

Buren (or 'Taming the Sea Monster... and other stories')

Mark Power

During my first visit to the Rijksmuseum I was drawn to the collection of 17th century maritime paintings, and in particular those of the Van Der Velde, both younger and elder. I was intrigued to discover that initial sketches for these works were actually made on the spot, in the heat of battle, and are therefore early examples of war reportage. Many of the paintings depicted sea battles between the Dutch and the English, which, I'm ashamed to admit, I knew little or nothing about. This part of British history is largely passed over in our schools (perhaps because the ultimate outcome?) an interesting example of how history is recorded and passed down through generations, or not, in this case.

Gazing in awe at these paintings I found myself drawn in close, editing the works down to tiny fragments. The original sketches were doubtless embellished later in the artist's studio, for propaganda and artistic license, and the line between fact and fiction became blurred. Instantly I was reminded of Jeff Wall's photograph 'Dead Troops Talk', a work of complete fiction that is also bizarrely believable.

The rendering of extreme detail in these great paintings is utterly reminiscent of contemporary large format colour photography. Assuming these war artists would have used a camera instead, had they been available at the time, the relationship between their practice and my own was intriguing. Although I am decidedly not a war photographer, I thought it might be interesting to combine some of these paintings with my own work in Holland.

While completing a previous project, 'The Shipping Forecast', between 1993 and 1996, I had made a little work along the Dutch North Sea coast, and, since I was being commissioned to look at the Netherlands from the point of view of a citizen of a

neighbouring country, I was offered the perfect opportunity to return to the coast, the border between our two countries.

Unlike England, the Dutch coastline is relatively undeveloped, allowing the beauty and bleakness of the landscape to breathe. There are relatively few 'seaside resorts' in Holland, and those there are remain reasonably tasteful. Although, as a photographer, I missed the general tackiness of a typical British resort, I was taken by the sense of space, the extremes of weather, and the many industrial complexes I found nestled by the sea.

As I travelled the length of the coastline again and again I was constantly calling to mind those 17th century paintings, some distant memories, others entrenched firmly in my head. I would visit the locations of some of the battles, or I would simply look for contemporary visual equivalents. Of course, the use of the North Sea has changed dramatically over the past 300 years, especially in this age of relative peacetime, but there remain surprising similarities in the details. By carefully sequencing my work together with tiny fragments of the paintings, fictional narratives, short stories, began to evolve.

Mark Power. September 2000