THE STORY ABOUT THE SHELL SERIES.

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Script video and podcast

1. The story about shells and the weak sea-animals

In the 24th century the earth was desolate. The water had vaporized and the huge craters where the basins were at one time seas and oceans had hidden their sea vegetables, fishes, and sea creatures. The sun had become almighty, the earth had warmed up too much to be able to keep the water fluid. Mists raised until all water was gone and only the shells were lying at the bottom of the crates.

The sea creatures who used to live under the sand, could not bear the weight of all the shells and of the dead sea creatures. Skeletons of big fishes laid on top, blowing in the wind. The sun had vanished all colors from the shells, and they were only returning to chalk.

The smell of rotten fish had been unbearable. But all human beings and land creatures had died because of the extreme heat.

Once upon a time the planet earth had looked totally different. The sea vegetables, corals, fish, and sea creatures, used to live in the salt- and sweet waters. Some of them ate other fish and sometimes they drilled a hole in a shell and suck the weak creature living inside.

The seagulls and other fish-eating birds had let fallen the last shells on the rocks. They could not eat the helpless weak sea animal anymore. One day, it was their turn to disappear due to the evolution mankind created. The sun burned the feathers of all birds and the last living species on earth were dead too.

2. Childhood
Shells have a ground in childhood. To be on the beach and see and find all the treasures is a feeling that does not leave us as adults. Who does not have (memories of) shells? Who does not have (had) shells?

When I was a child, we went on vacation to the Dutch Southwest coast. There were big piers with huge basalt blocks. In between these blocks were little square openings and the sea made little lakes of them. I loved to sit on my feet with bended knees to look for the treasures the water was hiding. And I found little shells that I took to our vacation home. Being there with my treasures the deception began: when the shells dried the colors were almost gone! In the Netherlands not many shaped and decorated shells are found on the beach. So, color was my main reason to collect them I suppose.
I found a way to make these shells more beautiful and glued little glass beads on them. I always had a lot of patience to do this kind of work. It took forever. Maybe I am trying to retrieve lost innocence and a feeling of my nostalgia for my early years!

The first shell piece I made as an adult, many years later, was in 2007. How come is untraceable but I had been working with the content to fuse the manmade with nature. In 2000 I had a show in the new Museum of Natural History, Naturalis (to show and prove the immeasurable inspiration of nature on artists), in Leiden and the first pieces with this content were on display there. I used baroque pieces of furniture and animal type additions.

One of my wishes is at one point to use the shell as an on its own standing medium in a complete room and cover all walls and maybe the ceiling. But maybe it is wise to first make a 'cabinet of wonders' on a smaller scale! Although all my shell pieces are 'cabinets of wonders' or 'kunst und Wunderkammer' on its own!

3. House of animal:
At Cranbrook Art Academy (MI) I studied architecture as a minor for two years (in the second year Daniel Libeskind was one of my teachers). I studied spaces we erect around us to protect ourselves, seizes, scale, light etc. (this research resulted in commissions for public buildings when I went back to the Netherlands after graduation). We need air so we have a lot of space around our physical bodies and windows and doors to be opened and closed. But the

creatures that live in these shells are one with their house in the water. They increase it when they grow and need more space. Or they have one opening to go out and in from, or there is a muscle which can open their house.

The work is very much about the vulnerability of the soft animals protected by hard shells they make themselves to protect themselves. The houses of the sea animals are also a metaphor for us and the protection our house gives to our vulnerability and doing so us as human beings. Protected by it yet there are always many dangers: water, wind, fire, earthquakes, wars, and people who can steal or betray you.

The manmade structures around my shell pieces protect these ultimate breakable shapes and forms. The shells are bound together as a huge shield against danger. They will never be alone anymore!

4. The making of the work.

The first shell piece I made as an adult, many years later was in 2007. How come is untraceable but I had been working with the content to fuse the manmade with nature. In 2000 I had a show in the new Museum of Natural History, Naturalis in Leiden, to show and prove the immeasurable inspiration of nature on artists. My first pieces from this content were on display there. For the first time I used baroque pieces of furniture and animal type additions.

My shell series do have their origin in the manmade. The frames are made of beautifully carved pieces of wood; the carved shells are having an only decorative function next to leaves, grapes and other decorative elements. The furniture comes from 'Kitsch' pieces of furniture: couches and chairs. In the smaller pieces the total frames decorated with baroque elements, are used. For example: mirror frames, picture frames and photo frames.

I took the couches and chairs apart and assembled them in new ways. Sandblasting has stripped off all paint. At that point I am totally black about the content and color of the piece.

