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# **CASINO EXOTIQUE**

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**HADASSAH EMMERICH**



**HADASSAH EMMERICH  
AND  
MAXA ZOLLER  
IN CONVERSATION**

## ◀ DREAMS OF THE EXOTIC ▶

Hadassah Emmerich's surreal drawings and mural paintings are immersive dreams of the exotic. Their sheer scale is overwhelming and like a dream they haunt the viewer. Cliché fantasies of foreign beauties, tropical plants and flowers are expressions of the artist's exploration of her own nationality: Emmerich is Dutch, born to a mixed race parents of German, Chinese and Indonesian origin. Following Sigmund Freud's Interpretation of Dreams we can read Emmerich's naïve and powerful fantasies about a place 'elsewhere' as an expression of the desire to re-connect with the repressed, as longings for Indonesia, her father's country, which she visited for the first time in her early twenties. Yet, the paintings are no one-to-one translations of the artist's subconscious, but they are inquiries into the idea of the exotic. For the artist, dreams are the starting point, never the end product. Emmerich's hypersensitive environments turn exaggeration and over-amplification into critical strategies of analyses. The references to woodcut, the traditional craft of so-called primitive art, and to the work of Paul Gauguin and Henri Rousseau are sometimes critical, often ironic and always celebratory comments on the representation of the exotic in art history.

My approach to art making is multifaceted ranging from personal intuition to literary references and theory. On a formal level I combine abstract ornamental forms with carefully composed elements. My formal choices are always in dialogue with the content.

In *Darkshines* I have printed a linocut of the bookcover of *The way to Paradise* by Mario Vargass Llosa. In a recent walldrawing I used a short excerpt from *The Way to Paradise*: the moment where Gauguin remembers his time with Van Gogh in Arles.

In the beginning my own personal history was an important reason to start working around the exotic. Apart from having mixed blood, I grew up in the catholic south of the Netherlands, but was never christened. My father offered me religion, superstition and magic, whereas my mother took me on a beach holiday when my friends had their first communion. This kind of, well, humorous schizophrenia resulted in a constant negotiation of the 'right' distance towards the idea of 'belief'. Today those spaces where the secular exists next to the religious are most interesting to me. It is also important in my work, and the co-existence of different viewpoints is also how I approach 'the exotic'. I am interested to show its complexity, which cannot be merely illustrative, but to me is a mixture of references to (art) history, pop culture, every-day life and the artist's authentic signature. This involves an existential questioning, a fragile balance between an objective and a subjective look.

Later, the stunning cathedrals, churches and palaces I saw in Southern Europe inspired me to start creating environments. I was already making large wall collages with paper cut-outs, but I realised that I wanted to create a similar immersive feeling to the one I had experienced in a baroque church where dark paintings were hung over murals merging into a painted relief which ended in a trompe-l'oeil. In these cathedrals, different mixtures of style and iconography built up to a dazzling climax.

Also, the layout of illuminated manuscripts form a major source of inspiration for my works on paper, where graphical, painterly and textual narratives are mixed together in the same picture. It is interesting that illuminated manuscripts have both an Eastern and Western history, ranging from Persia to Belgium.

## ◀ IDENTITY AND GENDER ▶

Emmerich's paintings are the result of a slowly emerging debate around issues of hybrid identity in the Netherlands. Emmerich, who can be described as a 'second-generation post-colonial artist', is too young to have experienced the every-day racism of the 1970s; she avoids the aggressive politics of first-wave black artists in order to celebrate, and not deconstruct, fantasies of exoticism. Her paintings can be compared to the collages of Wangechi Mutu, a Kenyan artist and anthropologist living in New York. Both artists engage in the representation of the exotic female body paired with an exuberant use of ornamental embellishment. Their use of collage techniques is a metaphor for an experience of identity, which is hybrid rather than homogeneous, complex instead of clear-cut. Emmerich and Mutu demonstrate a new post-feminist, post-colonial confidence, which allows them to playfully engage with cliché gender issues, such as the myth of 'primitive' sexuality. While Mutu focuses explicitly on the body, Emmerich's recent work shows an interest in the abstract language of vegetal ornamentation. The rampant and almost menacing blossoming of exotic foliage and flowers in her large murals are symbols of the mighty power of female sexuality.

