

February 20, 2022 Visual arts

The threat that can emanate from constructivist form language

Review by **JACE van de Ven**

When you close the door of the gallery behind you when you enter, you immediately see it hanging, the tapestry **Threat**, and it scares you a bit. “Has the invasion of Ukraine started?” you think for a moment. The tapestry was woven by the textile artisan Juliane Schreiber in collaboration with the TextielLab of the Dutch Textile Museum and after a design by and in consultation with the artist Jan Doms (1949). A MIG fighter jet tears apart the clouds over a landscape, screaming. Landscape and clouds seem cuddly, while the MIG, clearly separated from the background, is dangerously black, woven with some sort of rubber thread. The threat is further increased by the fact that a grid of squares is indicated over the entire surface of the tapestry: this is a precision bombardment.

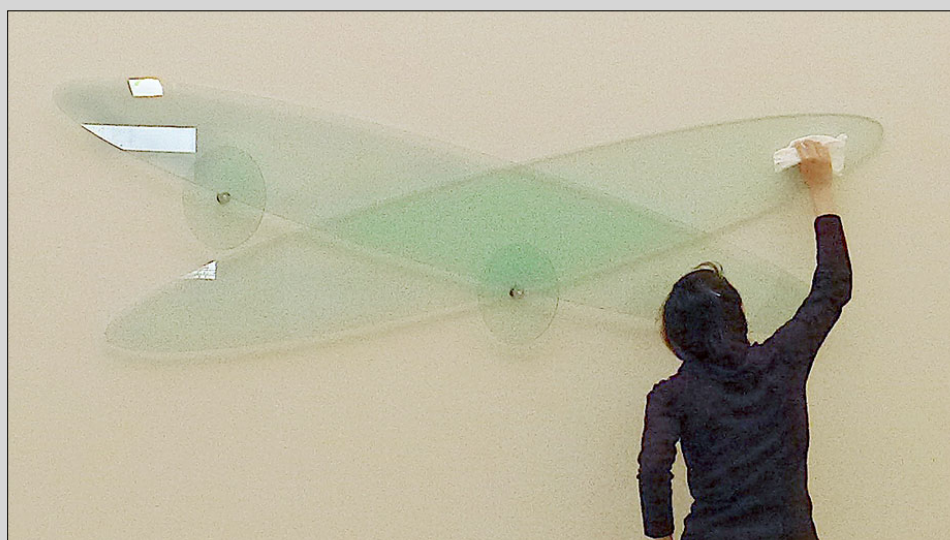


Tapestry on a frame:
‘Threat’ in collaboration
with Juliane Schreiber (D),
112 x 154 cm.
Photo > Jan Doms

Jan Doms really heard these MIGs. In Armenia, where he has been working regularly with artists from that country since 2015, they sometimes tore right above his head. On exercise. “When you later learn that there was a real bombing in an area where your friends live, you think back with horror to the times you saw a MIG come over.”

Two columns ago I wrote about Jan Doms and about his observation that the making of art has been doomed in recent decades. 'The new Dutch state art' he called the phenomenon that managers of government institutions nowadays believe they can determine what an artist must make if he wants to be eligible for subsidy. Of course we also talked about his own art. Without making a commitment to write about it, I promised to come and see his exhibition, **Stroboscope**, which is currently open.

That didn't disappoint me, except for the aforementioned tapestry **Treat**, the functionality of form of two wall sculptures struck me. The first, **Bomber**, is a glass plane like an insect against the wall and derives extra strength from the presence of the work **Threat**, but is older. The second, **Twin House**, made of spring band steel, combines two forms of houses in a simple, but so effective way that the combination creates a third house. The work is undoubtedly inspired by the emergency housing that Doms saw in Armenia and that have been there since the devastating earthquake of 1988.



Wall sculpture **‘Bomber’**,
float glass, 210 x 75 cm.
Photo > Jan Doms

The fact that Doms likes to work with artists in Bulgaria, Poland or Armenia certainly has to do with his interest in the Russian Avant-Garde and the resulting constructivism. He said that as a nineteen-year-old he spent six weeks in the tumultuous Paris of 1968. His mother had bought him a train ticket so he could go and see art. “That was undoubtedly whispered to her by Sister Seveke, who had studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and taught art history at the teacher training college where I attended”, Doms thinks.

Between the riots of the student uprising, Doms searched for places where art was made or displayed. On one of those quests, he passed the window of a gallery in which a small photograph of a corner sculpture by Wladimir Tatlin (1914) was displayed. The thing seemed to float. He had never seen anything like it. Raised with classical sculptures from antiquity and the Middle Ages, and with regard to modern sculpture, especially with Henri Moore, he realized that sculpture could also be done differently. So he wanted to know everything about the Russian Avant-Garde and Constructivism, which was not so easy then. There were hardly any publications available in the Netherlands.

In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet satellite states, the Russian Avant-Garde is, so to speak, still in the genes.

In 1976 he graduated from the art academy with a series of dynamic sculptures made of spring band steel. Moving objects with which you could make all kinds of different shapes. This movement led to a collaboration with the Israeli dancer Rina Schenfeld, after which Doms continued to work with movement artists, athletes and musicians throughout his career to make the dynamics of his work visible.



Wall sculpture
‘Twin House’,
RVS-spring band steel,
275 x 116 cm.
Photo > Jan Doms



‘Domik’ (emergency
housing),
color print op di-bond,
47 x 62 cm.
Photo > Jan Doms



‘Earthquake’, lino cut,
50 x 61 cm.
Photo > Jan Doms

His sculptures and the performances based on them have been shown in urban and landscape locations at home and abroad. It became more and more work that manifests itself at the intersection of the arts, architecture and urbanism. Doms studied cultural sciences after leaving the academy with a special interest in architecture and urbanism.

This is how he came into contact with the artists Mkrtych Tonoyan and Hrach Vardanyan, who introduced his work at the intersection of art and architecture to the City Research Center Gyumri in Armenia. They invited Doms to organize a research and design laboratory with art and architecture students, focused on the urban development and vitalization of Gyumri, where the scars of the great earthquake in 1988 were still clearly visible. His work in Gyumri with exhibitions and performances by himself and students and a similar project in Łódź, Poland, eventually led to a retrospective at the Armenian Center for Contemporary Experimental Art in Yerevan, again accompanied by performances in collaboration with Armenian artists. Video images of this can be seen in the exhibition **Stroboscope**, as well as a reflection on the work of Doms by the Armenian professor of philosophy David Mosinyan.



From the video registration
SHOWTIME (Armenian
Center for Contemporary
experimental art (ACCEA /
NPAK) Yerevan 2019):
Performance "Apache"
in collaboration with
Hasmik Tangyan (dance)
and
Lilit Petrosyan (poetry).

In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet satellite states, the Russian Avant-Garde is still in the genes, so to speak. This partly explains why the work of Jan Doms is so valued there. But its dynamic character, its unconventional character – the pursuit of new forms and contents to express and contribute to a new society based on idealism – and above all the fluent merging of artistic disciplines, linked to the spatial environment, architectural and landscape, has the power within itself to appeal everywhere. If the politically tense situation, as in the case of Threat, also leads to such a sudden recognition that you can almost literally hear a jet fighter tearing through the gallery, then it is clear that the Russian Avant-Garde and Constructivism are once again tinspiring.

The stroboscope exhibition can be seen until March 20 in Luycks Gallery, Nieuwlandstraat 31 in Tilburg, open on Thursday to Sunday from 1:00 PM to 5:00 PM.