



## Natasja Kensmil – laureate Johannes Vermeer Award 2021

### Jury report

The Johannes Vermeer Award, the Dutch state prize for the arts, has been awarded to an artist living in the Netherlands since 2009. With the award, the Dutch government wants to draw attention to and honour special talent. The laureates of this award demonstrate exceptional artistry. The prize can be awarded to artists from any discipline: from dance to design, from fashion to music, and from painting to writing.

In making her decision, the Minister of Education, Culture and Science is advised by a jury that varies in composition. The judges are all experts within their fields and also look beyond the boundaries of their disciplines. They are very familiar with and actively explore the artistic climate in the Netherlands. This year, the jury consisted of Andrée van Es (chair), Pierre Audi, Romana Vrede, Hicham Khalidi and Sjeng Scheijen.

This year, the challenges of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis emphasised the importance of this state prize. The jury was very aware of the impact of the pandemic on individual artists. It expresses its admiration for all those who reflected on events in solitude, without interaction with the audience and the field. It requires strength and the ability and discipline to work completely autonomously. The jury is of the opinion that this year's laureate has all these qualities.

The jury is looking for an individual artist living and/or working in the Netherlands who has built up a leading and consistent body of work. This artist has to have a proven relevance to the field and to the artistic climate in the Netherlands and beyond. In addition, the jury is looking for an artist who is artistically versatile. Their body of work should make audiences and viewers curious about how it can and will grow and develop further.

The jury is eager to see how the work of the selected laureate will develop in the coming years. The jury has chosen a painter who knows how to use a classical medium with great skill, and who – at the same time – is able to make the connection with the current zeitgeist with her paintings in a poignant way. With its choice, the jury emphasises the important position of painting in Dutch history. The jury also praises the exceptional way in which she comments on our cultural heritage and makes the connection to current events.

Unanimously, the jury has selected Natasja Kensmil as the winner of the Johannes Vermeer Award 2021.



Natasja Kensmil is a fantastic artist with a wonderful body of work and matching success. She stands out in her modesty; is resolute and relevant, and works with deep concentration and focus. Her paintings show that our canonised history is a flawed history, in which certain perspectives are underexposed. Her work inevitably triggers valuable discussions about the role of heritage in our time, also among the jury members. With its many nuances, layers, and details, Kensmil's work confronts us with the dark sides of the past and brings to light how this past affects the present. She does this with virtuosity and apparent ease, in a way that is healing, constructive and critical at the same time. Natasja Kensmil's career had a glorious start. She was born in Amsterdam in 1973 and graduated from the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in 1996. In 1998, while she was doing her post-academic studies at De Ateliers, she won the Royal Grant for Free Painting (now known as the Royal Award). This was followed by exhibitions both in the Netherlands and abroad and various other awards. She had solo exhibitions in Amsterdam, Dublin and Cape Town, among others, and participated in several international group exhibitions, including the exhibition No Man's Land: Women Artists from the Rubell Family Collection at the National Museum of Women in The Arts in Washington, in 2016.

One of the paintings with which Natasja Kensmil won the Royal Grant for Free Painting in 1998 already demonstrates her interest in heritage and history. Moreover, this painting shows that she does not want to make things easy for the viewer: her work confronts, attracts and repels. The heads of six black women, seemingly decapitated, lie on display on a lilac tablecloth with a dowdy pattern. Of their faces, only the gaping mouths are visible. The white circles around their heads are reminiscent of ruffs worn in the seventeenth century, as captured in the paintings of militia companies by Frans Hals and Johannes Verspronck. Or are they lace paper cake doilies? The painting is called *Schwarzkopf* (1998). This brings to mind the word "moorkop", until recently used as the name of a cream puff filled with whipped cream, glazed with a layer of chocolate. It is also the name of a German shampoo brand, and of the German soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. The painting is full of references: from Frans Hals to John the Baptist, from lynchings in the US to the names of pastries and cosmetics.

History is the domain of Natasja Kensmil. Her studio – which she herself calls a cell – is where she retreats with that history. The walls and floor of her studio are littered with hundreds of historical images: reproductions of paintings, postcards, illustrations from historical documents. Sovereigns and priests, martyrs and philosophers, saints and villains look at you from those images. History is solidified in images, in faces and in gestures. While painting, Kensmil explores those images. She rearranges them, pulls them apart and makes new connections. The painting is slow, it is a constant switching between thinking and feeling, looking and exploring.

Already early on, her work revealed a fascination with the darker sides of history. Themes such as power and violence, death and human error keep coming back in her paintings.



