Heiser, Jörg. “Willem de Rooij’s ‘Valkenburg.’” e-flux Criticism (December 8, 2025) [online]

e-flux Criticism

Willem de Rooij’s “Valkenburg”

View of Willem de Rooij’s “Valkenburg” at Centraal Museum, Utrecht, 2025. Photo by Jens Ziehe.

Centraal Museum, Utrecht
September 13, 2025–January 25, 2026

The exhibition on the top floor of the former medieval monastery that houses Utrecht’s Centraal Museum begins with a freestanding wall placed at an awkwardly slight angle, wedged in just below the exposed wooden roof beams. It is as if the fitted wall has been surgically carved out of the familiar presentation of prestigious old paintings in prestigious old rooms. For on this thin, white wall, with the unclad aluminum frame visible at its back, are placed four large portraits by the Dutch painter Dirk Valkenburg (1675–1721).

Willem de Rooij has carefully arranged these four paintings as part of a spectrum of thirty of Valkenburg’s works in a new constellation, constituting the work titled *Valkenburg* (2025). The portraits are not hung along their respective horizontal centers, at the usual museum height, but rather slightly above or below it. In addition, all four canvases are oval in shape, framed in richly decorated but rectangular frames (except for one, in an oval frame). The subjects are dressed up in ornate Baroque style,

complete with wigs, and they appear similar in poise and expression, following a relatively strict convention of status-indicating portraiture.

On the right-hand side is a marriage diptych of a gentleman on the left (*Portrait of Jan Wolters*), and a lady on the right (*Portrait of Sara Munter with a Green Parakeet*, both 1717). He is dressed in precious golden brocade, while she presents an exotic green parakeet perched on her index finger. The pairing on the left, however, is of two gentlemen—their posturing and countenance suggest a familial relationship or affinity—whose eyes are hung at the precisely the same height, as are those of the marital couple to the right. This idiosyncratic deviation from standard museum hanging also breaks with heterosexual convention, bringing two men into suggestive proximity.

One of them, it turns out, is part of a heterosexual pairing, the female counterpart of which de Rooij has placed several rooms away. The next display panel offers another serial hanging of four near-identical hunting still lifes featuring a dead hare hung up to mature, its soft white underbelly exposed in an almost pornographic manner. Intended references—to hunting as status sport of a burgeoning, affluent Dutch elite; to scenes of Mediterranean antiquity, and so on—seem layered here with subtexts not necessarily intended at the time of making, the latter induced by a combination of history in retrospect and de Rooij's suggestion by way of combination and constellation.

It's not the first time de Rooij has used highly conceptualized constellations of collection holdings to reveal a latent level of meaning: of imperial power, exoticizing desire, and violent appropriation; of colonialism. In 2010, he conceived "Intolerance" at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, which confronted seventeenth-century Dutch bird paintings by Melchior d'Hondecoeter with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century feathered objects from Hawai'i. De Rooij's display, on a huge freestanding wall set into Mies van der Rohe's modernist jewel box of a building, brought to the fore how owning and showing these objects historically was meant to demonstrate affluence, power, and prestige, so that any affectations of entertaining lightness and aesthetic contemplation vis-à-vis these objects appear as mere concealments of this fact.

De Rooij's meticulous approach, characterized by years of patient research and preparation, has historic precursors and sources. Like many practitioners today, he draws on Aby Warburg's image constellations as a means of visual and semiotic analysis. Michael Asher's 1969 intervention at the San Francisco Art Institute, in which the artist repositioned the gallery's modular display panels into one eleven-meter-long wall dividing the space into a very large and a very narrow part, also comes to mind; as does Fred Wilson's landmark exhibition "Mining the Museum" in 1992 at The Contemporary in Baltimore. Wilson brought to the fore repressed layers of history in the collection by grouping, for example, richly ornate silver goblets and pitchers with iron slave shackles, or comfy armchairs with a whipping post, all from mid-nineteenth-century Baltimore.