It was not until I started studying in London that I realised how different the debate around the concept of 'orientalism' was in the Netherlands, especially relating to visual art and culture. The problem of orientalism is a very established discourse in the UK, many artists work and have worked around it in various ways. Another – problematic – question is how to relate these problems to painting. But just because painting is this modernist history of the 'white male genius', it is very interesting to break it open as a female artist who works around the 'exotic'. This is the reason is why in my work I refer to Rousseau and Gauguin, for example. Picabia is another artist who I find most inspiring in all his various styles, because he opened up questions of authenticity, style and the artist's signature. When I studied in the Netherlands it seemed that you either were a formalist painter (and shut up about too much content) or a socially engaged artist, or you worked in the public space. To me, these divisions are rather outdated. There are painters who work beyond these divisions and circuits, like Kerry James Marshall or Paulina Olowska, who I find very interesting. It is another question whether an academic theoretical framework makes an art practice really more interesting, but I am convinced that it is always good to work from an informed point of view.

## ◀ THE ARABESQUE ▶

The notion of the arabesque is historically rooted in the ornamental patterns of Islamic mosques. Consisting of plants and animals, the arabesque describes an abstract, de-centred and non-Euclidean space, an aesthetic responds to the philosophy of the Qu'ran. The 'arab-escape' has often been used in opposition to Western conceptions of space, which is mono-centric and perspectival. It is no wonder then that the arabesque re-remerged around 1900 at the height of modernism, when a new rationalised and Fordist compartmentalisation of time and space produced a return to the arabesque line in the Art Nouveau movement. In 1907 the notion of a looped, curved and energetic form was expressed in Henri Bergson's concept of the *élan vital*, the 'vital impulse', which the philosopher saw as the source of all creative evolution. In Muslim culture this life force is represented in the symbolically feminine plant forms, which are opposed to their male counterpart, the square. In Emmerich's paintings the arabesque can be interpreted as an anti-modernist gesture, which seeks to disrupt the supremacy of the Western art history canon. Her use of the arabesque line in the convoluted and seemingly endless growth of vegetal design indicates the feminine energy of the *élan vital* while referring to a romantic 'tourist' idea of exotic art.

For me the curved lines are a very strong binding device in the work, and they have different appearances: sometimes they are flat and outlined, sometimes they suggest depth and have glowing edges. Sometimes they look like swirled candy-sticks and they gradually change colour from green to yellow, and then from orange to turquoise. They are woven through the other elements in the pictures (plants, figures, bows, medaillons, faces, etc.) and cross the borders between different sections. As a result they weave together history, facts and fiction, even though they look like a formal device. Also, the line can turn into an italic font and form a text. It's a very elastic device that shifts its personality from frivolous to uncanny, and allows me to bind together the 'expressionistic' and the 'intellectual'.

## ◀ PROCESS ▶

Emmerich's paintings are the result of excellent skilfulness and hard physical labour. The sheer virtuosity of her larger-than-life murals speaks of a controlled yet free touch, which seems to effortlessly materialise the artist's inner visions. Her complete physical and mental absorption into the space of the gallery produces a new relationship between the artist's body and her work. This recalls Ronald Namuth's photographs of Jackson Pollock at work in his studio, which generated new debates around the performative aspect of painting. The highly physical engagement with the medium paint and the expansive surfaces of the wall and floor introduced a new environmental form of 'installation painting' blurring the boundaries between two- and three-dimensional space, work and wall, art and architecture. This 'stepping out of the picture frame' enabled a return to the Surrealist method of the so-called 'stream-of-consciousness'. This working method was originally introduced by Surrealist writers, who sought to unlock their subconscious imagination by experimenting with non-rational states of being, such as sleep, meditation or intoxication. Emmerich's almost epidemic forms sweep seemingly uncontrollably through the gallery space. Rather than mere paintings, they can be read as critical interventions into the institutional context of Brian O'Doherty's pure 'white cube'.

My desire to create environments stems from my experience of baroque churches and chapels, rather than from a problem with the white cube. Actually, the more rigorously 'white cube' a space is, the better my interventions work. What I like about the murals is the amount of focused energy that goes into it, like a fireball. It is a very physical and direct energy, which counters the slower and more reflective energy of the works on paper that usually are time consuming. Even though I make rough sketches before I start a mural, I always leave space for improvisation during the work process, and take the freedom to combine personal themes with the existing architecture of the space. I have experimented with different ways of integrating the works on paper into a mural environment, up to the point where the boundary between drawing and mural started to blur. But rather than questioning their autonomy, I am more interested in creating a setting where the mural and the works on paper compliment each other while retaining their independence.

