

Desiree Dolron's "Xteriors II,"  
2001-2015. C-print,  
62 5/8 x 47 1/4 in.



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# FLOCKING PATTERNS OF STARLINGS AND OTHER SILENCES: THE WORK OF DESIRÉE DOLRON

THE LEGACY OF THE DUTCH  
GOLDEN AGE SHINES THROUGH  
HER CONTEMPORARY ART

BY NINA SIEGAL



Desirée Dolron, Peshawar  
Pakistan, 1997

**T**he influence of the Dutch Old Masters is immediately apparent in the Contemporary art of the photographer and filmmaker Desirée Dolron. Her best known series of photographs, "Xteriors," features luminously pale figures in dark gowns, turning toward the viewer with a plaintive or suprarational gaze.

"Her work is very much rooted in Dutch painting, especially the small Golden Age cabinet paintings by Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch," said Wim Pijbes, former general director of the Rijksmuseum, the Dutch national museum. "The way she treats light and composition is a very Old Master way of looking at interiors, at people, at moments and at atmosphere."

Other bodies of work that make up Dolron's 25-year career — which range from documentary photography in the Philippines and Cuba to short films that meditate on how fear can be expressed through a handful of dust — may less obviously reference the Dutch Golden Age. Yet all of her work seems to capture a sense of stillness and contemplation, and to mediate between states of impermanence and transcendence.

Dolron's work has been exhibited in Europe, most recently with a 2017 large-scale retrospective at the Singer Laren Museum in the Netherlands, and is represented in the collections of several major international museums, such as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. An exhibition at the Grimm Gallery in New York, which runs through March 11, is the first solo show of her work in the United States. She will also be showing at Frieze New York in May, and at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam and Kunstcentret Silkeborg Bad in Denmark later in the year.

The New York exhibition features only one

"Xteriors IX,"  
2001-2015.  
C-Print  
66 7/8 x 49 1/4 in.



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"Xeriors V," 2001-2015  
C-Print, 68 1/8 x 49 1/4 in

work: "Complex Systems," a short, looped film that captures the migratory flocking patterns of starlings. These small birds create beautiful and striking patterns in the sky when they are under attack by predators. Dolron was fascinated by the idea that a single starling keeps track of seven others and changes the flock's direction to keep the collective intact.

"It was something I'd seen as a child in Italy, a huge murmuration, which made an incredible impression on me, and then a couple of years ago I saw it again in England and it was also mind blowing and from there on I just started to do research," she said in an interview. "Found out a lot of things — from the fact that it's a defense mechanism to how starlings are being researched for military drone technology."

Dolron filmed the starlings in England, Italy and the Netherlands, and ultimately decided that her footage looked "too much like a nature documentary," so she tossed it. Instead, she enlisted programmers to help her make a digital version of the flocking pattern. The result is both pensive and poetic — a kind of infinity loop that reflects on both the natural world and technology.

Born and raised in Haarlem, the hometown of Frans Hals (some 375 years earlier) Dolron as a young girl regularly visited the Frans Hals Museum and the Teylers Museum, a wonderkammer of art and natural history. Although these museums clearly had an influence on her aesthetic sensibilities, she took a rather circuitous route to discovering the cultural influences that make her work so steeped in Dutch history.

Dolron received her first camera as a gift when she was about 15, and focused her lens on her sisters, capturing them in moments on a nearby beach. A couple of years later, finding school profoundly uninteresting, Dolron dropped out, traveled through Europe and earned some money as a runway model and bartender. She later moved to New York, where she attended the school of visual arts at Cooper Union, and worked as a photographer's assistant.

After that, her wanderlust returned and this

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"Complex Systems," 2017.  
HD video installation, surround sound, 2 min  
35 sec in loop. Dolron's film shows a digitally  
drawn flock of starlings in motion in ever-  
changing patterns.

time she traveled farther: to India, Malaysia, Pakistan and the Philippines. Between 1991 to 1999, she created her first major photo series, "Exaltation: Images of Religion and Death," which explored ritual acts that bring about both suffering and religious ecstasy in native cultures.

Her grainy, black and white images that reference ethnographic photographs of the 19th century, are violent, frightening and very intimate: flesh pierced through with needles and spears, bloody self-flagellation and self-immolations, close-ups of crucifixion ceremonies, captured with her subjects in trancelike states. To make these pictures, she had to stay with these indigenous cultures for months at a time, so that her subjects would allow her access to these intensely private moments.

It was 10 years before she returned home

to the Netherlands. When she did, she decided to begin work on a series of composed images, that were not necessarily studio photography, but which presented a more artful, rather than documentarian, vision. That was the beginning of "Xteriors," a project which would consume her for the next 15 years.

"I had been traveling constantly through all these places, other cultures and basically I'd become quite alienated from my own environment and background," said Dolron. "So for me it was very interesting to change and learn about my own cultural heritage. I also wanted a project that kept me home."

Having recently lost someone who was close to her, she wanted to explore grief. To do so, she felt that she could learn something from her Dutch predecessors who were so adept at capturing human emotion: Vermeer,

Hals and Rembrandt.

"It became almost like studying the history of art, and getting into the painters that I admired and discovering what kind of solutions they had for working with light on an emotional level," she said.

Dolron worked for a long time to develop a color palette through photography that would have some relationship to the way that Dutch Old Masters painted light.

"The palette is not just dark, it's sinister," said Pijbes, the former Rijksmuseum director. "And this dark background might also reflect the inner world of the subjects. There's something going on and there's always a kind of suspense. On first sight, they give a totally readable image and within a second you understand, oh, it's closed. You can't go inside, you can't intrude into the gaze, into the subject's mind."



Uncertain TX, 2016 - Desiree Dolron  
One-channel video for installation + audio.  
Duration: 03:57 min (loop)



"Xterices VIII," 2001-2015  
C-print, 45 5/8 x 68 7/8 in

Jan Rudolph de Lorm, director of the Singer Laren Museum, who curated last year's retrospective of her work, also recognized the direct connection to Dutch art history: "There is a formal technical connection, so the sfumato technique in painting is being transferred into photography by her technique, and like the painters who use sfumato she takes a long, long time with each work. She's extremely precise."

Recently, Dolron has turned her attention to short videos and films. She says she stumbled into the mediums because she had an idea to photograph dust as a reminder of both the primordial and the transitory nature of life, and discovered that she also wanted to capture the movement of dust. In addition to the photographs, she tried using a video camera and zoomed in as close as she could to produce "I will show you fear in a handful of dust," an installation that reflects on the passage of time and impermanence.

Another recent short video installation, "Uncertain TX," 2016, takes a viewer through the dense East Texas bayou where secular cypress trees are strangled by a form of weed that will ultimately kill them. Dolron said she saw an image of the lake that reminded her of a Jacob van Ruisdael painting, and became fascinated by the idea that the lake's flora is simultaneously growing and dying.

Dolron is currently exploring a project that would capture monarch butterflies — symbols of transformation and migration — using virtual reality technologies, while also working on a monograph, to be published in 2020, "Forever Someone Else," that includes other previously unexhibited photographs from her 10 years of traveling.

"What struck me about Desirée is that she's someone who is completely diving into her work, she takes it very seriously both conceptually and technically," said de Lorm. "She is researching the techniques, exploring techniques and always refining it to get deeper into the subject."<sup>16</sup>

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