

KOOS BREUKEL
HORIZON

A WORLD UNTO ITSELF

The history of art and literature, from say the late eighteenth century to 2007, is chock full of islands – from uncultivated behemoths in wild seas to small heaps of sand at gently ebbing tide, and from artificially sprayed dredging to imaginative mountains. Most are mere scenery or, symbolically, serve as metaphors for exile, isolation and paradise. Island art seems to be a subgenre, to be classified under landscape and seascapes, equated with mountains, and overlap with idylls and escapism. Victor Hugo on his chunk of France in the North Sea (Guernsey); Paul Gauguin on the Marquesas Islands, far away from unhealthy civilization; George Sand on Mallorca (an ‘El Dorado for painting’); and Jan Wolkers in the silvery light of Texel. Here islands are places of refuge and isolation, where inspiration seems to flow with every breath. Compile all these stories, all these paintings, drawings and photographs into one book, and you have a travel guide practically beyond compare. At the start of the book, on the inside flap, we then read an apt line by Gerrit Krol, about his decision to set sail for Ameland: ‘Because the sun is shining, because it’s an island.’ Voilà, island life is the simple life. And yet... when viewed from a distance (from a gull’s perspective, since islands have seagulls) a distinction emerges: that there are those who observe *an* island, and those who observe *their* island. For Sand, but also other famous figures like Gustav Klimt and Boudewijn Büch, the island was a travel destination. The place itself had no particular importance to them. On the contrary, it wasn’t the visit, nor the calm, the inspiration, the desirable life that awaited them there that counted; it was the idea, the *longing for* that place. Sand was miserable on Mallorca; Klimt simply painted *Litzlberg on the Attersee* in his Vienna studio 250 kilometers away. And Büch wrote about many islands but never visited them. Hugo, Gauguin and Wolkers were, on the other hand, in *their* places, in their personal domains where they resided, worked, slept, and lived. As Krol once put it, an island is not just a strip on the horizon but a world unto itself. With a population and a language of its own. A narrow island in one of the Vinkeveen lakes belongs to someone from that latter category: Koos Breukel, island dweller and portrait photographer.

In the summer of 2022, I was a guest there, on the elongated, somewhat overgrown stretch of land – a former *legakker*, a field that remained after the dredging of surrounding peat soil. Breukel had built a house and a jetty, then brought over a *Speed Graphic*, a medium format press camera. We sat on the deck in front of his house, in the languid afternoon sun, talking; he took a photograph, and I left. Two of his statements have stayed with me since then and now surface again as I look at the photographs in this exhibition. The first is, straight away, the photographer’s advice to anyone who wants to listen: ‘Photograph what you love.’ Easily done, you might say, which is not at all the case. Even a photographer who works autonomously relates, on many levels, to others who have a say. The model and the printer, to mention just two significant roles in the chain of portrait photography’s production. But Breukel loves people. Virtually his entire artistic career has been spent on an exploration of the genre. In his classical studio on the mainland (in the center of Amsterdam) he created a stunning work environment. A continuation and, at the same time, a redefinition of the longstanding approach to the oldest type of image in the genre of photography. And his second passion is craftsmanship. In Vinkeveen, about a ten-minute boat ride from his island, he set up a photo lab where, with a few allies, he breathes new life into printing processes such as platinum/palladium printing and photo etching. Yet something still

wasn't right. Was it Amsterdam, the city, its noise, the daily bustle and fuss of a successful portrait studio? For Breukel the most important endeavor in photography is remaining curious, about new insights, undiscovered patterns, new intrinsic challenges. Photography is a hunt, he says, a chase that you embark on when you're young, but which unfortunately is in danger of dwindling as you age. Declining into a straitjacket, the endless repetition of a successful formula: no, Breukel isn't the man for that. 'I want to return to this,' he told me as I paged through his first book of photographs [*The Wretched Skin*, 1994]. 'To thaat young, naive behavior with the camera. To simply take a shot when something catches my eye.'

