

Waar gebeurd (True Story)

Opening Nonna Hoogland and Alexander Koch. Moving gallery, 5 June 2025

Text: Catrien Schreuder, curator of modern art and education, Centraal Museum Utrecht

Thank you for the invitation to perform the opening today for the exhibition 'True Story' here in Moving Gallery.

As curator of modern art at the Centraal Museum, I am responsible for the art in our museum collection created by artists who are usually already deceased: impressionists, expressionists, futurists, surrealists. Studying their work is like time travelling. They take me on a journey through the history of the twentieth century, and often even more back. The art of this period is a celebration of innovations, of social ideals and dreams, but also a terrifying accumulation of fears, threats and escapes into parallel worlds.

Today, an exhibition of two young artists opens here in Moving Gallery, both are firmly planted in the 21st century. And you only have to follow the news to think: that is not an easy position.

Something about their work.

Nonna Hoogland, to start with, was trained as an illustrator, she now almost exclusively produces autonomous work. She graduated from the HKU in 2023, with a project in which she presented contemporary interpretations of classical mythological stories. She looks at these stories with a feminist perspective and addresses current political and cultural tensions and conflicts in her images. Nonna Hoogland is a feminist, even an active member of the Dolle Mina-movement. She does not read the mythologies from the perspective of male heroes or male gods, but from the perspective of female characters. The Amazones, among others, are the subject of her fascination, female characters who are not passive but rather active. They are not victims, but rather aggressors. Nonna uses vases as a carrier for her images, as was done already in ancient times.

Alexander Koch is a painter. He graduated from the Royal Academy in The Hague in 2022. His paintings depict dreamlike images, literally layered worlds. He also shuffles styles and subject matter and uses existing archetypal images, often drawn from art history, in his works. While working and allowing chance and speed to the process of painting, the painting materials themselves add an extra language. Most of the works that he presents today were inspired by a residency in Venice, where he became completely absorbed by renaissance painting, but also by the works by the Italian modern artist Giorgio de Chirico. Specifically Alexander was attracted by De Chirico's battle scenes, depicting entangled bodies in what almost seems to be a theatre play. Like in child play or in theatre serious subject matter, like love, regret, violence, is depicted in an almost funny way. Violence is being restaged in the arts and made harmless. In Alexanders paintings we see a contemporary setting completely blending with ancient times. And that is where we start reflecting on human nature, on our history of violence and heroism.

I have been thinking a lot about Europe lately. We still tend to look at the history of Europe as a success story. A story about civilization and culture, wealth and freedom. But just dive into the twentieth century and you also see a story of war, violence, forced migration, colonization, decolonization and genocide. Values such as democracy and freedom are just as much a part of

our history as an all-pervading arrogance, a deeply rooted sense of superiority. It's bad. And it's good. Both is true. And anyway, there is no such thing as 'the European'. Because the history of Europe is a history of cultural exchange and migration.

Nonna Hoogland presents a beautiful work in this exhibition, fresh from her studio. It is a vase, depicting the story of Europa. Europa was a princess. The god Zeus wanted to seduce her, and he decided to transform into a friendly bull. She climbed on top of his back, and so he took her to Crete, where they were starting their love story. Our continent, Europe, was named after this princess. But in Nonna's depiction, we see that the princess fell asleep. Zeus seems to be aggressively taking over, setting Europe's world on fire. Europe is not noticing how fragile her position is. Ancient myths are stories about love and cruelty, power and loyalty. Conflict and reconciliation. The age old story of Europe now offers us a new perspective on the contemporary world. At the same time, Nonna shows us that we have the power to flip perspectives, to add new meanings.

Nonna and Alexander did not know each other before, they were brought together by Arnoud van Mosselveld. They work in very different mediums and they drew from different sources of inspiration. Still their work is connected, rooted in the same age. They both draw to the archetypes and symbols that are deeply rooted in our culture. And both of them express a deeply felt engagement with the world and current political and cultural developments in the world.

Sometimes it feels hard to focus on art, when we feel we should fight against injustice, we should not fall asleep, but be awake and act. But I truly believe that real change happens in multiple layers and in different speeds, all needing our attention to do good. Art, stories and philosophy form a kind of humus layer, the deeper layer in our soil where organic materials are being digested. You cannot clearly recognize the specific leaves, fruits or other remains of our daily environment, but they are all in it. It needs time to digest before it can fuel new plants. In my mind there it's similar with art and art history. It digests our culture, values, stories. It's all in there, while at the same time fully present here and now. It often does not give clear answers or directs concrete actions. But what it can do is to give inspiration and courage in our daily struggles. It helps new seeds to grow.

I would like to congratulate Nonna and Alexander with this exhibition, and thank them for the inspiration they bring.