

Danielle Kwaaitaal - *Still Water*

13.03 - 30.04.2022

*Flowers won't be told what to do*

About Danielle Kwaaitaal's Florilegium (text Arjan Peters)

Thistle, Tulip parrot, Poppy, Wood violet, Grape hyacinth, Hellebore, Lady's mantle, Monkshood, Mimosa, Lilac. Flowers of the native soil, submerged under water, throughout the seasons. You can't get it more Dutch than that. At the same time, this latter-day *Florilegium* is a delusory experience, an immersion into a realm unknown, an exploration of our surrounding nature that also seems to explore our inner nature. After all, are not humans mostly made up of water?

Between the end of 2017 and the end of 2018, Danielle Kwaaitaal (Bussum, 1964) photographed about seventy Dutch flowers. A name for the series she had from the start: *Florilegium* – literally a reading or gathering of flowers, a pictorial genre already known in antiquity, but blossoming from the Middle Ages onward and in the Dutch so-called Golden Age especially. Higher clerics, and later noblemen and wealthy merchants wanting to show off their wealth, had professional draughtsmen and painters draw and colour the finest flowers, to be displayed in beautiful and precious books. In this way three Dutch strengths joined forces – growing flowers, painting and transacting business. Danielle Kwaaitaal's *Florilegium* is a new and innovative offshoot of an age-old and respectable field of art.

We visit the artist in her studio at the NDSM-plein in Amsterdam-Noord. She explains the project has its roots in the initiation of her career. In 1991 Kwaaitaal graduated from the Rietveld Academy with the series *Body-logos*, and a year later she had her first solo exhibition, *Bodyscapes*. 'My first subject was the female body. More precisely : the skin. My own skin. I zoomed in on it, mapping the skin in detail. It was the first series I produced, with only one subject. The skin constantly returns in my work, the tactile dimension, making something tangible. By isolating and zooming in, you acquire a degree of intimacy with the subject that you don't get by picking an image from reality without any intervention.

My career runs almost parallel to the development of digital photography, which started in the late 1980s, when I was a pre-photoshop era student. Being able to intervene in reality in a way that analog photography could not, fascinated me from the start. *Paintbox* was the name, the professional computer that was mainly used for complex photo retouches in very expensive advertising campaigns. I was allowed to work on it for a couple of nights, by way of sponsorship for my graduation project. It was an almost religious experience. I felt that intervening in an image without leaving any trace was such a beautiful concept. However, I did not use the opportunity to perfect the image; on the contrary, I applied it to show reality in a different light. For instance, I made a large field – a piece of stretched skin – and filled it with nipples. Digital media, its use and development, strongly influence my work. For *Florilegium* I studied various printing techniques. Paper quality and coloration account partly for the soft appearance of the photos.

I work with unique editions, one-off print runs, single copies. These works could be easily reproduced with today's techniques. But I decided not to. I refused. Which was a liberating thought: what I make is determined by what is possible here and now. The series is finished. In the past, I did sometimes make works in multiple copies, lured by the market, but then I changed my mind. My focus to portray a flower in the best way entails that I express its unique character by making a unique work. It is a more satisfying feeling.

Skin was the start of Danielle Kwaaitaal's career as an artist. Soon water was added. 'That's right. In those early days I also made a series of body part landscapes, painted underwater. The series was called *Bubbling*, made with simple analogue photos that I incorporated into digital collages. Water is the essence. For me, gravity is just an obstruction. Under water, time and space disappear. It is a new dimension, in which you are entirely free. And as a work field it has neat, clear borders. Water weaves through all my works. It is a melody. A photo captures a moment. Stillness. But underwater you have both the suggestion of movement and of natural and absolute a delicate, and nothing more. They have their own lives. They be will not be told what to do, because they just do what they have to do. The flowers invited me to picture them as they are, they allowed me to be present at their performances. Each time I was deeply moved by their beauty in the motionless water. Late 2017, I started this project in reaction to a previous one, *Whispering Waters*, with women I photographed and filmed underwater in a very big jumping pool – a complicated project that required a great deal of preparation. After that series, I wanted to feel again the intimacy between me and my subject. One to one. Which is also why I limit myself to flowers that grow on Dutch soil. I shrank the swimming pool, you could say. I asked an aquarium builder for different sizes of water tanks. The one I used measured 70 x 70 centimetres with a height of one metre. Next, I started experimenting, first with flowers I picked myself. Later I used a florist who attended auctions and obtained the most beautiful specimens for me. The magnolia in the series, my father grew especially for me. The first flower I photographed was a hellebore, a winter flower. Finding the right composition was a lot of work from the start. When you submerge them, the flowers naturally float back to the surface. I attached small lead weights to their stems to prevent that from happening. Once they had reached the bottom, the flowers effortlessly assumed their natural position. As soon as I saw through the glass the unimaginable freshness of the green hellebore leaves, I knew I would not leave it with one flower. I had to go on.'

