



# ELLEN MARA DE WACHTER

*An Illusion That Does  
Not Disappoint*

Essay Contribution For:

**ESTHER JANSSEN**

*Silence*

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### *An Illusion That Does Not Disappoint*

Esther Janssen's sewn paintings

Esther Janssen first had the idea of using artificial leather in her work in 1999, when she encountered it in a junk shop in Eindhoven. Instantly attracted to the material's visual and tactile properties, she bought the entire roll on impulse, but it took her some time to find the right application for this ersatz skin. Ten years after that fateful shopping expedition and following multiple trials, Janssen's approach shifted: rather than incorporating the material into sculptures, she decided to work it as she would the elements in a painting. This sudden breakthrough led to her ongoing use of artificial leather following a process of her own devising. Janssen takes great care to cut the artificial leather, then paint it, before she assembles and sews it into an image based on a digital sketch, sometimes adding padding to bring volume to the image. Finally, with her brush she adds finer details such as individual flower petals. It is a method she also applies with

cut paper, notably in her 'Disco' series of carefully constructed views from amid the trees in a night-time wood, all cool tones and chiaroscuro.

Janssen is a third generation artist. As a child, she helped her father make woodcuts, noting the way these were built up layer over layer and cherishing the 'hard-cut shadows used to build pictorial space'. She has imported these sensory and technical memories into her own practice, and also credits the everlasting influence of Japanese ukiyo-e artists Hiroshige and Hokusai, and the energy of David Hockney as important art historical references. At art school Janssen developed a keen interest in what she describes as 'the tension between intended design and lived reality'. The perpetual oscillation between the ideal and the real remains the beating heart of her recent work.



Assembling countless pieces of artificial leather or paper into a picture has something in common with the process of reconstituting fragments of the past into a coherent story. Janssen's sewn paintings are guided by pivotal memories connected to landscape and space, including her experience of suburban gardens in Belgium, which have fascinated her since she first saw them as a teenager. The images she has created based on these idiosyncratic spaces, which are both private and public, are tinged with longing and exude the aura of artefacts excavated from memory.

Janssen's sewn paintings seduce the viewer; their smooth sheen, harmonious compositions and elegant tonal scales invite us into peculiar worlds, in which carefully tended gardens flaunt a rich variety of greens from the frosty blues of glaucous leaves to acid-yellow and verdant shades. 'I am not troubled by beauty', Janssen says,

knowing that the allure of her works does little diminish their strangeness – indeed, it may even enhance it. The neatest cultures often conceal wild subcultures just under the skin. Such incongruities are at the heart of the worlds created by filmmakers David Lynch and Stanley Kubrick, who have been influential on Janssen's work, as have been the well-ordered worlds developed in graphic novels by Hergé and Chris Ware.

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##### **Above:**

*Disaster VII* (detail), 2012

Acrylic on sewn artificial leather  
60 x 80 cm





As Janssen draws preparatory sketches using Photoshop, she takes her images through a process of simplification, smoothing out textures and paring down forms, nudging them ever closer to archetypes. The process involves shedding the conditioning and conventions of visual culture, while preserving the essence, or the felt sense of a scene. Janssen is an early adopter of digital imaging technology, having worked with Photoshop since the late 1990s. Her method requires judicious choices about when to eliminate, and when to introduce and preserve elements: subtraction can be revealing, but only if you know when to stop. 'Building a space in a work is a puzzle I have to solve. It doesn't have to obey the laws of perspective but rather convey the sense of a space', she says. Eventually, Janssen settles on a composition, which provides the factual aspects of a picture. She then sets about lighting the scene, which generates a mood and sculpts flat planes into multi-

dimensional spaces. Although they may evoke familiar settings, Janssen's images are seeded with visual paradoxes. Improbable shadows break the laws of physics and perspective, staging a perplexing contest between fading natural light and brazen electrical wattage.

