

## De Overkant/Down Under: Den Haag Sculpture 2007

Artists in Transit

Written by Jodi Rose

Image courtesy of the artists, Robyn Backen 'Whispering Trees' installation & , Natasha Johns-Messenger, Labyrinth.

“That desire to set out on a voyage of discovery and discover new territory is (part) of all times, and if there is anything that stimulates us as human beings to move forward on our journeys through life it is our indomitable curiosity for the other and the unknown. The *other side* beckons. Always. The greater the distance, the more scary it is to look that desire straight in the eye and actually set out on that voyage.” Marie Jeanne de Rooij, Curator The Hague Sculpture

The 10th **Den Haag Sculpture** exhibition 'De Overkant/Down Under' celebrates this impulse and 400 years of connection between Australia and the Netherlands with the theme 'Curiosity, Discovery and the Desire for the Unknown'. The exhibition shows the work of 25 artists from both countries including Mikala Dwyer, Richard Goodwin, Fiona Hall, Tracey Moffatt, Ricky Swallow, and more, with 'sculpture that is earthy, surprising, frivolously serious, frank, to-the-point and different too,' exploring the horizons of the globe and the imagination and desires of artists traveling to (and from) the *other side*.

At the opening ceremony the Australian Ambassador speaks of the capacity of art to “inspire and challenge us...Art is what underpins the very fabric of civilisation, it alone has the capacity to ennoble us and make a civilisation great’. In reference to the contemporary political climate, he continues, ‘a society that ignores the ennoblement of the spirit, a society that does not cultivate the great human ideas, will end.... in violence and destruction.’ He notes that ‘contemporary art posits a new context – one not located within a particular country, but rather in a state of transit’, and talks of the universality of work that speaks from the heart, whose messages resonate across geographical and cultural distances around the globe.

Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands inspected all the works and opened the exhibition by raising Jon Campbell’s bright pink and green flag reading simply ‘yeah!’, a joyful affirmation of art in society, and artists vibrantly out there on the streets.

Three pieces stand out in relation to the exhibition’s theme. Firstly, Natasha Johns-Messenger, winner of the Hague Sculpture Rabobank Award with ‘Labyrinth’, a subterranean hall of mirrors installed in the basement of the **Escher Museum**. The work offers an immediate and visceral experience of the exploration and curiosity that underpins the show. The museum’s mosaic tiles

work beautifully against the dark velvet obscurity, as a mysterious darkened hall beckons you in, confronts you with your own reflection, diverting your steps down another path, before throwing you back to the start.

The next work to really capture my imagination and speak of the desire to connect, and find paths to each other is Robyn Backen's 'Whispering Trees' installation. Along the Lange Voorhout, this is a poetic rendering of fragments from mundane mobile phone conversation: "Hello, is that you?/Yes, it's me!/Where are you?/I will wait here behind the tallest tree./See you in 15 minutes/Bye'.

This everyday text is translated into Morse code lighting up the trees, and spoken by voices in 8 different languages. Passers by who unexpectedly encounter the work show curiosity and intrigue, one couple stopping to kiss passionately amidst the crossing of languages, English speaking to Dutch, German to Japanese, Iranian to Greek and Chinese to Urdu.

The sound of an airplane flies through trees in the direction of the American Embassy. It could be a real airplane but is it part of the work? Where is it heading, and are the trees really talking to one another? This playful interference with the perception of the passer by raises questions of receiving and transmitting. In a world of constant signals and instant messages, how do we hear clearly through the noise to identify who is talking to us and what they are saying? Where there is communication there is always noise.

Robyn has carved into her kitchen cupboards the final Morse code message transmitted by the **French Navy** in 1997: "Calling all. This is our last cry before our eternal silence." This speaks movingly to me of a disappearing language and lost opportunities to discover 'new worlds' at the end of a long journey into the future. Through a vanishing medium and technology, a poetic signal across the seas echoes in domestic counterpoint to this public display of personal communication.

The final project to navigate this journey of curiosity and desire is a series of public interventions, provocations and invitations by a group of young Dutch artists. Curated by Erik Jutten and Ramon Ottenhof, the **Bureau voor Hedendaags Avontuur** (Office for Contemporary Adventure) a wooden pavilion beneath the whispering trees offers visitors a selection of weekend adventures over three months of the exhibition. 'Become a tourist in your backyard #2', describes adventure as 'an elusive force that tends to unravel in the realm of the uncontrollable, on a craggy precipice that most people cautiously avoid'; Anique Veve promises you a new family for the day, and Esther Tamboer takes you camping in the city. Further enticements include a food rave, an angel's point of view, and urban revisiting of Gulliver's Travels. 'You see when night falls and you close your eyes to sleep and dream, I have seen things that you can only dream

about. I have been there. I was lost at sea for a long time. But I have been there. Oh yes, all the way and back.' (Jonathan Swift)

It's the coming back that can be problematic for a long-term cultural nomad. Where is 'Home', when you have learned to make a home in any corner of that world that can offer you a space to work, dream and encounter new paths and directions?

We each follow the impulse to find our own home in the world through a series of journeys, short and long, geographical and metaphysical, internal/external, and mythological. It is an art of writing the map as we go along, unfolding the path as we step out onto it, making the most of each meaningful coincidence, random encounter and deeper connection that we find along the way.

LINKS TO PHRASES IN BOLD LISTED IN THE ORDER THEY APPEAR IN THE TEXT

**Den Haag Sculpture**

<http://www.denhaagsculptuur.nl/2007/>

**Escher Museum**

<http://www.escherinhetpaleis.nl/>

**French Navy**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morse\\_code](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morse_code)

**Bureau voor Hedendaags Avontuur**

<http://www.bureauvoorhedendaagsavontuur.nl/>