The first idea how to start the piece will be shells. They must be able to make a connection to the frame regarding seize, shape and color. I start arranging them in total concentration. I continue to build the piece until I am satisfied about the complexity, total composition and seize, color and so on. In the last phase I paint the frame and or glue gold-leaf on it to give it a beautiful luster.

5. Beauty.
Nature is unbelievably impressive. Every shell is a piece of sculpture on its own. Looking at all the piles of shells I possess I am wondering all the time about the infinite variety of shapes, colors, and sizes and about their history. The thought that a small weak animal made these houses is a true miracle to me.
The resulting wall hanging objects after choosing the shells is amazing looking at the variety and complexity of forms and nuances of colors in the shells. My compositions are as organic as is the material itself.

Beauty in art is very questionable if one uses it as a starting point. I strongly believe in this quality. I want to make the world more beautiful. This is a metaphor for all the suffering and cruelty. The complexity of the totals overcomes the 'being only beautiful'. Beauty is not just there: it is created with a lot of effort. The works invite the viewer to connect to what is seen. It takes time to become one with what invites you to look at. The effect is hopefully that the viewer thinks about what is there, what is the invitation? Where is this work about? What is in aesthetics? What is the place of crafts in art? The lives of the death in beauty: are aesthetics allowed? The science of aesthetics tries to discover under what conditions one calls a work of art, or something in nature beautiful.

We always wanted to create beauty. We started 30 – 40.000 years ago to treat, craft and use shells. Cut and treated shells are discovered in different early cultures in the USA, Africa, and Europe. They are also found in ceramic art of many early American cultures, like the Aztecs and inhabitants of the early Peru. Beauty is beautiful on its own. Forms of nature have their own beauty and don't need much outside itself. True beauty does not need anything from outside.

Almost nobody stays untouched by looking at the beauty of shells. The enchantment touches deeply.

I like to quote a text by Willem Beekman who inspires me a lot:
Concepts such as wholeness, meaningful connection, beauty, you don't have to come up with those in biological science. But for me, the search for meaningful connections and beauty is the starting point. Life is bare and cold if we are no longer allowed to talk about beauty. Ultimately, you must find within yourself:

what am I inspired by? For me, the core is to continue to marvel and let your heart be touched by what you see and experience.

And a quote from Frank Lloyd Wright:
Here in these shells, we see the housing of the life of the sea. It is a housing with exactly what we lack – inspired form. In this collection of houses of thousands of small beings, who themselves built these houses, we see a quality which we call invention. The beauty of their variations is never finished. It is not a question of principle of design. This multitudinous expression indicates what design can mean. Certainly, Divinity is here in these shells in their humble form of life.

6. Decorative aspects.
Archaeologists, working in southeastern Spain, recently reported that they have found signs that Neanderthals were using seashells in a decorative and symbolic way. So, it seems that employing seashells in art is not an original idea. But as an artist, I bring things up to date and by doing so I bring the mysteries of the seas bottom up to the surface.

I do come from a long European history regarding **decoration**. Baroque and Rococo elements upon and in buildings and living in the center of Amsterdam confronts me daily with this unique heritage. In my parents' home a lot of paintings, sculptures and objects were hanging and standing. Not my taste and I did not like it, yet the unconscious influence had a bigger impact than I ever could imagine.

First, we ornamented ourselves with shells. These days I decorate spaces with sculptures made with shells. By their bizarre shape, incredible colors, and beautiful drawings on them shells are one of the most attractive creatures of nature. Not only are they beautiful; to hold them and look at them and feel the 'holding' aspect of one of them is a very special feeling.

In nature all the aspects we consider as decorative have a function. We can look at it as decoration, but pure function is what it is about. We use natural shapes as decoration and make it into a use for our homes and environment. For example, on the wooden frames I make you can see many beautiful leaves, shells, grapes, and other decorative elements. So, nature is brought back on the wood, which is nature itself, and we are enjoying this (recycling) thought by buying these items.

In nature all decoration is pure functional as stated before. Is ornamentation still allowed in sculpture? What is the meaning? What does it mean in my work? Can I work from the ornamentation to create a new content? Do I have to work more directly from nature and see which sculptural language will develop from there?

From: The sense of order. E.H.Gombrich: There is no tribe or culture that lacks a tradition of ornamentation. Only the 20th century has witnessed the final elevation of pattern making into the autonomous activity of 'abstract art'.

From: The Mediation of Ornament: Decoration: anything applied to a structure or an object that is not necessary to the stability, use, or understanding of that structure or object.

Carole Denninger about one of my shell works in an exhibition in Hilversum:
I got the association with a Wunderkammer when I saw a huge, decorated object. Built in a monumental architectural frame in which very big and a bit smaller shells are mounted. A 'folly' the English would mention an object like this in a big landscape garden. Beautiful to hang in a large entree or lounge, and especially an eyecatcher people will talk about.

