

Art City: Rineke Dijkstra's subjects elicit empathy

Rafael Francisco Salas, Special to the Journal Sentinel September 30, 2016



An image from Rineke Dijkstra's video installation "Marianna (The Fairy Doll)" (2014). (Photo: Rineke Dijkstra and Marian Goodman Gallery)

The portraits of Rineke Dijkstra display equal measures of vulnerability, confidence and a painterly sense of color. At the threshold of inward and outward reflection, Dijkstra's subjects in her photographic and video works elicit a surprising empathy. We know these characters, or want to. They are complex, displaying shifting emotions and attitudes often in the same image.

The Milwaukee Art Museum has curated an ensemble of works that connect Dijkstra's artwork with master photographs in the museum's collection. "Rineke Dijkstra: Rehearsals" and "The Lives of Others: Portraits from the Photography Collection" are exhibits organized by MAM's curator of photography Lisa Sutcliffe. Together they offer gutsy examples of Dijkstra's talent supported by works that inspired her and of contemporaries who share her vision.

A six-year-old girl, Almerisa, was a Muslim refugee from war-torn Bosnia who Dijkstra encountered at an asylum center in the Netherlands. Eleven photographs, recently acquired by the museum, document Almerisa as she grows into adulthood. This group of photos connects the two exhibits.

Almerisa, at the asylum center, wears too-small shoes and a red bow. Her feet dangle above the ground from a red plastic chair. She looks out at Dijkstra's camera, detached and somewhat anxious.

Dijkstra returned to photograph Almerisa every two years. With minimal background settings, and always seated, we see Almerisa grow and expand into various adolescent selves – sulky, cagy, arrestingly beautiful – and ultimately into adulthood. The last portrait shows Almerisa with her own child, holding it confidently and calmly. Her long hands bear a striking similarity through all of the photos. The series is a close study of an individual. However, Dijkstra's sensitive portrayals of a girl growing up as an immigrant in a new country become a story of universal and timely consequence.

"Rehearsals" consists of two video installations documenting young girls in Russia as they train for performances. In each, Rineke Dijkstra focuses on process and preparation rather than product.

"Marianna (The Fairy Doll)" shows a small, blonde-haired girl as she rehearses a ballet for an audition at the prestigious Vaganova Ballet Academy. We see her as she walks into a pink dance studio wearing pink tights and a pink skirt. The setting appears to be a young girl's dream, awash in the colors and textures of a Disney princess. But as we watch Marianna rehearse, she is tersely corrected off camera by her coach. She grows tired, her stage smile tested by frustration. At times she appears near tears as she repeats passages of the dance again and again, canned music abruptly stopping and starting.

At the end of the dance Marianna bows and drops a lace handkerchief. She exhales and dips her head, holding her arms at her sides. The innocence of childhood seems undermined by this adult pose. Like all of Dijkstra's subjects, Marianna communicates with elusive gestures many things at once, fragility, joy, courage and focus. She is simultaneously a child and an experienced professional.

"The Gymschool, St. Petersburg," is a three-channel video of girls practicing rhythmic gymnastics at the Zhemchuzhina Olympic School. While in "The Fairy Doll" music accompanies the rehearsal, here there is severe silence broken only by the gymnasts' labored breath and the abrupt sounds of their bodies hitting the floor. The background consists of a white wall and beige floor. The girls are shown twisting in impossible contortions, at times seeming to actually crawl through themselves, transforming into something nearly inhuman.

I was reminded of the bodily distortions in the triptych paintings of Francis Bacon, which Dijkstra echoes in her compositions. Like Bacon's paintings, they also recall religious iconography. The figures take on a monumentality that is both heroic and poignant. A memorable moment for me was watching a girl pause to rest in the central video. She lays face down on her stomach, arms and legs spread into an "X", in complete repose. She is unaware of the camera, her grateful body perfectly still.

The works of Rineke Dijkstra are fleshed out further in the corresponding exhibit. August Sander's iconic photo of three young farmers, dressed up to walk to a dance, shares Dijkstra's eye for the complex emotion and a quest for objectivity. Sally Mann's languid nude portrayals of her children contain the psychological transitions of their awakening selves. These photos, along with other major works from the museum's collection, add a parallel voice to the statements on the human condition that Rineke Dijkstra offers us.

"Rineke Dijkstra: Rehearsals" and "The Lives of Others: Portraits from the Photography Collection" are on view through Jan. 1 at the Milwaukee Art Museum. For information visit mam.org.

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