

Silences that will not be ignored, by Gladys Paulus

Commissioned by the Tropenmuseum for *Our Colonial Inheritance*

Artist Gladys Paulus lives and works in London. She works with felt and wants to draw attention to the loss of a certain type of sanctity in the world. Her work addresses her painful Eurasian family history. The work featured in *Our Colonial Inheritance* was created especially for this exhibition. Born and raised in the Netherlands, Paulus (1973) comes from a family of artisans and artists. She studied painting and drawing at the Utrecht School of the Arts (HKU). In 1995, Paulus left for England, where she combined traditional crafts with the arts. Handmade felt is her material of choice, but she also uses a range of other materials in her work.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT:

"I work with handmade felt, a unique material that has provided us with protection for millennia. In this work, I have used sheep's wool from Somerset, England (where I live) and from the Dutch Texel breed, as well as some Javanese kain batik from the 1950s. Around that time, my Indonesian family was 'repatriated,' while my other (Dutch) grandfather was sent to Indonesia to participate in the so-called 'police actions'. Anchored in those different landscapes of origin, these materials and colours carry symbolic meaning. They speak of uprooting, places left behind, memories, traumas, survival, and adaptation, carried along and passed down the generations.

In this work for the Tropenmuseum, I question ideas about social positioning, aspiration, and the way identity is formed and changed in subsequent generations. And where you feel at home if you come from multiple cultures. Creating felt is something between an art and a craft, and I use it to explore internalised cultural conflicts, such as being modest versus claiming space for oneself; a conscious personal challenge and statement."

ON HER WORK FOR OUR COLONIAL INHERITANCE: Silences that will not be ignored

The exhibition *Our Colonial Inheritance* at the Tropenmuseum emphasises the lasting influence of the colonial past. For artist Gladys Paulus, this was the deciding factor in accepting the invitation to create work for this exhibition.

For the exhibition theme of 'This is my Home', she designed three huge felt works that address intergenerational trauma, the silence at home that could not be ignored. But could not be addressed either. Paulus says: "For the silence of the pain from the past was deafening and palpable, but you could not reach it. You weren't allowed to mention it. Even though you sensed that there was something there. Like a big secret. It was incredibly oppressive for a child."

This is what Paulus' work refers to. She wants to break the silence. Talking about it is important. For that reason, she made a solo exhibition on ancestor healing in 2017. "That stirred up a lot, within my family as well." The process of creation felt very personal to the artist. And exciting. "In our community, modesty is the norm. What I make, is big and in-your-face. Which also represents growing up between two cultures. On the one hand, the work is white, silent, and, as such, modest. On the other, it's huge and takes up a lot of space." Silence made visible that invites a response.

Paulus continues: "It was a quest, finding out how far I could or should go. Can I call myself Indo when I'm a child between cultures? I'm claiming my place in this story, and I'm open about it. But I was not part of their history; I did not live it. Do I have the right to speak about it without the experience? At the same time, it is my story, too. It's part of my life precisely because of its lasting influence. I see a third generation wanting and trying to break that silence. With this work, I challenge myself to finally embrace that side of myself."

Paulus does so by depicting the silence that would not be ignored. With works of art so large and silent that discussion will hopefully follow. "When I look at the third generation, I can see that breaking the silence is also a

form of respect. Respect for one's ancestors. And their story.”

A podcast series on trauma from the colonial past (in Dutch): [Als geschiedenis in je opstaat - OVT - VPRO](#)