7. Shell shapes and patterns.
From: **What shape is a Snowflake? A book by Weidenfeld & Nicholson.**
The growth is only at the border of the shell. When a pattern is formed it does not change anymore. In every phase of the process a new layer of shell is added to the existing one. This means that the pattern is a graphic in time and space of the chemical dynamics of the pigments that are resided.
The shell grows because the inhabitant resides minerals that are deleted from its outer 'coat'.
The patterns are varied but can be divided into some basic types. For example: stripes, dots, waving stripes and semi-rhythmical patterns with triangles and zigzag lines.
With simple mathematical recipes we can construct shells in three dimensions. Nature must play similar games!

8. Shells and art.

Shells have been used in painting a lot. I live around the corner of Museum Rembrandt's house in Amsterdam. And they reconstructed part of his studio where he kept his 'curiosa'. In the seventeenth century we could travel over the seas and bring treasures back we had never seen before. On the shelves of Rembrandt's studio 'treasures' are a lot of shells. Also, there are numerous paintings by many different artists on which shells can be found. Often, they are part of a still life. Each of my works is a still life on its own. It is a microcosm of what is found on the bottom of the sea or on the beach. The frame embeds the curiosities nature composed.

Shells served as a source of inspiration for art, literature, and architecture (Guggenheim?) and are even used as objects of value, to indicate status (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam has a few of these objects), and as money. We built an unbreakable band with seashells that influenced many aspects of our culture. Museums are having huge collections and we encounter shells in art, architecture, religion and as food. We wear them, collect them, traded with them, and use them as decoration upon our bodies and in our houses.

The symbolic meanings of shells in Greek mythology are an attribute of Venus. Wagon of the god Neptunus, sea-nimph Galaea and sometimes of Fortuna. In Christianity: attribute of the Virgin Mary. Attribute of the pilgrims. Sometimes shells are in the hands of Joan the Baptist when he is baptizing Christ. Also used in Catholic churches to carry the water when you enter the church, to make a cross with.

From the book Shells by Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville. A Taschen book.
Shells have always been considered 'artifices of nature' and therefore a tangible reflection of the wonder and perfection of Creation. George Perry, in his introduction to the *Natural History of Shells,* reflected on how these objects with their astoundingly complex architecture based on a logarithmic spiral; invite the viewer to contemplate divine excellence. In Christian tradition, the shell that produces a pearl without the need for male insemination became a symbol of the virginity of the Madonna.

9. History, nature, and use of shells.
The homo erectus in Trinil on the island Java in Indonesia used shells already half a million years ago as a material for tools to engrave on them. These are considered as the oldest engravements we ever found. A team of 21

researchers researched hundreds of fossil shells. These shells belong to the Dubois collection, which is managed by Naturalis Biodiversity Center in Leiden, The Netherlands. In the end of the 19th century these shells had been excavated by the Dutch doctor Eugène Dubois, the discoverer of the Pithecanthropus erectus, nowadays known as Homo erectus.
We thought the Homo sapiens, the modern men in Africa, did this a 100.000 years ago says José Joordens, linked to the Faculty Archeology of the university in Leiden. But that is not true.

In every shell the whole evolution is contained. All life derived from the sea. There were not only sea animals but also plants and corals.
And we use nature in many ways. In the museum of the American Indian in New York I saw a spoon made of shells. They were also used to drink from, weight for fishing nets, means of communication to give signals through like a trumpet, water carriers and so on.

10. Survival.
The Shell Series Pieces are about life itself. To live and to survive. Eat and be eaten. The fragile soft mollusk makes its own strong house from chalk to resist all dangers and water streams. They are the architects in the sea. And when they die their houses stay forever on the bottom of the sea or elsewhere. Corals can grow on them; other sea animals can confiscate it as their home.

The animal has a lot of enemies. I do have a bunch of shells with a perfectly drilled hole in it: the drilling animal outside sucks the soft creature through the shell to feed himself. So being a creature living in the sea is very much a matter of survival and flight.

The sea animal must survive, protect itself and needs to migrate to produce offspring's and find food.

The work is crafted a lot. Crafts have always helped in our survival as mankind. We would not have survived as species without them. All shells are crafted in a genius manner.
It is the creative force that guides the beauty as the way of survival does too.

11. The Shell Series are an homage to the weak sea animal which makes these incredible houses. Jeroen Goud, curator of Mollusca in Naturalis Leiden, states: 'We do not know how in detail. You think you know something, but you will always keep questions. It is a complicated story. All mollusks reproduce themselves with the aid of eggs. Snails and calamari usually put them on a substrate, for example rocks or corals, and usually in egg capsules but bivalve mollusks, like mussels or oysters, give them to the stream of the seawater and the fertilization will happen in the seawater.

