



## Rineke Dijkstra – laureate Johannes Vermeer Prijs 2020

### Jury report

The Johannes Vermeer Prijs, the Dutch state prize for the arts, has been awarded since 2009 to an artist living in the Netherlands. With the award, the Dutch government wants to draw attention to and honour special talent. The laureates of this prestigious award each show exceptional artistic talent and are of great importance, both for their own artistic field and for society.

The Minister of Education, Culture and Science, Mrs Van Engelshoven, is advised by an expert jury of varying composition, with all the experts being very familiar with and actively exploring the artistic climate in the Netherlands. This year, the jury consisted of Andrée van Es (chair), Pierre Audi, Annabelle Birnie, Jamal Ouariachi and Romana Vrede.

The list of laureates to date is a good reflection of the breadth of the arts sector in the Netherlands. They have distinguished themselves in the fields of performing arts, music, architecture, visual arts, design and combinations of these disciplines. Now that the prize is being awarded for the twelfth time, a sample card of unique bodies of work is slowly emerging. Every year, we see that recipients feel an increased responsibility and honour to be one of the recipients of the award.

The extreme circumstances this year because of Covid-19 have made the importance of this State Prize even more tangible for the jury: as a symbol of respect and appreciation for the arts, but also as an expression of the exceptional importance of artists for our society.

The jury looks for an individual artist living and/or working in the Netherlands who has built up a leading and consistent body of work. That work should have an international appeal; it is not only known abroad, but also considered as meaningful. They also look for artists who show artistic agility. There must be a good chance of further exciting developments in their work.



This year's winner is definitely such an artist. The jury designates her as “the queen of Dutch portraiture”. Sometimes a winner is such an obvious frontrunner that he or she is overlooked for exactly that reason. That risk has been gloriously and assertively avoided this year. The jury is hereby naming Rineke Dijkstra as the winner of the Johannes Vermeer Prijs 2020.

Rineke Dijkstra takes her place on the list of laureates as if she was always supposed to be on it. She has been one of the country's leading artists for a quarter of a century. Her portrait photographs and movie installations are unique in the world, and a number of her creations are considered contemporary icons. She has made an undeniable contribution to the international prestige of contemporary Dutch visual arts. It is safe to say that the work of Rineke Dijkstra has significantly enriched the world of portraiture.

It is quite rare for an artist's career to get off to such a spectacular start as in the case of Rineke Dijkstra – although ‘spectacular’ is not the word that first comes to mind when you experience her intimate, probing portraits and her reserved personality. But there is no art lover – in the broadest sense of the word – who is not familiar with her seminal ‘Beach Portraits’. This series of photographs is in fact her first ‘free’ work; she starts the series in 1992 and continues to add new photographs until 1998. The series develops synchronously with her own coming of age as an artist, growing from a searching portrait photographer into a world star who has gathered a huge following.

Two specific images from this series almost immediately reach iconic status: ‘American Beauty’, the photograph of an American girl in her orange bikini trying a pose like a movie star (Hilton Head Island, S.C., USA, June 24, 1992), and, maybe even more so, her one of her Polish counterpart (Kolobrzeg, July 26, 1992), a photograph that is very reminiscent of the famous painting ‘The birth of Venus’ by Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli. Especially that second photograph has what makes an image a true icon: once you see it, you never forget it. The image is etched in your (visual) memory – that girl with her maturing body, stilted contrapposto, wearing a slightly wet, light-green bathing suit with an intriguing, unfathomable look on her face has become a contemporary Venus. Rineke Dijkstra put herself on the world map of photography with these two incomparable, unforgettable teenagers.

Such class doesn't come out of nowhere. Dijkstra was born in Sittard, Limburg, but grew up in Castricum on the coast of Noord-Holland. Much of her childhood was spent on the beach and near the sea. On the beach, the horizon is low and the perspective wide. The people there not only made an impression on the budding artist with their facial expressions, but also with their strong body language. During her time at the Gerrit Rietveld School of Art, the naturally shy Rineke Dijkstra overcame her bashfulness and started making portrait photographs, both in the Amsterdam club Paradiso and in her own studio. After her studies, she made portraits for leading magazines for several years, but it did not give her enough satisfaction. After a period of self-reflection, a serious cycling accident and long rehabilitation process (during which she made a crucial, vulnerable self-portrait in 1991 after an exhausting swimming training), she found her true passion. She started making portraits of anonymous adolescents on beaches all over the world. The vulnerability of these young adults, whether they are self-conscious about their appearance or not, and the intimacy that Dijkstra manages to convey, characterise her oeuvre to come. Just as well as her exceptional antenna for not just the eyes or the face, but the whole body as a mirror of the soul.

