

INTERVIEW HADASSAH EMMERICH

by Cynthia Jordens

Dutch artist Hadassah Emmerich (1974, Heerlen), who lives and works in Brussels, is known for her lush and sensuous paintings and murals. In her work, she explores recurring themes such as the body and identity, the sensory and the sensual, the commodification of the erotic and the exotic. In her exhibition *Batik Moon Rising*, Emmerich shows a new series of works that mark a turn in her artistic practice. Never before have her images been so distorted and full of dynamism and humour, adding nuance to her signature themes. What has not changed is her characteristic combination of warm and understated colours.

Hadassah, when you first see your new triptych *Batik Moon Rising*, you are overwhelmed by the exuberance of the motifs and the intensity of the colours. What have you depicted and why do these motifs fascinate you?

'I am fascinated by how contemporary painting can relate to complex issues related to 'the exotic'. In my work, I explore this through the depiction of the female body and nature, ideally suited to express ideas about 'the exotic'. Recurring motifs in my work are body parts and tropical plants and flowers. In my triptych *Batik Moon Rising*, shown here, references to flowers and leaves of tropical plants; lips, tongues and breast shapes can be recognised, as well as Indonesian batik motifs and fans. Moreover, these works represent a new phase, literally a new 'twist' in my work, as the motifs are fused together in a kaleidoscopic and somewhat psychedelic way. The title of the triptych is also a nod to the band Creedance Clearwater Revival's 1969 'summer of love' hit *Bad Moon Rising*. At the same time, this work may also be so exuberant, dynamic and colourful because it is a reaction to our current times that have spiralled to such extremes.'

Your love for Pop Art and advertising can be recognised in your work, is this also reflected in this series?

'In my work, I am interested in images that both aestheticise and problematise the female body; a game of seduction and aversion. This is also reflected in this series: the combined visual elements form colourful, eroticised ornaments that can both attract through their organic and sensual lines and alienate through their distortions and objectification. I create a constant interplay between cool and warm colour variations, mechanically executed colour fields alongside parts in which a painter's touch can be recognised. As a result, the game of push and pull is not only found in what is depicted, but also in *how* it is depicted.'

Your work seems to express criticism on the gaze on the female body as well as the gaze on the exotic and colonial past. At the same time, your work is empowering and actually seems to be a celebration of femininity and exoticism, or is it an in-between space that you are exploring?

'In my work, I celebrate the power of the mingling of genders and cultures. This stems from my interest in creolisation [the mixing of different cultures that then merge into one new culture, such as Surinamese or Caribbean cultures, C]]. As I mix and merge images and colours associated with men or women, Western or 'exotic', a cross-pollination takes place, creating new, (fictional) hybrid species. Thus, the female body is fragmented in my work, as parts of a possible new identity, fused with tropical plant forms, flowers and fruits. My imagery tends to have an erotic feel, but it is also a celebration of the 'sensual gaze' as a means of defying conservative and regressive worldviews, especially with regard to the position of women.'

You can describe your work as sensual and exotic, but there also seems to be a dark edge. Can you tell us something about the dark side in your work?

'Certainly. I explore the possibility of unfolding the psychological charge behind power relations through painting. My work addresses power relations between different genders and in the post-colonial era. There is also a downside to the desire to make works that are larger than life. In the creation of something grand and monumental also resides the fear of the puny, the mediocre and the oppressive. Just as that which thrills can also be devoured, and just as exhaustion and emptiness can befall those who pursue the ecstatic.'

Repetition plays an important role in your work. Not only through the technique of the templates you use to repeat shapes, but also in terms of content it seems to contribute to the meaning of your work. How does repeating visual elements contribute to your exploration of themes such as corporeality and identity, sensuality and exoticism?

'Since 2016, I have been working with a painting technique, using vinyl cut-outs to create prints with oil paint on canvas, paper or a wall, resulting in a matte, pigment-rich paint skin. This printing technique and working with stencils works very well to push my handwriting into the background. It makes my painter's touch more 'mechanical' and distant, and simultaneously the technique 'forces' me to stay within a certain visual language. But it is still an interplay, because besides the printed parts, my hand of painting can be recognised for example in the way fans and Indonesian batik motifs are depicted. By repeating images and motifs, I can execute a composition in different colour schemes. I find it interesting to explore how the same image in a different colour composition can create a

different vibe. For instance, a composition in cool colours is more likely to have a reflective, detached impact, while the same work in warm colours might remind us of tropical places. I find it interesting to test whether certain preferences are culturally determined, and how we are conditioned, subconsciously or otherwise, to attribute certain meanings to certain things.'

