

REGEN PROJECTS

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frieze

BEING THERE

Dale McFarland

In J.-K. Huysmans' novel *Against Nature* (1884), Des Esseintes, connoisseur and aesthete extraordinaire, endeavours to make a trip to London. Whilst dallying in a Parisian cellar bar favoured by English tourists, he decides that his surroundings, coupled with Paris' unusually inclement weather, provide a gloriously uncluttered vision of that foggy and nightmarish Victorian metropolis. Consequently, he ends his journey there on the rue de Rivoli, sated by the perception, rather than the experience, of his destination. Like Des Esseintes, the Dutch artists Jeroen de Rijke and Willem de Rooij find solemn pleasure in the condition of imagining another place while leaving its remote actuality intact.

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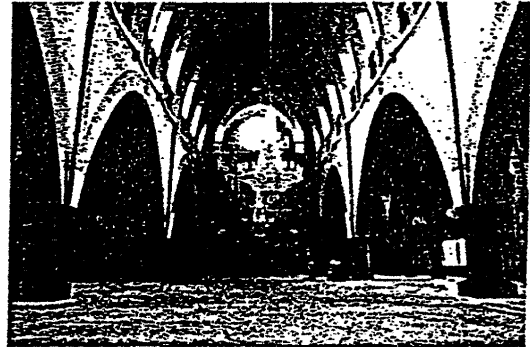


I'm Coming Home in 40 Days 1995
Location: still

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De Rijke/de Rooij's 16 and 35mm films recall pictures that you may have seen before in a museum or glimpsed in the cinema. Their work distills, rather than consumes, a world of pre-existing visual information, observing fiction with superb and deliberate detail. Against the deluge, de Rijke/de Rooij concern themselves with the preservation of unique images, espousing a kind of aesthetic autocracy in which the work itself must be protected from overexposure. Unlike much film and video, the viewer has no 'right' to see the work on demand. The films are shown only at stipulated intervals in a carefully constructed space; a room made specifically for a singular aesthetic experience. But for much of the time this 'stage' will remain perversely empty; so the environment becomes more than incidental to its purpose – its emptiness is as important as the projection it sometimes contains.

Voor Bas Oudt (For Bas Oudt, 1996) elevates an unremarkable event to epic proportions. The film opens with a close-up shot of palm fronds tracing an angular geometry across the screen; the background is velvety-black and everything appears in sharp focus. The camera steadily pans across the spiky leaves and comes to rest on a butterfly. Its legs delicately stroke the grey-green foliage; its outstretched wings quiver for a moment and then close. The camera holds its gaze for no more than a second on the resting creature, and the film ends. There is something tragically poetic about this piece; the lighting and saturated colours of 16mm film accentuate its bleak beauty, the romance of economy rather than excess. The brevity of *Voor Bas Oudt* is absolutely perfect – its abrupt end comes just at the point of enthrallment, the climax is secondary, but nothing else is



Of Three Men 1998
Location still



Bantar Gebang 2000

required or left to the imagination. For a moment, you are transported to a place that only exists in and for the flickering beam of the projector.

All de Rijke/de Rooij's films are set somewhere beyond quotidian reality. They choose locations that represent a particular fantasy or mental picture. *Voor Bas Oudt* is filmed not in the dark Amazon rainforest, but in the butterfly house of a Dutch zoo. An earlier short film, *Chun Tian* (Spring, 1995) uses the most clichéd images of exotic beauty you could possibly hope for. Despite its Chinese title, the film was shot in Amsterdam's botanical garden. It is a love story, pared down to two essential minutes. In a lush garden, against a backdrop of blooming rhododendrons and to the accompaniment of birdsong, a man and woman, both oriental, are pictured in a state of hieratic immobility. Throughout a series of static shots, each one looks at the other – but never simultaneously. The two do not speak, although the images are accompanied by a voice-over in Chinese (with English subtitles). A male voice says 'you're really very beautiful', then, after the punctuation of birdsong, a female voice says 'I love you'. The film cuts to a scene of the couple standing in another part of the garden before the camera pulls shakily away as they stare in opposite directions into the middle distance, framed by the impossible, artificial beauty of the setting. The work is uncomfortable, less for its seemingly ambivalent attitude towards the exotic, rather for its spectacular artificiality. Here, a human encounter becomes as formal and self-conscious as the botanical garden's picturesque recreation of 'untamed' nature.

Of Three Men (1998) is a single static shot of what appears to be a Romanesque church interior. Actually, it is a mosque which has been converted from an early 20th-century church in a district of Amsterdam. We see a massive, empty space whose walls arch heavenward in an exhilarating ellipse. In the shadows, just off-centre, three praying men sit facing Mecca. Nothing happens, or rather what does happen is pretty minimal. Still, any activity comes as a relief. Sometimes the men rock back and forth, while the sparkling chandeliers rotate almost imperceptibly as they are gently swayed by a draught of air. The interior is continually washed by sunlight from an invisible source and, in the distance, there is the roar of the outside

Old-fashioned elitists, de Rijke/de Rooij concern themselves with visual gratification. The highly mannered style of their films liberates the image from being anything other than a grand celluloid moment.

world which we usually understand as silence. The artists chose the Faith Mosque because of its resemblance to a favourite painting, Pieter Jansz Saenredam's *Interior of the Church of St Odolphus at Assendelft, Seen from the Choir to the West* (1649). The rigid perspective, the placement of figures dwarfed by the architectural drama of the space, and the use of colour stress the film's formal relationship to a certain style of Dutch painting.