She critically scrutinises the power of monarchs and of religious leaders, for instance in the painting *Empress Alexandra Fjodorovna* from 2008. The last tsarina of Russia is at the centre of this vertical composition. She wears a dress with a tight, richly decorated bodice. Her long neck is hung with jewels and from under her crown, a gossamer veil is draped over her perfectly coiffed hair. So far, nothing new. But then you see it: behind her is a looming mountain of skulls and skeletons. Is it a foreshadowing of the gruesome execution that awaits her and her family? Or a reference to the blood that has been shed in the name of the tsars? Both at the same time probably; ambiguity reigns supreme in these paintings.

This unparalleled ambiguity is first of all in the paint itself. Kensmil builds up her paintings layer upon layer. In her early work, she applied thick layers of paint on top of each other, until the canvas is saturated with matter and pigment. These thick layers create texture and relief, reminiscent of worn and weathered skin. The layers of time are stored in the paint.

In recent work, those thick layers have given way to transparency. Several layers of thinner paint, almost pencil-drawn images intermingle and overlap. Some are legible, others have been blurred or erased. The background of her canvases is often dark in colour. Bodies, faces, ornaments or coats of arms emerge from that darkness in lighter tones, almost like ghostly apparitions.

You can't talk about Natasja Kensmil's paintings without mentioning her extraordinary colour palette. At first glance, Kensmil's paintings appear to be in black and white, composed of various shades of grey. But appearances are deceiving. A closer look reveals that what appears to be black, is actually made up of countless colours: from dark brown to deep purple, from emerald green to midnight blue. The lighter shades are not white or grey, but consist of ochre, grey, light pink and light green. The lightest and darkest shades stand out first. Only when you look at the work long and intently, does the paint reveal its wealth of colours and nuances.

This distinctive palette gives her portraits a macabre and mysterious appearance, as if the figures depicted are suspended somewhere between life and death.

The tension between beauty and horror, between life and death, also plays an important role in the series *Sleeping Beauty* (2010). For these paintings, Kensmil was inspired by the post-mortem photographs from the Victorian era: photographs of deceased children, captured in their cots or cribs as if they are sleeping peacefully. "While painting, I began to believe that the soul lives on through these death portraits," she says. "The souls of the children are wandering, they seek to escape their lives that were cut short too soon, and to escape the loneliness."

The idea that souls wander and inanimate objects also have a soul is not unfamiliar for Kensmil. In Suriname, where her parents are from, many people believe in nature and objects having a soul. Something of that inspired and higher power can also be seen in her paintings.



In her recent work, Dutch heritage is given a prominent role. In the imaginary wedding portrait she made of seventeenth-century politician Johan de Witt and his new wife Wendela Bicker (2020), for example. As in the portrait of the tsarina, you can see the splendour of their richly decorated attire. However, the colour palette which seems monochromatic at first glance, makes you see something other than wealth. The eyes of the newly-weds are hollow and their corpse-bleached skin has a greenish-blue sheen. The lines in her face and her outlines are blurred. It is like looking at a macabre X-ray that not only shows the skulls of those portrayed shining through their skin, but also reveals something of their turbulent inner selves.

An artistic highlight is the installation Monument of Regents (2019), which she created for the Amsterdam Wing, an annex of the Amsterdam Museum at the Hermitage. These paintings turn the image we have of the seventeenth century on its head. They question power and suggest hidden connections: between the wealth of the regents and their activities in the colonies, and between that wealth and the charitable work of their wives.

In these paintings, too, the paint tells a story. It crumbles and drips. The faces of the regents seem to melt and dissolve on the canvas. The power that is so solidly and realistically rendered in seventeenth-century regent portraits and militia pieces, in the gossamer pleats of the ruffs or the details on a family coat of arms, falls apart before your very eyes.

What seemed solidified in our historical canon becomes liquid again under Kensmil's brush. She makes us question the image as we know it. For example, who were these regents? What did they, as daughters or wives of the leaders of the Dutch East or West India Company, know about slavery and other abuses in the colonies? But also: What was going on inside their heads? What were their fears and their dreams? What kept them awake at night?

These are questions that Natasja Kensmil is asking with her work. She reflects on the prevailing canon and brings new layers of history to the fore. In doing so, her work never polarises; it shows complexity and connects. Kensmil does not deface, she does not remove, she does not ignore, but rather, she distorts what we see. Alongside the prevailing image, she places a new and layered image. It shows vision and exceptional talent to reflect on our shared heritage in such a way, completely autonomously and with such a beautiful distinctive hand that does not leave anyone unmoved.

With admiration for what she has achieved so far and convinced that her work will continue to move, inspire and unsettle in the future, the jury nominates Natasja Kensmil as laureate of the Johannes Vermeer Award 2021.