

About Anneke Mikkers' Artwork

Introduction - storytelling

My paintings of interiors all tell a story- but the story is not definitive and unravels in the mind of the spectator. By leaving a few visual clues (small objects, composition) I invite the viewer to imagine what the story behind the pictured scene might be. The realistically painted interiors offer a kind of escape into someone else's life, even though the scenes are imaginary. Also, the viewer is left with a sense of uneasiness.

Lots of interpretations are possible for every painting. I only set the scene- like a movie still of a suspenseful film you haven't seen yet, or that moment in a theater show right before the actors enter the stage. All props are already in place and the lighting is set just right. The atmosphere is complete and the story could go anywhere, but you are sure every object on stage will play a part.

With this essay, I try to explore and explain the input I use to make my paintings, in other words, the things I've seen and read that inspire me to create my work. There are a few recurring themes in my paintings, and I will elaborate on every one of them in the next few paragraphs. By doing this, I also set a cultural and artistic context for my work. What artists do I look at for inspiration? Who creates comparable art, either in the formal sense or from shared inspirational sources? What techniques do I apply to get my ideas across?

1. Themes and inspirational sources

1.1 Interior Landscapes

Every space is built with a specific function in mind – factories for machinery and operators, malls for mass shopping, prisons for storing convicts, train stations, attics, bathrooms, closets, etc. I focus on interiors that could be encountered in residential homes because I want to play with the possible personalities the inhabitant might have, which they express in the 'dressing up' of their home. I am fascinated by the way in which people create their own biotopes with their own personal atmosphere in their homes. By looking inside someones house, you get a glimpse of what their daily lives would look like. Everyone chooses more or less consciously what they put on display in their living rooms, and where they put their furniture. By doing so, you basically are the set dresser of your life. Where you put which prop has an impact on how you feel inside your home. By examining and exploring this notion, I create a different atmosphere in every interior I paint. Of course lighting plays a central part here as well. By removing the human presence itself from the interiors, I try to purvey a sense of impersonality and desolation, and to enable the viewer to imagine their own life in the pictured decor. The absence of actors on the stage also implies an act that has just been performed, or is about to be performed. Time is tangibly suspended, which adds to the voyeuristic aspect of my work. I also try to add dynamics to the viewing experience by first luring the viewer into the scene with colors, composition and finely painted details, and then slowly making them realize the depicted room might not be so attractive after all – a bitter aftertaste that lingers. This creates a feeling of unease and alienation, while the rooms themselves are so relatable.

The traditional Japanese minimal aesthetics applied to homes appeal to me as well. It takes a very different approach to livable, comfortable human shelters. Through the differences of exotic interiors with western interiors, you get a sense of what essentially constitutes a home. This is important to me, because it reveals a basis to build the scenes I paint from.



The Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershoi (1864-1916) is known for his low-key interiors, almost devoid of furniture and painted with a very limited palette. A lot of Hammershoi's paintings reveal that he was inspired by the serene interiors of Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675). In the BBC documentary *Michael Palin and the mystery of Hammershoi* (2013) an intrigued Palin says about Hammershoi:

There's something about the emotional qualities of his paintings. It's almost like he's giving a room feelings, (laughing) which is an odd thing.

Edward Hopper also painted lots of suspenseful and minimal interiors. A room with only one or two pieces of furniture in it almost always emanates mystery- because of the questions it raises about the (former) occupants. I am very aware of the fact that every added object in a room is a clue towards what the lives of the inhabitants would look like, and consciously apply this in every painting.

Some movies that employ interiors and houses as important plot devices and tools used to tell large portions of the story are *Rear Window*, *1408*, *Rose Red* (2002), *The Skeleton Key* (Iain Softly, 2005)(fig. 1.1).



fig. 1.1. Screenshot from *The Skeleton Key* (2005).

Obviously, all haunted house stories and movies fall into this category. In these stories, the building itself is an actor with a dangerous personality. Also, almost every sci-fi flick and series utilizes interiors as plot devices. Space ships are -according to science fiction canon- clean, sleek, minimalistic, coldly lit, and claustrophobic. In *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), the ship, like the house in haunted house-movies, has a malevolent personality of its own.