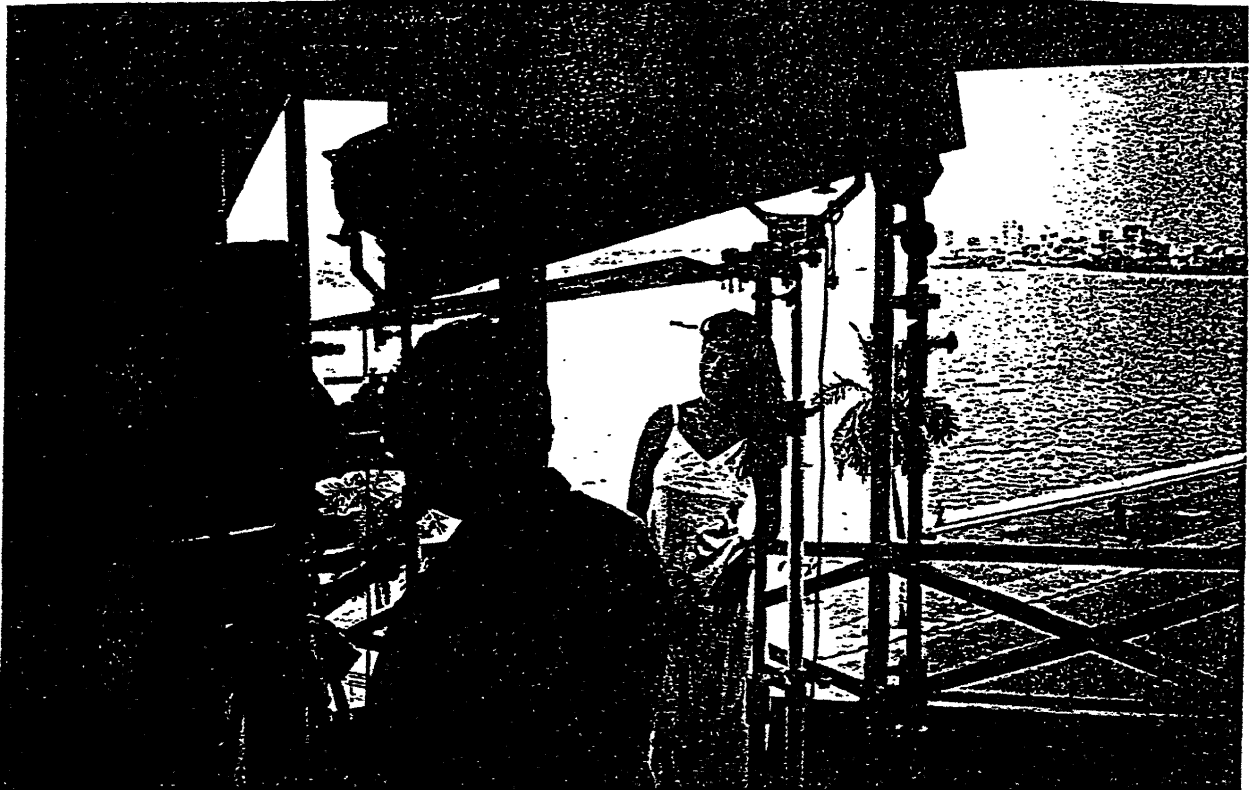
Old-fashioned elitists, de Rijke/de Rooij concern themselves with visual gratification. The highly mannered style of their films has the effect of liberating the image from being anything other than a grand celluloid moment. Their latest work *Bantar Gebang* (2000) depicts a shantytown, observed from an elevated position on top of what appears to be a rubbish heap. The image captures in jewel-like colours the sumptuous squalor of this settlement, hemmed in behind what you might imagine to be the garden wall of a long demolished palatial residence. White birds fluster around the edges, figures pick their way along the mud road, and the distant tree line is shrouded in morning mist. Occasionally the cameraman coughs, or a mosquito's whine is picked up by the microphone, so emphasising the process behind the camera. The slum is depicted with just the same degree of elegant detachment as in their other works, without guilt or intrusion.

De Rijke/de Rooij take refuge in an art that limits itself to a seemingly luxurious and self-reflexive form. Their longest film to date, *Forever and Ever* (1995), is about the language and conventions of filmmaking. Set in India and featuring Bollywood actors, it is an epic whose story seems to have been edited out. What is left are those parts of the movie that act as connective tissue. An actress stands by the window of her sea-front apartment, seemingly preoccupied with nothing but the idea of herself; a young couple argue by an azure lake; a telephone rings incessantly in an empty villa. These vignettes allude to half-remembered cinematic sequences – moments of suspense and pathos left stranded by the absence of a concrete subject. However, the work is not simply defined by its lack of a story; rather, it is a film about a movie that only ever existed in the artists' imaginations. *Forever and Ever* ends with a beautiful, almost kitsch, sequence of two boys engaged in a campfire discussion about the birth of the universe.

'Every star is a sun to someone' says the actor as he looks up to the twinkling night sky, his face illuminated by a sublime extra-terrestrial glow.

The camera reveals things that could never be seen with the naked eye. Although de Rijke/de Rooij's work highlights art's unique ability to create a circumscribed, artificial place, their films do not operate within the relatively overcrowded terrain between fact and fiction. Without direct quotation, they reference the history of image-making (and rely on the audience's appreciation of this) to offer us a place that is mercifully without any guilty relationship to a wider and messier world.

1. The tide is a dedication to one of the artists' tutors at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam.



Forever and Ever 1995
Location still