You consider yourself a painter, but also an 'expanded painter', a painter interested in stretching the boundaries of painting with painting. To what extent is this reflected in these works? And why do you like to create works that are larger than life?

'My triptych *Batik Moon Rising* is of a large size, each work measuring about 200 x 320 cm. The works are not presented in a classical way as paintings on a white wall, but as a kind of billboards on wooden supports in the daylight of the exhibition space. The paintings stretch and rhythmically continue in the surrounding architecture through the prints on the windows, in which you can recognise magnified details of the works. The monumental size of the works challenges me to make bold decisions during the creative process. It allows me to use my whole body while making them, to create an immersive viewing experience for the visitor.'

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EMMERICH RISING

by Laila Melchior

At Schunck's Atrium, Hadassah Emmerich presents the installation *Batik Moon Rising*, with works deriving from her investigation into painting through imprint methods, as well as the use of digital tools and colour. The installation shows three oil paintings and a digital print covered by multi-hued shapes that evoke the feminine body through shredded forms, traits, reminiscences and fragments resembling outlines of fruits, flowers, and other botanical elements. Partially recognisable and partially blended into the compositions, the forms result from a process developed over the years in which the artist uses vinyl cut-outs to imprint coloured shapes on canvas and, sometimes, on the wall. Known for compositions that multiply these forms in mechanical sequences or series of colour variations, Emmerich now presents them in elongated and distorted forms, compared to the 'original' shapes of her usual visual language.

Three oil paintings stand in the space of the Atrium. The motifs resemble tropical bouquets arranged in the centre of the canvas as if competing centripetal and centrifugal forces ruled the compositions. The volumes depicted seem ephemeral and ungraspable, in balance for the moment of a gaze. These paintings pop out against a horizontal background, a digitally projected print showing the same pictorial elements of the paintings in a less visually condensed way. Resembling a moon rising in the sky, the circular white shape on the upper

right-hand side of the image turns the banner into a psychedelic landscape, giving the installation its title, an adaptation of Creedence Clearwater Revival's *Bad Moon Rising* song title.

Born in Heerlen, Emmerich now revisits the scenery of her adolescence on the occasion of the exhibition. Growing up in Limburg as a teenager of mixed heritage, an important part of her artistic research stems from her formative years. It was a context in which Indonesian traditions remained largely foreign to her. In a time when there weren't many critical discussions regarding the colonial history of the Dutch East Indies or colonialism in general, the local *pasar malams* became virtually her only point of contact with Indonesian cultures. At the edge of abstraction, Hadassah Emmerich's painterly practice revolves around questions of exoticism and its complementary pair, recognition.

Together with the new cultural worlds discovered in the tropical-themed markets, a whole set of sensory experiences unfolded to the artist. Associated with them, products, food, sounds, and typical dances from different Austronesian origins began to inhabit her inner world and repertoire. Enchanting whilst lived and archived internally in a mixed, ghostly and loose way, all these references remained too vast to define or summarise a discrete portrait of a self, even more so when combined with Emmerich's simultaneous fully-fledged experience of Dutchness. First, the myriad of allusions to the exotic was brought into the work rather crude way through depictions of a more illustrative nature. In contrast, recent work reflects a long process of transforming appropriation into a claim for entitlement of these inapprehensible contours, digested and reworked through stylisation and form-bending. The artist's latest experimentation with digital image processing applications, where she elongates and distorts the 'original' shapes of the cut-outs that typically compose her visual language, is one of the tools that allows for incorporating references while consciously imposing some distance on them.

In Hadassah Emmerich's work, calls for embodiment, experiences of appropriation and claims of entitlement go hand-in-hand with the fragmentary nature of the self. Looking at them, we might notice the spectral fragments of the bodies, the fruit flesh and the luscious flora in their appeal for exoticism. The auratic reality of the work also engages a fundamental absence. This distant, mysterious and paradoxical feature defines the here-and-now experience of its subject while simultaneously overpassing it. In their dynamics of estrangement and familiarity, they constitute singular bodies made of shredded, repeated forms. These images allow one thing to be taken for another, as unanchored ambiguities in a perpetual drift – even when they remain highly personal.

