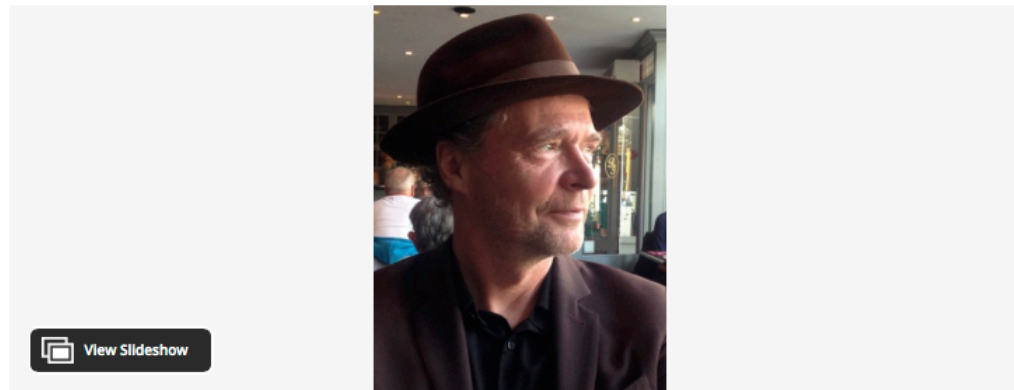


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'I am attracted to the idea of reincarnation' Q&A with Dutch Artist Hans van der Ham

BY NINA SIEGAL | JULY 09, 2018



Hans van der Ham
(Photo by Monique Talk)

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Hans van der Ham, a Dutch artist and independent curator, has put together an exhibition that explores how certain works of art, from ethnographic sculptures to contemporary photographs and even androids and robots, can seem to have a soul. The show "ANIMA MUNDI," with works by Contemporary artists such as [Desiree Dolron](#), [Berlinde de Bruyckere](#), [Melanie Bonajo](#), [Paul de Reus](#), [Inez van Lamsweerde](#), is being presented at the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam, the Netherlands from June 9 to September 23.

What drew you to exploring the emotional connection between humans and works of art — the concept behind the exhibition "ANIMA MUNDI"?

I started to think about the idea about two years ago. I'm an artist and everything I curate is related to my own work. About 15 or 20 years ago, I learned about ethnographic art — I didn't know anything about it before that — and it really opened my eyes, because I found it incredible that people would believe that a carved piece of wood could have a soul. It reminded me of something that was in myself for a very long time. We all want to see life in things. We want to see a soul in a piece of wood, and we want to see art pieces as living beings.

The Greeks also had a relationship with sculptures as if they were real beings, and in the Renaissance, there was already anatomy — there was some doubt about whether we humans have a soul, so they wanted to look inside the body to make sure we were not machines. [Leonardo da Vinci](#) was one of the first artists to work with anatomy, of course, and that movement goes from the Renaissance until now, with robotics.

Did that idea find expression in your own art?

Before that, I only made drawings. I came into contact with ethnographic sculptures and at that moment I started to make sculptures too. I started to make sculptures that seemed to have something going on inside them, sculptures that are always hiding something, so that you never know what's inside. The first sculptures I made frightened me a bit. There's more than only clay, it got to the point where I felt that may be something inside it. That was when I knew a work was finished. It's the fear and the excitement. This thing that's inside is still fascinating to me. That is the question of the exhibition, that's really related to my own work.

How did the exhibition at the Boijmans come about?

I started curating exhibitions at an art space I founded in 2012 in Rotterdam, along with a patron, called Garage Rotterdam. About two years ago I had this idea for "Anima Mundi," and I knew it could be on a museum level, so I went to Boijmans and presented it as an idea for an exhibition there, and they were enthusiastic about it.

Is your own work in the exhibition?

No, I never do that. It's too self-serving. But I think of an exhibition as a kind of artwork that I make.

How did you decide on the works for the show?

I was quite familiar with the collection of the Wereld museum, which is an ethnographic museum in Rotterdam, and I contacted them and told them about my project, and they gave me a kind of carte blanche for searching for items for the exhibition. My timing was very good. During the period of my exhibition the museum is closed for renovations, so I could really have my pick of whatever they had. The Contemporary artists in the show are mostly artists I've known for many years.

