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ARTIST'S QUESTIONNAIRE

Jacqueline de Jong Paints It All

At 82, the artist continues to make works that respond to the world around her, whether they comment on the migrant crisis or transform the potatoes she grows in her garden.



The artist Jacqueline de Jong in her attic studio in Amsterdam. Beside her is "Pomme Frites" (2020), a mixed-media work from her "Potato Blues" series. She makes these works by photographing the potatoes she grows in her garden in France, printing the photographs onto canvas, painting over them in oil stick and adhering bits of dried potato to the surface. *Desiré van den Berg*

By Julia Felsenthal

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The Dutch artist Jacqueline de Jong, 82, lives alone with her cat, Shosha, in a vertiginous central Amsterdam townhouse that she bought with her late husband, Tom Weyland, in 1992. Just before the pandemic, de Jong installed an elevator to ease her climb to the attic, where she keeps a painting studio tucked under the eaves. Going up and down in that lift — a “little prison,” she says — got her thinking about the tension between movement and confinement, a theme already on her mind as she watched the news, horrified by the unfolding refugee crises in [Idlib](#), [Syria](#), and [the Mediterranean](#). It’s a testament to de Jong’s eclectic sensibility that she braided those thoughts together in a new body of work: “Border-Line,” a series of oil-stick paintings that mash up news imagery of the global migrant crisis — the rescue boat Sea Watch 4, huddled masses on rafts, fire at the Mória refugee camp on the island of Lesbos — with the kind of monstrous, cartoonish figures that frequently appear on her canvases. Here, they are ghostly lugs, hovering at the edge of the action, sometimes encased in little elevatorlike boxes (that de Jong made these paintings during Covid lockdown — “very much in confinement” — adds another layer). The series reflects her “personal desire to *do something*” about the migrant situation, but these ungainly interlopers seem to sound a note of self-critique: Like the artist and her presumed viewer, they empathize and gawk in equal measure.

On Nov. 11, “[Border-Line](#)” will be unveiled in New York at de Jong’s first show at Ortuzar Projects in Tribeca, the latest in a spree of recent milestones that includes a 2019 solo exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, a European traveling retrospective, [currently at Mostyn](#) in Wales, and a 2019 Outstanding Merit Award from the French Ministry of Culture and the AWARE Prize for Women Artists. Equally important to the octogenarian is the way young people have taken notice of her work: She name-drops the artist duo Body by Body, who included her in a 2016 group show at the Los Angeles gallery Château Shatto.



Geraniums trail down the front facade of de Jong's central Amsterdam townhouse. On the stoop is a small vegetable garden. Desiré van den Berg

De Jong's career certainly merits the attention. She was born in 1939 to a Jewish family of art collectors, and worked briefly at Christian Dior before making waves in the early 1960s as one of two female members of Guy Debord's radical leftist organization Situationist International, and the head of its Dutch chapter. In 1962, when Debord booted visual artists — too commercial — from his anticapitalist movement, de Jong retorted by launching a magazine, *The Situationist Times*, from her Paris apartment (the Beinecke rare books library at Yale acquired her papers in 2011, and the six issues of the *Situationist* are now [available online](#)). The publication married diverse interests with a funky, D.I.Y. aesthetic: sheet music here, a bomb shelter schematic there. The entirety of one issue was dominated by an extensive visual essay on knots.

De Jong's studio practice has taken similar zigs and zags. She has worked in printmaking, designing protest posters during the 1968 Paris uprising, and performance, as well as with artist books, sculpture and sculpturelike paintings, such as her 1970s hinged diptychs that can be closed and carried like suitcases — “made to travel,” she says. More recently, she has made art from the potatoes she grows at her country home in France, casting sprouted spuds into a line of jewelry whimsically named Pommes de Jong and using photographs of the vegetables and bits of vegetal matter in a series of mixed-media pieces. As a painter, she has taken what she needs where she's found it, borrowing from Cobra in her abstract early work — the movement's co-founder, the much-older Danish artist Asger Jorn, was her lover — and, later, from Kazimir Malevich and Francis Bacon, among others. Over the decades she has forged an expressionistic vernacular, painting playfully grotesque, vividly colorful tableaux of humanoid creatures, their gnashing teeth, flicking tongues and groping fingers reminders of our baser instincts.



Two works by de Jong that will appear at Ortuzar Projects in New York hang side by side in her studio. Facing out is “Idlib in Mud with Dead Infant (Border Line)” (2021). To the left is “Locked In and Out” (2021), a larger work on paper. *Desiré van den Berg*

Parallel to this, she returns again and again to pop imagery: cosmonauts, billiards players, trench-coated sleuths and noirish femme fatales. Her paintings are often bizarrely funny — see [“Peeing Hamlet”](#) (2012) — but violence is a constant theme: Beginning in 2013, de Jong made drawings of World War I soldiers who forged links to the use of chlorine gas in the contemporary conflict in Syria, and in the '90s she made surreal paintings about the Gulf War that anthropomorphized the desert landscape. (She remembers watching television news footage of the war late into the night, fascinated by the visuals.) One can trace a line from these later works back to her 1960s TV drawings, grids of inchoate images that evoke the cacophony of watching 100 screens at once, and glean an abiding interest in how mass media can be a force for both connection and alienation.

