

**Margriet Smulders & Bouke de Vries**

by Andrea Alessi

*Deconstructions / Siren Blood*

Ronmandos (Amsterdam)

Prinsengracht 282 , 1016 HJ Amsterdam,  
Netherlands

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The Dutch still life tradition did not end after the 17th century. It continues even today as contemporary generations of artists mine the prolific genre for its symbolic imagery, enchanting style, and celebration of technique. At Galerie Ron Mandos, photographer Margriet Smulders and ceramicist Bouke de Vries revisit this tradition, spiking it with a healthy dose of modern day *vanitas*. Their lush works are just on the wrong side of ripe, capturing material opulence and the fragility of mortal pleasure.

Smulders's sanguine compositions of flowers, fruit, and colored water come from a sumptuous dreamscape she shares, perhaps, with the likes of Pipilotti Rist. Her colors are so saturated that her flowers appear to droop under the weight of their pigment, slowly weeping ink into reflective puddles. Though her baroque images are more sensuous than their Dutch predecessors, they similarly foster the notion of life's impermanence with a wilting flower here or a fallen petal there. In *Eat and Drink Me*, whose title marries bacchanal extravagance with *Alice in Wonderland* surrealism, a single fly rests on a juicy slice of pomegranate, poetically forewarning its imminent decay.



With titles referencing mythology, paradise, and indulgence, Smulders's photographs contrast the ethereal and otherworldly with hedonistic, earthly desire. A psychedelic viewing space highlights these contradictions. In the middle of a dark room hangs a cushy, flower shaped swing (or is it a bed?). Around this installation, a selection of new prints glows under a black light. While it is difficult to see their images, this controlled viewing environment suggests the intoxicated, fleeting experience Smulders aims to convey in her work.



Accompanying these photographs are Bouke de Vries's sculptural assemblages. In his work as a ceramics restorer, de Vries frequently acquires broken pieces. He refurbishes these in uncanny arrangements, delicately displayed in glass boxes and bell jars. These witty re-constructions are more tongue-in-cheek than Smulders's seductive tableaux. Some vessels seem mid-explosion, their shards held in place by clear plastic supports; others encase carefully crafted still lifes assembled within their cracked fragments. De Vries furnishes his arrangements with withered flowers, dried fruit, preserved bugs, and stuffed birds – all typical of 17th century still life. These props compliment the broken ceramics in their subtle references to life's transitory nature.

Smulders and de Vries's works fit seamlessly alongside a selection of 17th century paintings on loan from Christie's Amsterdam and Dr. A. Wieg Fine Arts. These masterworks, on sale at upcoming auctions, anchor the contemporary works in local tradition. They, in turn, benefit from their association with the 21st century art, which makes them seem as relevant as ever. It's worth stepping in from the frozen canals to warm up with this unique exhibition of decadence and destruction.

~ *Andrea Alessi*

[Images: **Bouke de Vries**, *Dead nature; Life Cycle*, 2009, Chinese Swatow dish and mixed media , diam. 580x380mm; **Margriet Smulders**, *Siren Blood*, 2009, 128 x 220 cm & 64 x 110 cm; **Bouke de Vries**, *Dead nature, Kraak dish with walnut*, 2009, 34,5 x 34,5 x 12 cm, 16th century Kraak dish and mixed media; Courtesy of the artists and Ronmandos (Amsterdam)]

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