The works in the exhibit aren't only fine art, but also anatomical models and even a robot.

Yes, I wanted to have four or five robots in the show, but I couldn't get them; it was impossible. To me, it's very strange that we seem to want our robots to look human. It's not easy to make something walk on two feet like we do, but still they want to do it. One of the leading robot designers, Boston Dynamics, is making robots now to send into Mars, and they all look like the Terminator, and it's very difficult to understand why they need to do that because no one will see these robots.

I did manage to get one robot for the show, Pepper, a humanoid robot from SoftBank. He'll be at the entrance of the rooms, greeting people. He will tell a little story about himself, and he will wonder about whether he's so much different than you. He's not sure if he's a machine or something else. The problem is that he has a battery and it has to be charged so we have to be very careful about how he spends his battery.

Instead of real robots, I got a series of photographs of robots and androids by a Belgian photographer, Wanda Tuerlinckx, who makes beautiful portraits using a 19th-century camera, and the way she shoots them makes them seem like they almost have a soul, which is in a way, even nicer.

What is the organizing principle or structure of the exhibit?

There are about 60 works in the show, maybe more, across six rooms. I do it very intuitively. We have somebody who writes all the text for the museum and she suddenly saw some kind of structure in the 6 rooms. I didn't think about it, but it's there. Now I think she's right, but it was not done on purpose.

For example, there's one room where I show anatomical drawings but also alchemist books. People were busy with alchemy and they hoped someday to find something so that you could have eternal life, a kind of fountain of youth. That as the goal of alchemy, and I will put this in to this room to explore how people are still seeking eternal life.

Can you give me an example of one room and its contents?

In one room I have four works by the Dutch artist [Desiree Dolron](#); one of the "Xteriors" series of several women holding a boy who may or may not be dying; I also have a few pictures she made in Thailand, which are images of people whose faces are full of wild piercings. The same room will have works of Oceanic art from Papua New Guinea, Africa and Indonesia. And Contemporary artist [Melanie Bonajo](#)'s work "Matrix Botanica," is a modern kind of shamanistic ritualistic work. She is an artist who wants to go back to nature to cure yourself. In the same room, I also have work by Michael Nedjar, an outsider artist, and two films: one an anthropological film and one a short film about a robot.

Do you believe that artworks can have a soul?

Animistic people thought that there was a soul everywhere. I would like to believe it because I cannot believe that we are only physical. Maybe I don't want to believe it. I hope that there is something more than that. I want to try and prove it in some way. There's a very interesting book called "Eindeloos Bewustzijn", which in English means "Endless Consciousness," written by Pim van Lommel, who is a clinical cardiologist. He writes about the experiences of some of his patients who had near-death experiences. He believes that our consciousness is not in the brain, it could be located everywhere, and this I find very interesting. It is also linked to theosophical thinking. I believe that there is something that turns on your body, like a driver in a car. If the car is gone you cannot drive anymore, your existence as a driver is over.

If the driver leaves the car, the car can't run.

If you imagine that this driver is the soul, and the car is the body, and if the body is gone then there is only the soul. Or the soul moves to another car; that's what all the major Indian religions believe in, reincarnation. I'm attracted to that idea.

Are you still making sculptures?

Yes, very much. I'm working on a project now. I do one hour for Boijmans and one hour in the sculpture studio. I'm making 12 heads of people who lived in the 15th century. I used paintings from this period and I tried to look behind the canvas. I'm not interested in the artists who made the portraits, I'm interested in the person who at some point in the 15th century was posing for this artist. They'll be exhibited at Nouvelles Images Gallery in The Hague in an exhibition called "Shadow Archive."

What does it feel like to go back and forth between curating and making your own art?

To be honest, this curating thing I hate it as much as I love it. It's a hate-love relationship. I love to do it but I also hate to do it, because it takes me from my studio. But they are both part of what I do. From a tree there can be two different branches, but it's still the same tree.

Do you like being an artist more or a curator?

The combination is perfect.

"ANIMA MUNDI" will be on view through September 23 at the Museum Boijmans, Museumpark 18-20, 3015 CX Rotterdam.

More information: www.boijmans.nl

<http://www.blouinartinfo.com>

Founder: [Louise Blouin](#)