

Tomeo, Michael, "An Interview with Folkert de Jong," *Daily Serving*, May 5, 2011.

The figures in Dutch artist Folkert de Jong's work are both historical totems and cautionary tales. Suggesting that our darkest impulses are unavoidably cyclical in nature, he evades didactics through a combination of period details and contemporary imagery. de Jong seems to understand that every nationalistic conquest brings with it trumpet bleats, shiny shoes and other supposed finery—things that, while often treated as symbols of greatness, are often nothing more than cover ups. His current show, *Operation Harmony*, at James Cohan Gallery is up through May 7th. I had a chance to catch up with him over email this past week.



Michael Tomeo: I'm really into the *Trader's Deal* pieces. From the moment we learn about it in grade school, Americans laugh at how foolish native people were to sell the island of Manhattan for a bunch of beads. You make the pitch made to the native people seem goofily transparent and demeaning, like some sort of song and dance. But there's also an oddly hypnotic quality in the stares of the offerers. It's like they're half street hustler, half visionary. Could you elaborate on these?

Folkert de Jong: The *Trader's Deal* pieces are about unfair deals, profiteering, colonialism and imperialism. I based the character on the monument for Peter de Minuit, the Dutchman who purchased Manhattan for beads and mirrors. The figures in the artwork are all copies from one character... a 16th/17th century trader, that I created out of many figures from history: The painting "The Nightwatch" by the Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn, and characters such as Pedro de Alvarado, Peter de Minuit and Hernan Cortes. All the figures in the artwork are copies made from one mould, from one single character. The clones are trading with themselves, their own kind, ripping off each other and facing their destiny; self-destruction.



MT: Coming from the Netherlands, were you taught a different view on the di Minuit transaction than children in the U.S. are?

FdJ: Well, if you look at the propaganda machine that promoted the 400 years Dutch-New York connection, I would say that still not much has changed. The Dutch seem to be very proud of their historical conquests. For me as a kid growing up here, they are like adventurous stories, with costumed characters as in Hook and Peter Pan. What

disturbs me most is the interference of governments and the Royal Families in the manipulation of the historical myths. But I guess that is what happens with all nations, if you can change the cause of history into your own advantage, it simply becomes more profitable.

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MT: What's the symbolism behind the cubes and other polygons in your work? The people in the *Trader's Deal* pieces offer strings of them and the half figure in *Hail the One* is sort of crushed by one.

FdJ: The shapes are references to dices, or mathematical forms. I am interested in the element of chance. How science has been always trying to simplify natural processes, and how uncontrollable nature actually can be.

MT: You often mix colonial imagery with contemporary objects and you combine traditional sculptural techniques with industrial materials. Is there a "those who don't learn from history are destined to repeat it" sense of moralism at play here?

FdJ: In a way, yes. I believe that there are timeless natural cycles. The costumes and setting looks different every time, but the people and their behavior remains the same.



MT: What inspired Operation Harmony? In part, I'm getting a Goya's *Los Caprichos* for the 21st century vibe...

FdJ: Yes, I am fascinated about the role of Goya as an artist reflecting upon his own time. There is a timelessness in his work that reflects upon the fear, and fascination for human nature at work.

MT: I love the works on paper in this show. Often incorporating text, they have more of an unburdened sense of humor than the sculptures. How does your mindset change when making the drawings?

FdJ: Thank you. The drawings are coming more out of an uncontrolled stream of thoughts, flowing out on the paper, telling thing about my fascinations...more uncut maybe?

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MT: Do you see your sculptures as monuments of sorts?

FdJ: Not deliberately, but there is a strong reference to the powerful meaning and function of monuments in my work for sure. Maybe they're monuments for the moral subjects that are unspoken around the glory and heroic and fame of our history and time?