It is natural to suffer blind spots when it comes to familiar surroundings, which makes opportunities to see clearly all the more precious when they arise. As Janssen points out, 'when given attention, things close to home become interesting', and she facilitates our lucidity by inviting us into specific worlds of her own making, in which we can alternate between experiences of the familiar and the sublime, held within the 'spatial paradox of both safe enclosure and vast infinity.' Several visual effects enhance this existential play of near and far: in the 'Silence' series, the mirror-smooth surfaces of garden ponds throw a fabricated world

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**Left:**

*The Silence V (detail), 2021*  
Acrylic on sewn artificial leather  
80 x 122 cm

back at us upside-down, and many of her scenes are set at dawn or dusk, a fertile period of time during which fantasy has free rein. 'I aim to make the viewer's eyes and mind dance', she says. What better time than twilight to let the imagination off its leash.

In common parlance, the terms 'house' and 'home' are often used interchangeably but they differ in at least one important aspect: living presence. Some of the houses in Janssen's paintings may well be homes, but they offer little evidence of inhabitation other than the meticulous care brought to their exteriors and gardens. For all we know, what lies behind these walls may be utter chaos, or a dark abyss. Reassuringly, the secret gardeners seem to be more or less in control of their environments, acculturating wild forms into the geometric order of platonic solids – here a cube, there a sphere, and a cylinder of plant life. Now and again, the natural world slips out of this civilised

chokehold: in 'Neighbourhood I' untamed leaves creep off the edges and stems wrap around the back of the canvas.

Spending time with Janssen's works, a curious phenomenon takes place: my world gets smaller. Suddenly I am inside the rectangle of the painting, transported to the scene as its sole witness. Landing in this world-inside-the-picture-plane occurs simultaneously with a second dive, this one into the actual texture of the materials. Artificial leather mimics skin; that is its purpose. At close range, its texture resolves into tiny islands surrounded by so many channels, while its clean-cut edges provide sheer falling off points for the eye, tiny cliffs for the senses. Contemplating this texture throws me back to the knowledge of my own skin, my body standing before this strange and strangely soothing scene.

In Janssen's 'Disaster' series, a collection of ruined utopias attests that entropy will always have its way. What was once upright has tumbled down, providing a playground for unruly vegetation. In 'Disaster II' (2011) a collapsed Tuscan-style villa signals the evanescence of wealth and culture. The rubble is set against unperturbed hills in the distance, their soft, pillowy forms glowing with an iridescent sheen. The modernist house in 'Disaster VII' (2012), an icon of 20th century privilege, is reduced to a tangle of steel draped over a kidney-shaped pool. These homes are no longer a refuge from planetary forces – if they ever were. Janssen explains that when she developed the series, 'there were a lot of disasters in the world, which are covered by the media in a very hungry way and soon left behind. I wanted to test myself to stay with the nature of disaster for longer.' This commitment to spending time with complex and difficult thoughts and realities is of a piece with Janssen's dedication to the painstaking techniques that lend her paintings such powerful affect.