This period really boosted the creativity of the photographer, now in her mid-thirties. It was as if after a long sprint, she finally managed to leave her years of searching behind her. She started to set out new lines that she would revert to again throughout her career. Those lines are recognisable but never dogmatic; they always turn out to be surprisingly different. For instance, she revisits the club scene, ten years after her Paradiso pictures, to capture the dancing, kissing, cool-looking teenagers on camera and on video in a dedicated studio constructed on location (The Buzz Club, Liverpool, UK/Mystery World, Zaandam, NL, 1995-1996). These works, made in an era before the emergence of social media, have now become unreproducible period pieces. In 2008, a totally different time, she goes back to the same theme again for the series of video and photographs entitled 'The Crazy House'. In 1994 she also makes portraits of new mothers (one of them was photographed an hour after giving birth; the woman with the look of a soldier who has been to the front), and discovers another theme that from then on started to dominate her work: the individual 'in function', tired after a great feat or exertion, no filter, no conventions.

She manages to capture this sentiment in her portraits of Portuguese bullfighters (1994) and Israeli soldiers (1999-2003), and in her video portraits of a ballerina-to-be who has to repeat her perfect audition routine time and time again (2009) or extremely flexible Russian gymnasts (2014).

In 1994, she also made the first photograph of the Bosnian refugee girl Almerisa, whom she has photographed since every two years. We can see a shy girl transform into a self-confident woman and mother, but also: an uprooted refugee changing into a rightful citizen. This brought Rineke Dijkstra to a different theme and different methodology, namely capturing the transformation one person goes through over time. She will do the same with Olivier from France (a soldier in the Foreign Legion, 2000-2003) and three sisters from Amsterdam, Emma, Lucy and Cécile (2008-2014). Dijkstra is determined and does not care about fashion, frills and public opinion; she relies on her own instinct and follows her own path, as befits her character.

In the nineties, Rineke Dijkstra already wins a number of important awards and starts to exhibit her work around the world. Her work can be seen in large museums and is included in private collections. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the Art Institute in Chicago and the Jeu de Paume in Paris, to name but a few, organise big retrospective exhibitions. In 2017 she is the first Dutch photographer ever to win the prestigious Hasselblad Award.

What is essential for the concentration of a photographer and model, is to create an artificial situation, Rineke Dijkstra explains. This means that wherever she photographs people, whether it is on the shoreline, in a city park, in the street or at home, reality is pushed aside for a brief moment, and model and photograph imagine themselves in a 'studio' – whatever form that takes at that moment in time. There is always that 4 x 5 inch dry-plate camera on a tripod, which can take only one photograph at a time, after which the plates have to be exchanged. There is always that ritual of creating the right lighting. Posing takes a long time, the depth of field is narrow, and there is no room for spontaneous gestures or movement. Diane Arbus, one of Dijkstra's sources of inspiration, calls the technical process 'a little bit cold'. Finding that moment of intimacy in such a 'cold' process is evidence of her great class, sharp eye, daring and enormous patience.



Dijkstra stands next to the camera, talks to her subject, asks for minor adjustments – all without being able to immediately see in the viewfinder whether that makes a difference. The slowness and mainly her interventions make that poses initially adopted are forgotten. A finger slightly bent, that corner of the mouth curling upwards or a brief distrustful look pushes the prepared or built-up image to the side. A deeper, more vulnerable or actually more powerful layer of the personality comes to the surface for just that fraction of a second, and we can see that highly-praised intimacy in Dijkstra's work.

We get the impression to have really gotten to know a person in just a short space of time, transgressing time and space, not influenced by aesthetic and moral preferences or sympathies. Look at the adolescents Rineke Dijkstra photographs again over a number of decades; every time she captures the essence of that intangible, complicated stage of life that everyone has to go through. Or look at the English schoolgirl Ruth, who, in 2009, copies a famous painting with an alert and deeply concentrated look on her face ('Ruth drawing Picasso', 2009). It is as if we, now, at this moment in time, have the privilege to be there in that moment – you are so close you want to hold your breath. All these people, who Dijkstra simply calls 'beautiful', are now adults, time has continued for them. The image that the artist managed to capture of them, however, is still there and has become an entity in itself. This work is for eternity. Few artists have been given the ability to create these types of images. In the opinion of the jury, there is not a more deserving winner of the Johannes Vermeer Prijs 2020 than Rineke Dijkstra.