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Press release

Hellen van Meene / And everything goes on when you die

8 september – 2 december 2018

- **Hellen van Meene's newest and most personal work to date**
- **An exhibition that unites death and vitality**
- **Art born of mourning**

The strange discrepancy between mourning and vitality

How can it be that the world keeps turning, the sun shines on and the flowers bloom – that, in short, it can be a beautiful day – when someone you love has just died? How is it possible that between your tears, and to your own amazement, you can suddenly laugh again, and enjoy making plans for the future, or creating things, while you are still paralyzed by grief? How can the world seem to be exactly the same when your own life has been altered so profoundly? These unfathomable connections between death, mourning, and renewed vitality inspired Hellen van Meene to create her newest work, entitled *And everything goes on when you die*. The exhibition includes a series of nine panoramic photographs, exhibited for the first time ever in Huis Marseille. The theme of this series is that of death as part and parcel of life, depicted with striking immediacy by the inclusion of an upright coffin in the photographed tableaux. Coffins used to be objects of dread for Hellen, but she has come to embrace the coffin as a part of life, and of her photographs.

A Memento mori and nine Dutch panoramas

And everything goes on when you die is the most personal series of photographs that Hellen van Meene has ever created. In 2017 she was confronted with the sudden illness and death of her beloved mother, Ada, and this newest series of photographs is the result of Hellen's creative processing of her grief. The core of the exhibition comprises nine panoramic photographs of typically Dutch landscapes, whose backdrops include windmills, tulip fields, farmhouses, and the Dutch coast. A recurring element is an upright coffin, in which the deceased person can take their place amongst surviving

family and friends for one last time. In each tableau the other figures play suggestive roles in the life story of the dead person: what was the story of the dead bridegroom, whose young bride stands so sadly next to him? What happened to the dead young man alone on the premises, with a white horse for company? What is the story behind the coffin on the beach? The photographer offers us these figures and props as tantalizing keys to our own interpretation of the series. Nine panoramas, one for each of the nine months our mothers carried us; for Hellen van Meene this series also felt like something she had to carry to term, and to which she gave life, to the memory of the mother.

Inspired by earlier times

Now that photography is used routinely and everywhere to capture many of life's most superficial moments, it is worth remembering the curious fact that there was once a time when death was the occasion of the photographic fixing of a memory. Hellen van Meene was inspired by a 19th-century photographic tradition in which dead people were photographed just as if they were alive. When photography was first invented in 1839, subjects had to pose for minutes at a time, doing their utmost not to move a muscle. A photograph therefore showed no discernible difference between a living person and a carefully dressed and posed corpse, and the whole idea was to depict the dead person in as lifelike a manner as possible. These carefully and lovingly prepared photographs were often the only tangible souvenirs of a dead person that their family members would ever possess. Interestingly it would seem that the dead were treated with much more familiarity in those days than they are today. With this new work Hellen van Meene also bridges the past and the present.

Funeral flowers

'Turning funeral bouquets into art' is how Hellen van Meene describes what she did with the funeral bouquets at her mother's burial. Her daughter Veda posed lying down with these flowers rearranged into a garland around her head. The resulting portrait, *Funeral Flowers*, is a *memento mori* born of elements of the mother, the daughter and the grandmother, symbolizing both an ending and a new beginning. It demonstrates that photographs can create new memories of a profound moment that attests to the enduring power of life.

Hellen van Meene (Alkmaar, 1972) graduated from the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam in 1996 and has worked as an autonomous photographer ever since. Her international breakthrough came with her intimate portraits of young girls teetering on the threshold between childhood and adulthood. Van Meene finds her models in her own surroundings or on the street, attracted by the often unconventional beauty she sees in them. Van Meene is not concerned with capturing the identity or character of her subjects; her photographs are timeless portraits marked by a dreamy, sometimes fairy-tale atmosphere. She always constructs her images in detail, attuning location, model, styling, pose and lighting with the greatest care. Her staging never feels forced, however; the location gives rise to the composition in an organic way, and her models look natural. The balanced use of colour and light in her images complement their tranquil mood.

In 1999 Hellen van Meene won the Charlotte Köhler Prize awarded by the Prins Bernhard Culture Fund. In 2006 she had a solo exhibition in Huis Marseille. In 2015 a large retrospective, *The Years Shall Run Like Rabbits*, was held in The Hague Museum of Photography. In 2016 she was awarded an Honorary Fellowship of the Royal Photographic Society. Her work is held in many international museum and private collections, including those of Huis Marseille, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the MOCA in Los Angeles, and both the Guggenheim and the MoMA in New York.

Cahier

The exhibition is accompanied by the publication of a small cahier, designed by Rebrandt, with texts by Professor Douwe Draaisma.

Acknowledgements

The title of the exhibition is taken from a poem by the Dutch poet, writer and critic Gerrit Komrij, *Alles blijft* (2001), published in *Alle gedichten* (De Bezige Bij, 2018).

Editorial note, not for publication

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