

Saskia Olde Wolbers

The Falling Eye

23.06.06 - 24.09.06

'Elmore Vella was suffering from what in the profession was called the "falling eye"... In her presence sets would fold in, camera men tripped on wires... and whole rows of can-can dancers would keel off the stage like domino pieces.'
(Trailer, 2005)

'The Falling Eye' is the first solo exhibition by Saskia Olde Wolbers (born in Breda in 1971) at the Stedelijk Museum CS. Olde Wolbers' video works are full of fantastic stories and illusory images. Central to the exhibition is her latest video film *Trailer* (2005). The title of the exhibition, 'The Falling Eye', comes from this film and refers to a fictional medical condition that afflicts one of the characters in the video. In a broader sense, 'The Falling Eye' refers to the way that the figures in Olde Wolbers' films experience their lives as an inextricable tangle of appearance and reality. The Stedelijk Museum is showing *Trailer* together with three earlier videos: *Kilowatt Dynasty* (2000), *Placebo* (2002) and *Interloper* (2003).

Olde Wolbers skilfully constructs her video works from a combination of word and image. The hypnotic voice of the narrator acquaints the viewer with the complicated personalities of the characters. The protagonists themselves are not shown. Their presence can, however, be felt in the desolate, sci-fi look of the interiors, landscapes and underwater worlds through which your eye wanders as the narrator

shares the tragicomic experiences of the central figures. Olde Wolbers' tales are pure fiction, but they are prompted by real-life situations from newspapers or television documentaries. These situations are often so bizarre and inconceivable that they allow the imagination full play. Although her work appears to be based on digital imaging techniques, everything in the videos is made by hand. Olde Wolbers creates her films on miniature sets that are placed underwater in aquariums. She uses a small camera to explore the models. Right down to the smallest details, the plant forms and architectural structures are constructed from fishing line, packaging materials and parts of everyday objects. She then allows paint to flow through the aquarium and onto the set, creating a viscous world in which forms duplicate themselves in a rhythmically pulsating, labyrinthine space. At a time when boundaries between the artificial and the authentic, the fictional and the real, are becoming increasingly blurred, Olde Wolbers occupies a unique position with her video works, in which nothing is as it seems.



Trailer

2005

Voice-over: John Wynne
Sound: Daniel Pemberton
Video, 10 minutes

*Scrutinizing their mask-like over-lit faces...
I was trying to find something that was
familiar or even recognizable.
But as the grain of the films became finer,
bringing them closer to me...
plastic surgery pushed them further away.
Until one day I realized I had overtaken them
in years...
leaving them behind their celluloid curtain in
an unaging past.*

Trailer, recently acquired for the Stedelijk Museum collection, is Olde Wolbers' latest piece. This film stands out from the rest of Olde Wolbers' work because of its length and narrative complexity. The camera moves alternately through two spaces: an impenetrable, gently swaying Amazon jungle and a deep-red cinema auditorium. Alfgar Dalio, the main character, sits watching a trailer in a small cinema in Wadena, Ohio, the town he has just moved to. The story is about a carnivorous plant

named after Elmore Vella, a relatively unknown actress from the 1920s who survived a plane crash in the Peruvian jungle, where she then waited with her co-star for news from the film studio. With dew-bedecked spider webs in the background, the camera glides past a mass of this carnivorous vegetation. The actress discovers the extraordinary plants by chance and becomes addicted to their hallucinatory sap. She picks so many of the plants that the species dies out. The Alfgar Dalio moth, which lives on the leaves of the plant, also disappears. When he hears this information, sitting in the darkened cinema, the man realizes that he is named after the moth and that this trailer may hold the secret of his existence. Dalio is not aware that he has been brought up by foster parents. But now that he knows about the trailer, he instinctively returns to the cinema to see the two actors, who appear in it only briefly. He keeps comparing his own appearance with the black-and-white images of the faces on the screen. When one day he strikes up a conversation with the old ticket-seller at the cinema, she reveals to him all the minute details of the true story of Elmore Vella and Ring Kittle, the two actors.



2



3

Placebo

2002

Voice-over: Sukie Smith

Video, 6 minutes

I heard of phantom doctors roaming around hospitals...

Charming but unqualified men dressed in white coats...

Doing their imaginary rounds through endless corridors...

Sporting a name badge with a fancy title...

Giving care behind cubicle curtains...

Dispensing the treatments they in fact needed themselves.

Placebo (2002) and its companion piece *Interloper* (2003) take place in a fluid, surreal universe – an endless labyrinth of metal grids and slowly extending drops of paint. It is a self-contained, liquid space that can be interpreted as a metaphor for the mental space of the main character. A heartbeat and the bleeps of an electronic machine can be heard in the background. The artist uses the only recognizable visual element, a narrow bed or something that might be the lighting equipment for an operating theatre, to evoke associations with a clinical hospital setting.

The story of *Placebo* is appropriately based upon a medical syndrome. The psychological disorder Pseudologica Phantastica is the irresistible inclination to present invented, sometimes extremely unlikely, experiences as having really happened. People who suffer from this illness are renowned for their ability to appear genuine. They become so wrapped up in their lies that they are ultimately no longer able to distinguish between everyday reality and their own fantasy world.

Placebo focuses on the lover of a man who has assumed the fictional identity of a married doctor. This woman met the 'doctor' two years ago in the hospital, where she worked as a nurse, and fell in love with him on the spot. But slowly the realization begins to dawn on her that the man who leaves the operating theatre with blood on his shoes, who wanders through the endless hospital corridors in his white coat without ever being acknowledged by the other staff, is not the loving husband, caring father and brilliant doctor that he makes himself out to be. After she confronts him in the car, the man deliberately drives into a tree. Now they're lying in the hospital and she knows that the man beside her is a complete stranger.



4

Interloper

2003

Voice-over: Ian Michie

Sound: Jem Finer

Video, 6 minutes

*I am slowly pulled along following myself...
Holding together the compromising folds of my hospital gown.*

As I float along the ceiling low enough to hear myself...

Softly repeat a private little mantra...

'Nothing is a more powerful placebo than the word.'

Interloper is the companion piece to *Placebo*. In this video, the image is determined by a maze of tubular aluminium structures, an impenetrable high-tech system of corridors like in a spaceship, a laboratory or the catacombs of a large building complex.

The perspective shifts in this video, with the story being told by the phantom doctor himself. Just as in *Placebo*, he emerges as a figure who is completely detached from his personality. A man without a soul

– an 'interloper' who is able to penetrate into unfamiliar surroundings and convince people with his fine tales: 'Nothing is a more powerful placebo than the word.' Lying in a hospital bed alongside the lover whom he has deceived for two years with his pseudo-identity as a married doctor, the man has a near-death experience. Floating above his body, he sees himself waking up from a nine-month-long coma and getting out of his hospital bed. He is shocked to see himself at work in his world of lies and false appearances, where he confidently talks to patients, goes into operating theatres and carries out complicated operations. A little later, however, he discovers that he has himself been the victim of a cruel experiment. Wandering through the catacombs of the hospital, he discovers a secret laboratory. The staff recognizes him as one of the children who long ago were handed over for medical purposes. When he wants to hear more about the story of his earliest childhood, he is suddenly taken back to the room where he has just got out of bed, back to his body, whose falsehood he now recognizes...