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) wrote an essay (*The Poetics of Space*, 1958) about how every room and space in a house has a certain meaningful place in our subconsciousness.

Sometimes the house of the future is better built, lighter and larger than all the houses of the past, so that the image of the dream house is opposed to that of the childhood home. Late in life, with indomitable courage, we continue to say that we are going to do what we have not yet done: we are going to build a house. This dream house may be merely a dream of ownership, the embodiment of everything that is considered convenient, comfortable, healthy, sound, desirable, by other people. It must therefore satisfy both pride and reason, two irreconcilable terms.¹

1.2 Hermitages

It seems to me that for the last decade, the interest in living self-sufficiently and independently from mass-produced consumer goods has been growing in western culture. More and more

¹Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 1958

people want to give their lives meaning not through a career and acquiring wealth, but through reducing the amount of time they spend working for others and instead spending more time with their family and friends, doing things they love while this not necessarily guarantees a steady income. Monetary wealth is no longer seen as desirable. There appears to be a raised awareness of overconsumption and the ways in which companies try to convince us to keep buying. After realizing the treadmill they're endlessly running on, lots of people want to break free from materialism. This development fascinates and inspires me, and it seems to inspire other artists, writers, photographers and movie directors.

The possibility of being able to live entirely off the grid, on a plot of land somewhere in the middle of nature, growing my own crops and collecting firewood, selling maybe a few paintings or surplus harvest to buy necessities I might not be able to make myself, intrigues me very much. I read life stories online of individuals who have succeeded to do this in many different ways.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (*Self Reliance*, 1841), Henry David Thoreau (*Walden*, 1854), Jack Kerouac (*On the Road*, 1957, and *The Dharma Bums*, 1958), Chuck Palahniuk (*Fight Club*, 1996, and *Rant*, 2007) and Jon Krakauer (*Into the Wild*, 1996) all wrote about living in the margins quasi-autonomously and in solitude, and are as popular and relevant today as ever. An artist who makes life-sized installations inspired by this very same notion is Ethan Hayes-Chute (1982). His works *Built-Up Site/Settled Down* (2012), *Make/Shifted Cabin* (2009) and *Hermitage* (2009) (fig. 1.2) represent exactly what I imagine a simple self-built shelter would look like when you just start out living completely autonomously. From his website: "Through paintings, sculptures, large-scale installations and artist's books, he explores the ideas of self-sufficiency, self-preservation and self-exclusion as models for living."²

² From <http://www.ethanh.com/about.htm> Retrieved 26 October 2013



Fig. 1.2. Ethan Hayes-Chute's *Hermitage* (2009).

Contemporary movies that feature this notion of complete self-sufficiency and independence from society and consumerism are *Mud* (Jeff Nichols, 2012), *Into the Wild* (Sean Penn, 2007), *Winter's Bone* (Debra Granik, 2010), *On the Road* (Walter Salles, 2012), *Surfer, Dude* (S.R. Bindler, 2008), *Wanderlust* (David Wain, 2012), *Killer Joe* (William Friedkin, 2011) *The Hunter* (Daniel Nettheim, 2011) and many more. The TV show *Supernatural* revolves around two adventurous brothers without a home address or steady income, always on the road in their epic '67 muscle car, crashing in equally epic motels and living off of dubiously acquired money. A blog featuring only pictures of hand-built cabins in the wilderness, a great source of inspiration, is the aptly named cabinporn.com.

Similarly, the shoddily built garden sheds and shacks, that seem to have the exact same style all over the world (I've seen them in The Netherlands, Spain, Latvia, America), incite my imagination.



Individuals, blogs and companies that relate to this change in society are Jay Schafer's *Tumbleweed Tiny House Company* (www.tumbleweedhouses.com), *Tiny Texas Houses* (www.tinytexashouses.com), *Tiny House blog* (tinyhouseblog.com), and Lloyd Kahn, author and publisher of *Tiny Homes*, *Simple Shelter* (2012), *Builders of the Pacific Coast* (2008), *Home Work: Handbuilt Shelter* (2004), *Shelter* (1973), and blogger on lloydkahn-ongoing.blogspot.com. I find these websites and books inspiring.