Life originated in the sea. Organisms transformed. The work deals with protection and vulnerability, life and let live or be eaten. I put them in a context so we can dream about their beauty and feed our longing for a more beautiful planet in many ways. They are still lives on their own. Human beings contemplating about life in a mirror of symbolic fertility. It's a micro cosmos from what is found on the bottom of the sea or on the beach. The baroque frame binds the wonderful compositions of the nature.

We are one with nature as we are nature. To be nature means to respect nature's increasing and decreasing forces and rhythm in all ways. To agree we are nature means to observe how nature's patterns develop and grow. The transformation process of parts which change constantly and in an ongoing flow. This means we respect the universe, the eternal creating force.

I have always been interested in processes of development in the everchanging world of which we are part of.

The shell pieces create a remembrance of the late Renaissance grottos or Rococo decorations. They are playful and associative. I am researching the thin line between art and decoration.
One of my wishes is at one point to use the shell as an on its own standing medium in a complete room and cover all walls and maybe the ceiling. But maybe it is wise to first make a 'cabinet of wonders' on a smaller scale!

Although all my shell pieces are ‘cabinets of wonders’ or ‘kunst und Wunderkammer’ on its own!

From: Wonders and the order of Nature. Lorraine Daston. Katharine Park: ’Grottoes and Wunderkammern were prime sites for artificial nature: Palissy planned a grotto encrusted with casts of shells and reptiles for the Tuileries. Descartes’ physiology may have been inspired by the automata in the Grotto of Perseus at Saint-Germain-en Laye. The technique of casting snakes, frogs, lizards, and shells in bronze spread from Padua to Nuremberg to Paris in the early sixteenth century. Palissy used casts in ceramic and enamel, shells, and animals, to decorate gardens and ornamental platters’.

Madelon Broekhuis, art historian, wrote about my shell pieces:
Claire Begheyn’s favorite artistic medium at this moment are shells which she ‘re-contextualizes’ into complex compositions and in natural contrast to or in dialogue with manmade objects. Generally, these are parts of furniture like the leg of a table/chair or part of a gilt mirror in rococo style. The range of the pieces of furniture she uses is between antique and kitschy imitation.
The wall objects thus created evoke a reminiscence of late Renaissance grottoes or Rococo decorations. Her work is playful, elegant, and associative. It explores the fine line between art and decoration and between high art and popular culture.

12. The end
We forgot our future and must start all over to re-establish our contact with nature and start to give back what our planet gives to us.
Remembrance of what has been and does not come back transformed into shell still-lives about nature. Restore nature in ourselves we do not know anymore. Archetypic memories which are there and not recognized.
Nostalgia and richness from the past teach us how to remind our future. We will have to become the remembering and be it. Otherwise, we are no future. The sea no sea. The sea animals no sea animals, the land no land, land animals no land-animals. And we: What and how will we be. The striving is for harmony with nature and in ourselves.

When we turn to our insides again, we will grow, transform and so will the earth. We will become auto-nomos again and the earth too.

With special thanks to:

- Jeroen Goud. Curator of Mollusca. Museum Naturalis Leiden
- Museum Naturalis Leiden
- The former Zoological Institute Amsterdam
- Willem Beekman. Text from: Openbaar Geheim. Christofoor 2020. ISBN 9789060389232
- Original text in Dutch:
  'Begrippen als heelheid, zinvol verband, schoonheid, daar hoef je in de biologische wetenschap niet mee aan te komen. Maar voor mij is het zoeken naar die zinvolle verbanden en de schoonheid juist het uitgangspunt. Het leven is kaal en kil als we het niet meer over de schoonheid mogen hebben. Uiteindelijk moet je in jezelf vinden: waar word ik door geïnspireerd? Voor mij is de kern je blijven verwonderen en je in je hart laten raken door wat je ziet en ervaart'.
  willembeekman@hotmail.com 15 april 23 benaderd
  De video ontvang ik graag! Zet mij maar op de mailinglijst.
  Dat is inderdaad een mooi en kernachtig stukje. Je mag het graag gebruiken. Mocht je ook de bron willen weten, dan is het uit Openbaar geheim (Christofoor, 2020). Mijn naam mag er ook bij.
  De Engelse vertaling klinkt voor mij goed, ook al kan ik het grammaticaal niet echt beoordelen.
  Fijn dat je dit in je werk wilt vermelden!
  Succes verder!
- Madelon Broekhuis. Art Historian