Then his second remark, which is not advice but a confession: 'I'm way behind my time.' Another reason to make portraits is to collect people. Breukel tucked his portraits of photographers such as Richard Avedon, Josef Koudelka, Gerard Fieret and Robert Frank in their photography books. Like Fayum portraits in the tombs of the ancient Egyptians. They, and dozens of others, are the company he forces himself to keep. When Breukel started out in his twenties, shooting photographs on the street, Diane Arbus was at the back of his mind. Standing in front of Mick Jagger, he thought of David Bailey; and in the studio, mainly of Irving Penn. On his island – a place of seclusion, chosen exile – he operates his camera like a young Jacques Henri Lartigue. There he takes pictures of his children, the friends of his children, people who stop by, ripples in the water, slowly moving clouds, a far-off horizon, the morning sun shrouded in mist. Impulsively and without thinking. His subjects take no notice of his presence or tacitly accept it. It is the photographer's circle of friends and family, situated in the landscape where they discernibly feel at home. Photographs of serenity, commotion and silence, togetherness, and childlike playfulness, but above all these are the images of an exploring photographer spellbound by his idyll, since that's what islands do to us. Because the sun is shining, because it's an island, a world unto itself. With its own population and language. The hunt goes on.

RÓMAN KIENJET
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Translation Beth O'Brien



THE LANDING, VINKEVEEN, 2018
210 x 140 CM
HAHNEMÜLE FINE ART BARYTA
FRAMED, MUSEUM GLAS
1/3 + 1AP



KOOS BREUKEL, *THE COUPLE*, 2018
100 x 120 CM
HAHNEMULE FINE ART BARYTA
FRAMED, MUSEUM GLASS
EDITIE 1/5



THE LANDING, VINKEVEEN, 2018
210 × 140 CM
HAHNEMÜLE FINE ART BARYTA
FRAMED, MUSEUM GLAS
1/3 + 1AP



THE COUPLE, VINKEVEEN, 2021
100 × 120 CM
HAHNEMÜLE FINE ART BARYTA
FRAMED, MUSEUM GLAS
1/5 + 1 AP



SILENCE, VINKEVEEN, 2021
100 × 120 CM
HAHNEMÜLE FINE ART BARYTA
FRAMED, MUSEUM GLAS
1/5 + 1 AP



DREAM, VINKEVEEN, 2016
40 × 50 CM
HAHNEMÜLE FINE ART BARYTA
FRAMED, MUSEUM GLAS
1/8 + 1AP



LISA, VINKEVEEN, 2017
30 × 40 CM
SILVERGELATINE PRINT
FRAMED, MUSEUM GLAS
1/10



IN THE AIR, VINKEVEEN, 2018
30 × 120 CM
JUMBO CONTACT
SILVERGELATINE PRINT
FRAMED, MUSEUM GLAS
1/10



RAINY DAYS, VINKEVEEN, 2020
 30 x 40 CM
 SILVERGELATINE PRINT
 FRAMED, MUSEUM GLAS
 1/10



CLOUDS, VINKEVEEN, 2020
 30 x 40 CM
 SILVERGELATINE PRINT
 FRAMED, MUSEUM GLAS
 1/10



HORIZON, VINKEVEEN, 2020
 30 x 40 CM
 PINHOLE
 SILVERGELATINE PRINT
 FRAMED, MUSEUM GLAS
 1/10



DEW, VINKEVEEN, 2020
 30 X 40 CM
 SILVERGELATINE PRINT
 FRAMED, MUSEUM GLASS
 1/10



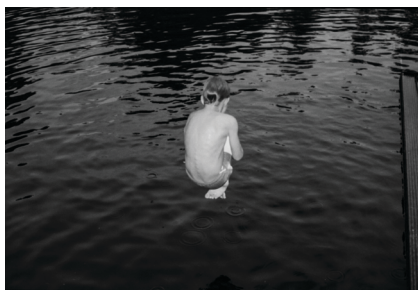
SUNRISE, VINKEVEEN, 2021
 30 x 40 CM
 SILVERGELATINE PRINT
 FRAMED, MUSEUM GLAS
 1/10



THE ISLAND, VINKEVEEN, 2018
 30 x 40 CM
 JUMBO CONTACT
 SILVERGELATINE PRINT
 FRAMED, MUSEUM GLAS
 1/10



CLOUD STUDIES, VINKEVEEN, 2019
 30 x 40 CM
 JUMBO CONTACT
 SILVERGELATINE PRINT
 FRAMED, MUSEUM GLAS
 1/10



JUMP, VINKEVEEN, 2017
 30 x 40 CM
 SILVERGELATINE PRINT
 FRAMED, MUSEUM GLAS
 1/10



THE MORNING, VINKEVEEN, 2021
 30 x 40 CM
 JUMBO CONTACT
 SILVERGELATINE PRINT
 FRAMED, MUSEUM GLASS
 1/10