The curator and writer Alison M. Gingeras has called de Jong’s artistic shape-shifting a “perpetual migration-as-situation,” a boundary-annihilating bent that makes the artist particularly allergic to anyone telling her what she can and cannot depict. De Jong was dismayed to hear that some curators balked at her choice, as a white painter, to make images of refugees — many of them people of color. She doesn’t wish to dwell on personal history, but it must be noted that she has experience with forced migration: As Jews, de Jong and her mother fled Nazi-occupied Holland for the safety of Switzerland during World War II, and lived in exile for several years. “Perhaps it’s not a coincidence,” she acknowledges, “But I don’t like to mix it. I want things to be more universal than personal.” Citing a “longing to get back into imagination,” she recently embarked on a series of very large-scale paintings on paper and canvas — jumbles of monsters, men and beasts with no discernible real-world reference. Three of these will be shown alongside the “Border-Line” paintings at Ortuzar, and on the day we Zoom, the artist — generally impish and quick to laugh — is fretting about the prospect of getting them off the wall and down the tiny elevator in one piece. Sitting in her kitchen where during the pandemic she mastered the art of making “really good baguettes,” de Jong answered T’s [Artist’s Questionnaire](#).



A close up of "Pomme Frites" reveals dried potatoes affixed to the surface of the canvas. Desiré van den Berg

What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what's your work schedule?

I wake up around eight, which is not too bad, get up around half-past eight. Then my cat tells me she wants to eat. I start slowly. I'm talking about nowadays. It was completely different when I was younger, but I'm not going to tell my whole life. First, I read the paper, I listen to the radio. Then I go up to the studio and have a look, go down again, start doing meals, etc. At some moment I get up to the studio and work. I found out during Covid that I was able to work four hours at a stretch, which is for me quite a lot. The evenings are for cooking and eating dinner. I happen to be sadly alone, as my husband died. Alone with the cat. I have dinner standing up, watching television in the kitchen.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

Creative work? I think making bread is pretty creative. Thinking and reading is pretty creative. I do more creative work without being creative than probably when I create.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

When I was 4 years old and my mother and I were living down in Zurich after having fled from Holland, she started keeping whatever I was making as drawings. She thought I had some talent or something. I've got one from that period, where she wrote on the back side "four years old." It's completely abstract. It was pastel. At that moment I was in a sort of children's home because she couldn't keep me on her own, apparently, where she was staying. I don't know why she put my age. The date, OK. But four years is a bit funny. That was my first really interesting work.

What's the worst studio you ever had?

I had a friend who went to Australia, a colleague [and I took over his studio in Amsterdam] when I came back from Paris. It was huge, everything you could want, a real studio. And I got inside and thought: I can't work here. I never did one thing in it. I tried one painting and destroyed it and left the place. It was too much a real studio for me.



De Jong only uses Sennelier oil sticks. "Colors are very important to me," she says. Desiré van den Berg

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much money?

Probably one work [that] I sold in my first exhibition in Rotterdam in 1962 at Gallerie Delta. It was bought by a nun for a cloister school. It was called something like "The Saint Birth" — something funny as a title, a word play. There were only monsters coming out, but the word "Saint" made her buy it. For how much I don't remember. Probably 200 guilder.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin — what's the first step?

I take charcoal in my hand. Often, it's the first step. Depends what I make.

How do you know when you're done?

When the panting tells me that I'm done.

How many assistants do you have?

None. My ex-husband, Hans Brinkman, helps me sometimes. I have a young friend who does sometimes, too. Mainly with putting big drawings up on the wall. I'm quite small. I don't dare to stand up very high. I need some guy. It doesn't have to be a guy, but it happens to be.

Have you assisted other artists before? If so, who?

When I came to Paris I was an assistant to [Cobra painter] Karel Appel. I cleaned his brushes and put all the canvases on stretchers.

Did you meet Asger Jorn through Appel?

No, actually, when I was working with Appel, Jorn said, "Why the hell are you doing this?" I said, "to spy for you!" No, no. I met Jorn in London in '59, long before.

What music do you play when you're making art?

Classical. Bach is ideal for working. It keeps you very much concentrated.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

When I started selling I was professional.



The artist's canvas painter's coat is draped over a French rattan chair. The central image taped to the wall is a photograph of de Jong's late husband, the lawyer Tom Weyland, who died in 2009. *Desiré van den Berg*

How did that square with the Situationist International?

