

On the Wonder of Bodies,

an interview with Caren van Herwaarden by Helen Falconer, Ireland, May 2022

Helen Falconer talks with visual artist Caren van Herwaarden about the wonder of bodies, both humans and horses, inside and out.



The Dutch artist Caren van Herwaarden has brought her exhibition TOUCHABLE to the Ballina Arts Center this month. Her large, emotionally captivating watercolors, in which the human and horse form are central, will be on display to the public until June 25, 2022.

Van Herwaarden works with different techniques, but has a special fondness for watercolors because its transparency allows you to "see through the skin, into the interior of the being, people's motivations, fears, hope - that's what really interests me, not just a well-drawn image of a human body.

Caren's work is anatomically precise, as only the most experienced artists can. "You have to be precise, otherwise the viewer gets distracted, they focus on the mistakes and don't move in what is depicted," she explains. "And precisely that identification, the empathy is the hook that pulls the viewer closer, into the painting"

Her work experienced a growth spurt after the art academy when she studied and drew the anatomical preparations in the collection of the University of Leiden for a number of years. For

anatomical studies people used to rely mainly on the cadavers of executed criminals. Cutting open and examining people was taboo, but an exception was made for criminals. The more recent the anatomical specimens in the anatomical collection, the more sound and respectable the deceased were.

It was a wonderful world to spend time in, says Van Herwaarden. "In addition to the beauty and functionality of the anatomy, that collection gave me an idea of how people through the ages viewed life, illness and death. For example, the collections include a small, mummified, stillborn baby that the family kept on the mantelpiece for generations as a fertility symbol. Ironical, because two centuries earlier, women could be sentenced to death for having a stillborn child, on the grounds that stillbirths were caused by adulterous thoughts."

Caren's fascination with both the inside and the outside of the human figure began at an early age. The moment she fell as a six-year-old and her knee was wide open. She realized that her leg was not just "my leg", but "a leg":

"...I remember the red blood pearls that came first, then a good amount of flood, then the white of the bone. I was so shocked that this inside, this matter was me too. That later became my subject: That we both consist from mere matter as of consciousness and personality."

From that moment on, her fascination grew. "When an animal died, I studied it meticulously with a mixture of horror and fascination. I couldn't believe it would go from a living being to a thing that no longer worked. Just matter."

Because she was raised a Catholic, many statues of the crucified Jesus hung in her family's home. "A half-naked, tortured dead man hung over the doorway of the living room in our home, that was normal, I grew up with that. No image for the delicate child's soul, you might say. But the use of the vulnerable, transient body in Catholic art says so much about humanity and dreams, betrayal, unconditional love, hatred, pain, cruelty, unconditional love and loss. All things you have to learn to deal with when you grow up. Indispensable subjects that also Shakespeare and Homer also used for their timeless stories."

After her studies, this life theme continued in the Leiden collection. "I spent my time looking at the body we live in, our home we live in, love, sleep, suffer and fight." To give more focus to the work in the anatomical collection, Van Herwaarden asked himself the question: if there is a soul, where would it be hiding. While Van Herwaarden is not a soul-body dualist: our body is controlled by our consciousness as well as by our nature.

After focusing exclusively on humans in her art for a long time, she began to add horses to her subject. "At first it felt like a taboo to introduce them into my work, especially since I'm a woman. People would ask, 'Oh, are you such a horse girl?' A reference to countless teenage girls: first they practice on a horse, then on a man. That was not such a crazy order, by the way," laughs Van Herwaarden.

But she overcame her internalized prejudices and concluded: "It's not about the subject, but the way you look at it that makes it interesting. I view people and horses the same way: we are animals. We like to eat and lounge. We need companionship and we fear pain. We are vulnerable, easily frightened, but also strong and resilient with a fervent desire to survive."

A few years ago, Caren was artist-in-residence at the Ballinglen Art Foundation in Ballycastle, North Mayo, which offers visual artists time, shelter and a studio to explore their own work. "I usually use models, but there were no available nude models around, just a lot of horses. So then I started

drawing horses. I love horses, their look and smell, how they live in the moment. I always think of a piece from Wallace Steven's poem 'Song of Myself':

**"...I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain'd,
I stand and look at them long and long...."**

I paint the horses with the same attention to strength, beauty and vulnerability as I paint my human figures, and they expand the possibilities of my work. Because naked people who climb on each other are quickly experienced by the public as pornographic, but with horses in the leading role, it stands for Passion and Nature."

The exhibition is called TOUCHABLE because Caren imagines her subjects as she paints. "Isn't it fantastic that on a flat surface it is possible to suggest not only movement, but also intention. I achieve that by imagining what it would be like to touch the subject, to caress their skin - on the belly, the back, the cheek, the top of the head. Every surface is different. When I focus on that imaginary touch, the surface comes alive to me."

Caren is concerned about the loss of physical contact as a result of increasing digitization. This has been accelerated by Corona. "Communication was only spiritual, digital, with physical distance. Meeting each other, holding each other for a while, cuddling - all these activities that are so essential for being human suddenly became dangerous. With her work Van Herwaarden wants to give power back to the body. The body contains so much experience and wisdom, don't underestimate it." Hence, Caren's latest art book will be called "Touch", in the same compelling way as the previous "Stay".

TOUCHABLE, an exhibition of paintings by Caren van Herwaarden curated by Arno Kramer, is currently on display at Ballina Arts Center and will run until June 25. Entrance is free.