I try to incorporate a sense of this self-made life and isolation from society in all of my interior landscape-paintings by creating a desolate atmosphere that suggests the occupants of the rooms are living a hermit's life in the fringe, estranged from 'normalcy' and no longer conforming to the unwritten rules of society. They haven't had visitors for a very long time. The possible backstories can be imagined by looking at the details. The inhabitants of the spaces aren't necessarily 'crazy', but they're definitely offbeat, weird.

Another interesting development, perhaps very much linked to the abovementioned shift in society, is the changing view of religion. Spirituality does not need to be regulated by an ancient institution. In some of my paintings I show the private form of spirituality separate from the institutionalized form -not catering to the inner differences of individuals- as dogmatized by churches.

1.3 Suspense

Another theme that has been present throughout my work since 2006, is suspense. The paintings show cinema- or theater-like scenes, stages on which a story is unfolding. The captured scene always suggests something just happened, or is about to happen. There is a literal suspense of events, which almost always incites a feeling of unease or even fear. Again, cinema is one of my main inspirational sources here. The pictured scenes are parallel to the still, dark scenes accompanied by creepy music, leading up to a big fright usually involving

copious amounts of blood and screams, in countless horror movies. Masters of suspense in the cinema-world are, in my opinion, Alfred Hitchcock and David Lynch. In their movies, inconspicuous details and scenes in which nothing seems to be happening are very important clues in revealing the plot. Some very suspenseful films I enjoyed watching are *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1953), *Don't Look Now* (Nicolas Roeg, 1973), *Lost Highway* (Lynch, 1997), *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sánchez, 1999), *The Village* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2004) *The Descent* (Neill Marshall, 2005), *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2007), *1408* (Mikael Håfström, 2007), *No Country for Old Men* (Joel & Ethan Coen, 2007). Looking at my paintings, you'd wish you could see beyond the borders of the canvas or turn around to see what (or who) is behind you. Not all is revealed, but there is a strong suggestion that a lot more is going on than meets the eye. An example is the slightly open door in *The Closet* (fig. 1.3).



Fig. 1.3. *The Closet* (2013), acrylics on canvas, 73x54cm.

The open door raises many questions and stimulates the imagination of the viewer. Other artists who have very successfully applied suspense in their works are Edward Hopper (1882-1967), David Hockney (1937), Hans op de Beeck (1969), whose installations, miniatures/scale models and short films are all full of suspense (fig. 1.4), and photographer William Eggleston (1939).



fig. 1.4. Hans op de Beeck - T-Mart (2004), installation

My favorite suspense novelist is Stephen King (1947). Lots of his books have been turned into movies that are as suspenseful as the novels (for example *The Mist*, Frank Darabont, 2007). Surprisingly, the showcase pictures of interior designer/fabric designer David Hicks (1929-1998) are very suspenseful as well, although probably not on purpose. An example of such a staged photograph:



1.4 Americana

Americana refers to artifacts, or a collection of artifacts, related to the history, geography, folklore and cultural heritage of the United States. Many kinds of material fall within the definition of Americana: paintings, prints and drawings; license plates or entire vehicles, household objects, tools and weapons; flags, plaques and statues, and so on. Patriotism and nostalgia play defining roles in the subject.”³

This is a very intriguing phenomenon as well. Scenes that are so typically American to me, like the backwoods community in the Ozark mountains as portrayed in *Winter's Bone*, or the small-town scenes, including the outfits, cars, and of course, R.L.'s house, in *Black Snake Moan* (fig. 1.5), have me wondering about what it would be like to live that life.

³ From <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Americana> Retrieved 27 October 2013



Fig. 1.5. Screenshot from *Black Snake Moan* (2005).

The thick atmosphere, amplified by folk tunes, country songs or delta blues music, preferably played on a jukebox or record player, is a great source of inspiration for my work, as well as the American style of architecture that was very distinct in the 50's and 60's (diners, motels, and also residential bungalows).

Some photographers who captured what I feel is the essence of Americana are Dave Jordano (1948) (fig. 1.6), Aernout (1951) and Teska (1980) Overbeeke (with their show *Mississippi 25 years later*) William Eggleston (1939) (whose works are also very suspenseful), Stephen Shore (1947), Gerd Kittel and Andrew Phelps.