[Laughs.] It's true. Well, you know when I became professional? When I got thrown out of the Situationist. When I decided to be an *artist professional*. Because before that I was an *amateur professional*. Do you know that expression in French? It's a very nice expression. Perhaps I always stayed an *amateur professional*. It means someone who loves art. It's not just an unprofessional professional. It's also the loving professional.

Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?

I'm not hungry. When I'm working, I'm working. I'm listening to music. That's enough. I don't want to eat. I'm not on the spur of eating or drinking. I'm another generation so I don't drink water all day every day, [either].

Are you bingeing on any shows right now?

Of course I am. A Netflix series about a woman who is going to be the head of [a department of] the university.

"The Chair"!

Yes. Have you seen it completely?

Yes. I have a little crush on Jay Duplass.

Who hasn't! He's fantastic. I have sort of a crush, [too]. I don't think [Sandra Oh] is very good, but the story is so good. In "Killing Eve," I thought she was fantastic.



Taped to the wall above de Jong's desk is a postcard of a "quite weird" 15th-century work by Jean Fouquet and a news clipping photo of the Dutch chess Grandmaster Jan Timman when he was young and "very beautiful." Desiré van den Berg

How often do you talk to other artists?

Very frequently, but I can't say daily. Daily I talk to my cat.

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

I don't understand what procrastinating is?

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

I have a piece of art, "The Stick," which was made by an artist who died, Krijn Giezen. It's a piece of wood hidden in a box of canvas material. And it's completely useless, which art is, usually, but in this case I never found out what it is. It's signed by him, and I like very much what he made. It's really an object. I have it there because it makes me feel good, because you can't explain it.

When you're avoiding your work. For example, I like to look at other people's houses on the internet.

Ha! This is very nice. What do I do? Making bread. Reading. Gardening of course. Lots of things. I don't have fixations. I hardly ever get bored. I'm busy.

I was thinking today, actually: There is a new building I passed, just finished, a millionaire's apartment building. I want to look inside. This happens very much in Amsterdam. It's more and more expensive. Imagine all the refugees who could be . . . well, let's not exaggerate.

What's the last thing that made you cry?

On the 15th of September, I cried because I realized that it was three months ago that Quirry, my favorite cat, suddenly passed away. He was so funny. I got him only five years ago and he suddenly passed away when it was very hot this summer. It was really a shock for his sister, Shosha. And now Shosha is alone. They're Norwegian Forest cats. He was incredibly beautiful. Very long hair and he had a little white piece at the end of his tail. He was very naughty and very, very present. So that's the last time I think I cried.

What do you usually wear when you work?

I have got a coat, a real official painter's coat. I bought two of them in Paris. It's very beautiful and made out of canvas.



A corner of the studio with a recent work on paper, "Devils Moregate" (2021), and a German chair from the 1980s. Desiré van den Berg

If you have windows, what do they look out on?

In France, it's nice landscapes. But here, it's roofs. Roofs and nice neighbors. And less nice neighbors.

What do you bulk buy most frequently? Like, some people might bulk buy paper towels or toilet paper, or turpentine . . .

Oh, that's interesting! Because, you know how it was with the beginning of Covid: Everybody got hysterical about toilet paper. When I was just in Basel, I found out that there are toilets that spray water, and you can buy one. Instead of bulk buying toilet paper, you can buy a toilet like that and have it in your house! For elderly people, like me, it would be very convenient.

Toilet paper is, of course, a very interesting subject. When I was poor in Paris, the first thing I always bought when I got money was toilet paper. Really! I was so afraid because in France they had these horrible, really awful thin little sheets. I very often get fixed on the subject, as you can see in my work. What else? Well, chocolate. Toblerones. Also bulk, but those I get from a friend. I have to have resources.

What's your worst habit?

I think I talk too much. But I have lots of very bad habits. Interfering in discussions. I do listen, but I also give my opinion, perhaps too often.

What embarrasses you?

You mean what embarrasses me concerning myself? I'm afraid I'm very honest. That embarrasses me very much. When I've been too honest, and I'm like, "What again have I done?" And in other people: dishonesty.

Do you exercise?

No. In the old days I said there are two important exercises: painting and making love. I exercise by living. I don't do yoga. During Covid I tried to walk a little. Perhaps I'm also lazy.

What's your favorite artwork by someone else?

There is one but it's so obvious. It's the Goya, the shooting of — I don't know what it's called.

"The Third of May 1808"?

Yeah, put that one. There are so many. To name it, and it's my favorite. . . . It changes, also. *[She gets up and returns waving a postcard of the 16th-century painting "[Hercules at the Court of Omphale](#)" by Lucas Cranach the Elder, which depicts the Greek hero being henpecked by a swarm of women, after having been sold into slavery to the Queen of Lydia.]* I have another favorite! I think it's one of the most funny, feminist works. A wonderful Cranach!

This interview has been edited and condensed.