But de Rooij's approach, as manifested at least since "Intolerance," is also informed by contemporary queer and BIPOC studies, such as for example the work of Surinamese-Dutch writer Gloria Wekker, who in her 2016 book *White Innocence* dissects the strange schizophrenia of the white Dutch self-image, which proudly claims a tradition of great tolerance and cosmopolitanism while, sometimes simultaneously, indulging in blatant racism, a contradiction that expresses an actively repressed colonial history. The grounding of de Rooij's work in contemporary discourse is also literally expressed in the fact that both in 2010 and with the current project, the accompanying publications are key parts of the entire endeavor, containing not only careful cataloging of the examined work, but also a critical mass of substantial scholarly contributions.

As you step back from the aforementioned display of dead hares, you also gaze back, through the connecting doorway, at the first room. As the two freestanding walls are slightly inclined towards each other, you notice parallels: there is a kind of detached conventionality to all of this, with one of the still lifes actually painted, in much the same vein, by Valckenburg's more famous mentor Jan Weenix. Both displays are odd hangings, this time with the dead hares lined up evenly, the specifically bucolic now serially brutal.

Among the animal and bird scenes in the following rooms is one by the aforementioned d'Hondecoeter, a direct cousin of Weenix and a major influence on Valkenburg, who also attempted to impress with a scene of exotic birds. But whereas d'Hondecoeter's *The Threatened Hen* (1681) is uncomfortably alive with tension, hen and chicks threatened by two intimidating peacocks, Valckenburg's *Birds from Various Continents in a Landscape* (1701) is oddly calm, as if his rare exotic birds were already taxidermied. It's hard not to read these two works as involuntary testimonies to the white colonial gaze, between xenophobic fear and deadening immobilization as trophy.

In 1706, Valkenburg was commissioned to document the Suriname holdings of an Amsterdam-based plantation owner. The work that stands out among other plantation scenes in this exhibition is a relatively small but complex painting titled *Gathering of Enslaved People on One of Jonas Witsen's Plantations in Suriname* (1706–08). The gathering is under the shadow of tall trees; in the background, foreboding clouds. All the garments—headscarves, loincloths, belly bands, brassieres—are in one of four colors: orange, red, white, and blue. In the late sixteenth century, the "Prince's Flag" of the Netherlands (orange, white, and blue) was altered towards the "State's Flag," with the orange replaced by red (the first version is today a cypher of the Dutch far-right). The colors function as a subtle-not-so-subtle indication of ownership: in possession of the Dutch crown. "Possession" here comes with all the connotations: grabbing, voyeuristic obsession, the willingness to use up, exchange, treat as equivalent to money—i.e., to dehumanize.

And yet there is an element, strangely, of envy. The bodies on display in this painting are proud, and beautifully, erotically shimmering. The white gaze remains outside of the image itself, but the plantation owner's fortified building is visible in the distance while, in

the front, two European whippets signal loyalty and control. That said, the gaze itself seems literally to fall onto the bodies as white reflections on Black skin.

The exhibition booklet explains that the group may be in the middle of a Yoruba-Dahomean *apuku* ceremony involving drumming and dancing to evoke forest spirits. According to anthropologist Renzo Duin, the ceremony also served as a cover to "organize and resist without arousing suspicion." Elsewhere in the booklet, a scene similar to that in Valkenburg's painting is recounted as taking place before an uprising against the cruel plantation owner and his overseer. Valkenburg himself is said to have been involved in a scuffle in the course of the uprising; in any case, as opposed to naturalist and artist Maria Sibylla Merian, who stayed in Suriname between 1699 and 1701 to research plants and insects, he is not known to have denounced the abuse of enslaved people.

Valkenburg is the perfect subject for de Rooij because he's a refined, sophisticated painter but also an emblem of the kind of mediocrity that is indicative of the power structures of an era. *Portrait of Maria Uylenbroek* (1714), the missing counterpart to *Portrait of Jan Jacob Braems* (1714) at the beginning of the show, is hung right next to *Gathering…* The divorce of the couple diptych becomes suggestive of the undercurrent of their marriage, their wealth directly built on colonialism (Braems was born on Java, son of the chief accountant there).

A similar thread leads us back to the very first *Portrait of Sara Munter with a Green Parakeet*. Learning that the sitter was the daughter of a high-ranking Dutch West India Company and Suriname Society official, the "white innocence" of an exotic bird sitting on her finger stands as an allegory of the history of violence, which puts itself on display in disguise as elegant, ornate, and cute. But it is not.