Fig. 1.6. Dave Jordano - *PrairieLand - Small Towns* (2006-2010)

The hyperrealist painters Richard Estes (1932), Don Eddy (1944) and Ralph Goings (1928) also often chose very American scenes as their subjects, focusing on big city architecture, shiny American cars and 60's fast-food restaurants.

Some movies that have a strong Americana vibe are the aforementioned *Winter's Bone*, *No Country for Old Men*, *Black Snake Moan*, *Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1984), *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994) *Death Proof* (one of my favorites, written and directed by Quentin Tarantino, 2007). The TV series *Supernatural* (2005-present) features lots of American folklore, muscle cars, motels, diners, hard rock music and many very atmospheric scenes (fig. 1.7). Creator of the show Eric Kripke says about his choice of music to accompany the show:

There's a real energy in the Midwest to miles and miles of flat farmland and two-lane blacktops that stretches into infinity and you're jamming classic rock as loud as it can go. There's something so mythic, so American about that, and that's the energy I wanted the show to have.⁴

⁴ From <http://www.hypable.com/2013/07/10/ultimate-supernatural-road-trip-playlist/> Retrieved 27 October 2013



Fig. 1.7. Screenshot from *Supernatural*.

Other shows with a very Americana setting are *The Walking Dead* (Frank Darabont, 2010-present), *Sons of Anarchy* (Kurt Sutter, 2008-present), *Breaking Bad* (Vince Gilligan, 2008-2013) and *Justified* (2010-present).

2. Humor

By juxtaposing certain visual elements, I add some humor to the scenes. Through the unusual placement of objects (like a prehistoric cat skeleton or an upside-down stuffed parrot in a miniature orange tree) you wouldn't normally encounter in, say, a living room, the expectation pattern of the viewer is broken and this can be quite comic. The humor in my paintings is mostly of the black kind. I try to use this trick subtly, so the 'joke' is only discovered after looking at the painting for a little while, and even then might still have the viewer wondering if it is indeed meant to be funny. This also adds greatly to the earlier mentioned viewing dynamics.

Andrew Phelps acknowledged and captured this kind of humor in his series Higley (fig. 2.1).



Fig. 2.1. Andrew Phelps - Higley

Many of Tarantino's movies also contain this type of comedy – for example the exact moment Jungle Julia pulls out her *cell phone* in an, up until that point, completely retro 70's setting in *Death Proof*.

3. Application of formal qualities

3.1 Light

Lighting is essential for creating an atmosphere, and thus suspense. Changing the intensity, direction or color of light can completely alter the feel of a room. I apply this strategy in order to create a certain basic atmosphere for setting the stage for the story. It can be either serene, suspenseful, gloomy, cheerful, esoteric, etc. In many of my interiors, the sole source of light is cool daylight coming in through a window. I would like to experiment more and create some darker interiors that are lit by artificial lighting only.

3.2 Color

Applying certain colors to an interior suggests something about the inhabitant. There are several theories regarding the effect on your mood of color in your home, and I might look deeper into these theories to really apply some of them in my paintings. For instance, yellow is usually regarded as being a mood-lifting color- this might mean the occupant of the yellow room has a very cheerful personality, or, on the contrary, tries lifting their low spirits by painting the walls a fluorescent yellow. Also, signal colors such as red can heighten the significance of certain small objects, like the firetruck-red telephone in La Red. Similarly, I can hide objects in the scene, so the viewer only discovers them after a while, by giving them a color that is very similar to the colors surrounding it. Lastly, giving walls, furniture, objects or food/beverages unnatural colors can add to the sense of uneasiness. I can thus apply color as a means to tell parts of the story.

3.3 Form

The lines that form the shape of the rooms are always very straight, although they are painted freehand. Also, there generally are a lot of long, straight lines in my paintings, which could add to a feeling of claustrophobia in some compositions, and force the eyes of the viewer in a certain direction.

The form of the objects are as true to the original as possible, because I want my interiors to look and feel realistic. The viewer should not be thinking he is looking at a dreamy surrealist room, yet be able to imagine this room really exists somewhere. To achieve this realism, I use several reference pictures while painting. Where possible however, such as with patterns, wall decoration, plants and small details, I enjoy painting from my imagination.