In Greek and Roman antiquity and in the early Middle Ages various florilegia were compiled, surveys of flowers, plants, herbs, often with hand-coloured illustrations, made by engravers and water-colourists. The Bavarian *Hortus Eystettensis*, dating from 1613, is a benchmark. The project, which took sixteen years, was overseen by the pharmacist and botanist Basilius Besler. The bishop who commissioned the book, died before the book was completed and sadly, he was unable to see how beautifully the flowers of his garden were depicted. It was the first time that pictures in a book were not just meant as helpful images in a culinary or medicinal guide, but also served as elegant works of art: the 367 pages of the *Hortus* depict 1084 species of flowers, herbs and vegetables, in detail and often life-size. In 1705 the Dutch (German-born) artist-entomologist Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717) published her main work, with sketches and drawings of the flora and fauna of Surinam. In the preface of the Amsterdam edition, she writes that she had the plates engraved by the most famous masters and took care that the best quality paper was used, to insure that 'both Connoisseurs of the Arts and Amateurs of Insects will find Pleasure and Enjoyment therein'. Of course, Danielle Kwaaitaal knows these predecessors, as well as many others. She has seen the drawings – kept in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam – that the Flemish engraver Adriaen Collaert (1560-1618) made of roses, granny's bonnets and cyclamen. Apart from that, she paid many a visit to collectors of such precious flower books, like Elizabeth Blackwell, Franz Bauer, and Pierre-Joseph

Redouté. All these predecessors were in Kwaaitaal's mind when she photographed her flowers. She immediately named her pictures P1, P2 et cetera, with the P standing for Page. From the very beginning she imagined her pictures as pages in a book, the book of flowers you are at this moment holding. It took some years, but finally she has her own *Florilegium*. The attention she focuses on her subjects resembles the precision with which her illustrious predecessors pictured their plants. The big difference between yesterday and today are the tools in the hands of the artist.

How did Danielle Kwaaitaal reach the breathtaking results we are privileged to enjoy again and again, each time astonished by the detail, the colours and the extraordinary show her flowers perform underwater? 'I have a large container filled to the brim with water – my underwater studio – and I have ink to add. I can choose from many different colours. Ink gives the image a non-photographic depth of field. Water combined with ink gives off an effect comparable to what a photographer's soft-box does, a cap in front of the lamp to diffuse the light. Getting the water-ink ratio correct is a job which involves a lot of adjusting and experimenting, as it impacts the shading, the light and the darkness of the image. During a photo session I keep several flowers and bouquets ready. Usually, I ask someone to help. I sit in front of the container, at my request the helper moves the flower very slightly. Finding the right composition takes time. Sometimes I hardly do anything, like with the chrysanthemum you see with its face almost against the glass. Some flowers needed only one take, like the autumn crocus on the front cover of the book, the one with the beautiful tiny air bubbles on the leaves. When you submerge the flower it takes some air with it in the form of tiny droplets attached to the petals – they stay there just for a moment, then the bubbles become loose. That means I have to take my photo quickly. Other flowers did not do immediately what I had in mind. They were reluctant to show themselves at their most beautiful. Some of them can take an entire day to capture. The winter crocus for instance, that you buy in the shop as a bulb, and blossoms on its own, without any water. Magic. I had about ten different winter crocuses on a platter. Of the entire bunch, only one was willing to cooperate. What I like about working with water is that chance always plays a role. This project may be called a classic one: artist depicting flowers. But these flowers are depicted in a way that is only possible with modern technology. The lighting is done with state-of-the-art techniques. I have a number of lamps around the container, and I try out different effects. The ink goes first into the water, then comes the flower. I take about a hundred photos of every flower after which I start choosing from the thousands of photos I took. This is the practical "flower reading". My weekly schedule looks like this. I will spend two days photographing, and the rest of the time I will be busy selecting and post-processing the images, that is, adjusting the colour curves. In other words: the final result of my efforts is an inversion of reality. We all recognise the pulsating light of a monitor. That is my point of reference. It is what I'm looking at. I spend the entire day in front of the monitor. The pulsating light is something I want to convey. I have developed a special computer technique to reverse the dark and light areas to make the object glow in the dark, hence the wondrous effect my flowers emit: the light seems not to come from outside, but seems to emanate from within. The flowers themselves radiate light. I print the photos in four different sizes. The small ones are 30 centimetres in length: I call them studies, finger exercises: they serve as soldiers for the larger works. Next come the 55 centimetres, the 80 and the 120 centimetres format. The last one is a stately format. You can make out the structure of the veins. The image embraces you completely. It has so much detail that you almost drown in it.