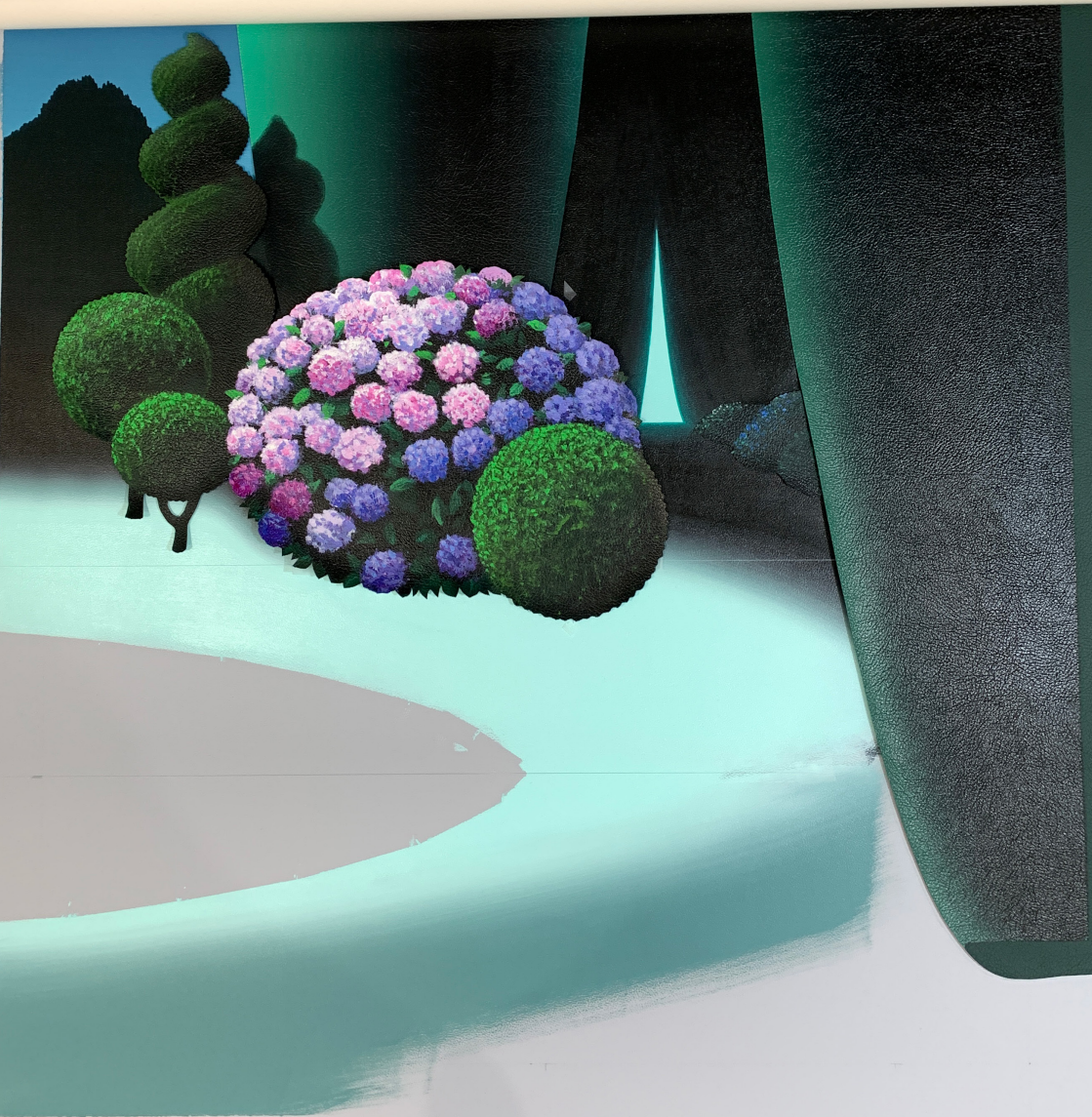
An attachment to the way things could be, given our uncertain future, is mediated in Janssen's work through the activity of gardening. Gardening is a profession of hope, and the cherished spaces in Janssen's images are the expression of their carer's best intentions for the future, even in a utopia struck by catastrophe, or a community space devoid of people. This is where Janssen's carefully constructed scenes seem to point to the world beyond the studio, beyond the museum. In their depictions of illusory places that are so clearly the product of nurture and attention – for gardens, homes, entire

neighbourhoods – Janssen's works promise worlds in which things might be endlessly new and fascinating, and yet in which, it is true, bad things might happen. As Janssen puts it, these works propose 'an illusion that does not disappoint, but reveals itself as an illusion, generating a feeling of possibility in which even banal subjects reveal their sacred essence.' In the antinomy Janssen sets up between perfectly controlled materials and imperfect situations arises our fundamentally human capacity to engage with a flawed reality and find beauty in it anyway. After plunging into the twilight depths of Janssen's sewn paintings, we are released back into the flow of life, returning to 'our' world with fresh and dancing eyes.

**Right:**  
*Esther Janssen Studio Study, 2021*

**Ellen Mara De Wachter**  
All quotes are from conversations between Janssen and De Wachter in June and July 2021.





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