

Darwin, Sinke & van Tongeren



Flamboyant taxidermy

Former ad execs Ferry van Tongeren and Jaap Sinke are successfully fashioning the missing link between traditional taxidermy and contemporary art. Three years into business and one highly acclaimed debut exhibition later, the Dutch duo received the cherry on top of the cake on January 2015: British artist Damien Hirst bought their entire collection.

The two giant red wooden doors of their Haarlem canal house mark the entrance of a garage that leads into a vast studio, entering which feels like stepping into a treasure cave of curiosities. The space is brightly lit as daylight pours in from the skylight in the back: nothing is out of sight; the space is an archetypical storage room reminiscent of antique markets. Full walls of saturated shelves, cupboards hang with skewed doors, stuffed with books, bottled chemicals, glass cloches and works in progress. From the ceiling hooks and chains are draping on a desk. Row upon row of cupboards line the floor as antique showcases waiting for a purpose. Somewhere in this undeniably well-organised chaos sit two bearded chaps. Old friends that just over three years ago started a company called Darwin, Sinke & van Tongeren. A company that is now dusting off the worn image of traditional taxidermy. “Before we put antiques and the animals together, we scan Europe’s antique markets in search of things we feel we could use one day. Then they basically just sit there waiting for us to come up with an idea.”

Two blue-and-yellow macaws sit on a nearby desk, their beaks are kissing; a work in progress as the drying process can take up to several months. One macaw is upside down and the other looks as if it is falling from the sky, wings spread out, almost recalling Michelangelo’s painting *The creation of Adam* which illustrates God breathing life into the first man. By making new moulds of animal bodies and constructing the skin in a more modern way, the duo is stretching up traditional taxidermy by giving animals –new-life and artistic value. “We like to emphasize the beauty of the animal while using the traditional methods like making

new moulds using clay and wood. This Victorian way of preserving animals comes with standard posing. What we do is about looking for an aesthetic. We just want to show off the beauty. Therefore we are looking for a position of the body which lets the animal shine.”

Their personal energies don’t even remotely recall the fast, profit-making world of make-believe van Tongeren and Sinke were part of for over two decades. Collectively known as Darwin, Sinke & van Tongeren [Charles Darwin is named CEO of the company], their choice of words is deliberate and uttered with jaded calmness. They met over twenty years ago at international advertising company Ogilvy & Mather. “Twenty years? Is that a good guess?” says van Tongeren in an effort to remember, “No, an educated guess”, quips Sinke.

We enter a trip down memory lane as these two old friends try to remember the first time they met and realising they have known each other just shy of half their lives. After van Tongeren started his advertising company Doom & Dickson, Sinke followed him a couple of years later as one of the partners. In 2011, van Tongeren decided to quit, sell out and travel the world with his family. “I was done working on assignments which are at the mercy of the randomness of test panels and business strategies. At a certain point I was just done attending useless meetings.”

While he was traveling Australia, New Zealand and a good part of Asia, van Tongeren decided he wanted to learn taxidermy and, back in the Netherlands, he began working for certified taxidermist Erwin van Zoelen for free, for one year.



La Vie Dans l'Eden Collection, Pheasant Arch

In this year he learned the tricks of the trade. Sinke and van Tongeren kept in touch after departing from the advertising world. “I think at certain point I infected him”, says Van Tongeren. Sinke started learning from van Tongeren and, before long, Darwin, Sinke & van Tongeren was born. The beginning, like most beginnings was difficult and exciting. “It wasn’t so easy at first. At the beginning I had to build up my own network of people that would call us if one of their animals had died. I remember being euphoric when we could drive up to Denmark to pick up a dead penguin.”

Using their experience in advertising to their advantage, their entrance to the art world came rapidly. After one and a half year of making objects, an email was sent to antique webshop 1stDibs.com. “The webshop is an international meeting point of high-end dealers in antiques. But apparently there was a waiting list of 2000 artists and dealers at

1stdibs.com. So we decided to make a presentation using everything we know about making presentations. They liked it so much we got in.” Selling most works in America via the webshop, they started paving the road of their business in the UK by hiring a PR company in London. “We knew there had to be a market for our work in the UK so we decided to give it a try”, Sinke explains. “We actually went to London to have a chat with our PR over there”, Van Tongeren continues, “And because London was in the middle of a tube strike we decided to rent bikes and drive up some antique shops. We stopped at this marvellous looking shop and showed the owner these booklets we made to show our PR and one thing led to another.” Oblivious of their whereabouts, the Dutch duo walked into well-established antique store Jamb, who conveniently appeared to be waiting for something fresh. They met with the owner who didn’t take long to offer them an exhibition. This was the beginning of their debut exhibi-



La Vie Dans l'Eden Collection, Weenix Swan

tion *Darwin's Menagerie*, which received much praise from art critics. Celebrities from all over and highly influential insiders attended the show at Jamb. *Financial Times*, *CNN* and *The Daily Telegraph* all wrote about the highly anticipated nouvelle vague of taxidermy the Dutch duo were heralding. The exhibition consisted of forty works placed in a warmly lit, ambient antique shop. “Darwin’s menagerie was during the Frieze art fair when London is packed with art dealers and art lovers with massive wallets. We saw Rolls Royces and Maseratis driving down the street. We saw people getting out, pointing at our work saying ‘I want this one’ and taking off again. That’s how things go in London”, reveals van Tongeren.

Right after their debut, their work was picked up at the Masterpiece art fair and Darwin, Sinke & van Tongeren was made part of group exhibition *Natural Selection* in the Shapero

Modern. The line-up had some significant names like Andy Warhol, Yayoi Kusama, Edvard Munch, Pablo Picasso and Cindy Shermann.

The result of having the rare combination of mastering great sales techniques and breath-taking art: evident success. Damien Hirst, famous for his diamond encrusted skull *For the Love of God*, bought their entire collection after weeks of negotiations. They never met him of course, but the director of Hirst’s London art complex, The Newport Street Gallery, called to arrange the booking of the whole collection, which is now added to his personal art collection *Murder Me*. “He took everything we had”, Sinke says with a smile.



Aves Oxi Action Collection,
Flamingo and Hornbill.