"The *Florilegium* series succeeded in making me see reality in a different way, something I needed for some reason. Reality itself does not satisfy me. Imagination does. Through imagination I'm able to switch off everyday reality, which I find predictable and dull. Maybe banal as well, but I think dull is the best word. There is nothing sublime about it. There the reality does not stand out. That is what I have felt from very early on. I was not a photographer when I was young. I got

my first camera at twenty, when I was studying at the fashion academy Bijenveld in Amsterdam. By then, without a camera, I had already discovered that it was possible to intervene in reality. In the seventies in Ermelo, where I grew up – I must have been eleven years old or so – it was autumn, and I collected the leaves that had fallen from the trees. At home I put them in small plastic bags and the next day I hung them back on the branches as I thought it a shame that they had fallen. That must have been my first action of defying gravity and my first conceptual work of art, even if I was not aware of it. I would pick up dead birds and tie them under the strap of the BSA bike I had got for my birthday, and then rode home with, as my mother used to say, “yet again a dead animal on the bike”. I buried them in the garden. In this way, as a child, I was always busy arranging the world around me. My parents never scolded me for my somewhat eccentric behaviour, nor tried to restrict me. I did correct myself, but of my own volition. I was not trying to prove anything. I think there remains a childish intuition in me, and in the choices I make. That is where my desire to observe and explore things originated and my ability to trust my intuition.’

‘For a year I worked on the flowers photos. I was completely submerged by them. I had a large tub around my head it was as though I was living in another dimension. I have always been good at keeping aside stimuli from the outside world. My work ethic is huge. I get up early and I go to my studio, my safe haven. It was a special moment to finish the *Florilegium* project, after a year, which for me is an exceptionally long period. I like adventure and experiencing new things. Although water remains my element: the new series I have just begun is called *Ultraviolet* and explores the colour spectrum visible to us. This time my models are vases – in reference of course to Giorgio Morandi, who painted pots and pitchers and vases in Bologna all his life. In my new series gravity plays a completely different role. The vases stand firmly on at the bottom, whereas the flowers present themselves quite naturally – look at me, under water I am beautiful. I decided to choose objects that do not have any intrinsic beauty or are unconscious about it. Unlike the flowers aware of their beauty, the vases are ordinary, average, not designed by someone with a special vision in mind. I struggle immensely to make the image into something. Sometimes I photograph them in five different compositions. It is all about transparency, layering, space. The photo-lab prints them twice over, thereby creating a different colour intensity. At first, I thought it was going to be a compact series. But now, when I visit some flea markets, certain vases catch my eye.

Flowers to vases may seem like a logical step but creating beauty in something attractive turns out to be quite a complicated business. Yes, here they are, in the studio, over there. They are multiplying. It is the start of a new series. My work is beginning to tear itself loose from photography. I have the impression to be drawn more and more towards painting. Once the photo is taken, the image has been captured and a second life begins, the life of art and amazement. My ideal would be to create a photo without a camera. I do not see myself as a photographer, but as an artist with a camera.’ Leaving Danielle Kwaaitaal to continue her new series, a present-day curtsy to Morandi, the visitor closes the door of her studio, takes the ferry from Amsterdam-Noord to the city centre, and during fifteen minutes with the water beneath him, he catches himself thinking that for the moment he still wants to dwell on Kwaaitaal’s company of clematis, dahlia, hibiscus, freesia, mimosa and lisianthus. Her *Florilegium* gracefully invites the viewer to pick up and read this wordless gathering of flowers, this poetry anthology in images, each reading bringing new discoveries.

The almost audible silence, the delicacy of flowers that don’t seem to need us to show their exuberant beauty, the ephemeral nature of their flowering, the ineluctable suggestion of how much we miss when we do not pay attention, the temptation to contemplate, to look, to admire, to participate by looking at something unknown. The movement, captured for just one moment only to continue wafting and waving after we look away. A show that leaves us speechless

and gladly so, unshackling us from words, letting ourselves be captivated by images that effortlessly hold our attention. The luxuriousness of flowers according us a world we vaguely seem to recognise as something within ourselves – would it be because once taken out of the water we still not can exist without it? – a world we so easily neglect to honour, a world we can touch with the words tender and fulfilling. As soon as we close the book we immediately want to return, entangling our gaze once more with the images, we feel something happening but know not what it is, nor do we care, because everything goes without saying in this lasting embrace that needs no text, allowing us, uninterruptedly submerged, to drift away in eternal, weightless bliss.

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

**Exhibition dates :** 13.03 - 30.04.2022

Open Thursday, Friday, Saturday from 11am to 6pm and by appointment.

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