3.4 Composition and perspective

Another formal strategy that can strongly add to the suspenseful atmosphere in a room, is composition. Deciding what to include in the scene, and, equally important, what to leave out, is essential to the amount of mystery a room emanates. The borders of the canvas are analogous to the edge of the peripheral vision of the viewer, so suggesting something is going on beyond these borders has a very unnerving effect. Also, by showing only a certain part of an interior, and by deliberately positioning the objects, large and small, I am planning a route for the eyes of the viewer to follow. This way, carefully composing the scene has a major impact on the chronology of the viewing experience. Perspective can also play a comparable part by forcing a direction in which to look. Also, by painting all the lines freehand, the perspective, although convincing, might not be 100% correct. This can make the viewer a bit uncomfortable, especially when he can't quite put his finger on the cause.

3.5 Textural expression

Like with form, I try to stay as close to reality as possible when I paint the texture of a wall, floor, or object. This way the viewer can easily believe the scene is real. There is a nice challenge in trying to achieve a convincing look for an old scruffy leather couch, an empty glass, a stuccoed wall, etc. Making objects look aged is particularly difficult.

Conclusion/Summary

By exploring the themes that fascinate and inspire me, I have created a work of reference for myself and a context for viewers. I feel I have clarified what drives me to create my interior landscapes, and I have gained a lot of new inspirational sources in the process. What I try to express through my work has also become clearer.

Obviously, movies are a great source of inspiration for me. Often, my paintings are quite similar to a movie still, suggesting a whole story that is happening just outside the depicted frozen moment. It appears to me that suspense is always present in my paintings, while the objects

and decoration in the rooms come from a few key ideas: the notion of living self-sufficiently, away from society, and the typical rural lifestyles in the less populated, less affluent areas of the States. Living in the margin/on the fringes of society- like Ree in *Winter's Bone*, Jeffrey 'the Dude' Lebowski, Mud, Alexander Supertramp, and Sam and Dean Winchester- is the overlapping notion here. Regardless of their perceived wealth (or lack thereof), the inhabitants of my interiors don't entirely live by the rules of society anymore, but they haven't made the jump to complete freedom yet – out of habit perhaps?

I have elaborated upon the various means I apply to pull the viewer in and have them wonder what living in the depicted house would be like, while creating a dynamic viewing experience. Some techniques I very consciously apply to get the story across are composition/perspective, strategically placed and finely painted objects, lighting and suggestion of unseen spaces (through windows and doors or around corners).

Coming soon...

In future works, I would like to apply the notion of self-sufficient living more ostentatiously by creating interiors that have obviously been hand-built by the current inhabitants (who have no building experience) – using found materials like drywall, plywood and corrugated iron, though I'm by no means emphasizing poverty. I'm often escapistically imagining what it would be like to live that way.

Other themes that have not yet played a big part in my work so far, but have definitely been inspiring me, are gaudiness, tackiness and camp - the trailer park trash 'aesthetics'; retro 70's aesthetics and artifacts; rebel subcultures (like MCs) and desolate isolation. I would love to create works with a strong visual presence of any (or several) of these themes, like a beat-up trailer in a desert-like landscape with an epic retro muscle car in front, surrounded by white trash paraphernalia such as flamingo statuettes and broken bathroom ceramics. Or a sleek 70's lounge including white shiny round coffee tables with fancy drinks in unnerving colors and glasses filled with cigarettes.

I also would like to create my own iconography by reusing certain objects in different interiors, giving them meaning beyond their use in daily life, thus turning them into symbols. I think this will add to the mystery and could raise even more questions. Plus I would be creating a kind of cult status surrounding my paintings, like Tarantino did through clever use of fake-brands and suggested backstories of certain characters to create a parallel movie-universe. This allowed him to bend the rules that would apply to our current reality. It would be really cool to pretend I only paint interiors that exist in a universe very much like our own, but that does not quite seem right. I feel I could enhance that atmosphere by placing certain objects several times in different settings.

I would like to mention some lesser known artists who are my contemporaries and inspire me: Thijs Jansen (1986, www.painterthijs.com), Hugo Tieleman (1982), Ryan Sardachuk (1993) of Fast Lane Illustration (www.fastlaneillustration.com).

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Screenshot from *Paris, Texas* (1984)