerich can be seen at Kunstmuseum Den Haag until 2030. From 24 August to 11 December, Emmerich has a solo exhibition at Erasmus Gallery in Rotterdam.

FOTO: PARIS TAVITIAN