

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



26 / Gerard Verdijk, painter, sculptor, Marcillac-St.Quentin, France

Alas, he's gone. After an intensely experienced and enjoyed private and artistic life, Gerard Verdijk died in 2005. He never made it to the tallgrass prairie in Kansas, but he did come to love New Mexico after various explorations of other areas of the US. America wasn't the only foreign country he was attracted to. He lived and worked also in The Hague (the Netherlands), Witten am Ruhr (Germany), Boissano (Italy), Basel (Switzerland), Tokyo (Japan), Ponte de Sor (Portugal)—and I may have forgotten a couple of places. South Africa, right. He was a cosmopolitan and widely recognized and appreciated artist, who had solo exhibitions in far-away places such as Verona, Paris, Wuppertal, Vienna, Genova, St. Gallen, Marseille, Amsterdam, Toulouse, Augsburg, Brussels, Kopenhagen, London, Eindhoven, Ostend, Berlin, Stockholm, Dublin, Zürich, Dordrecht, Sigean, Assenede, Baden-Baden, Prague, plus Los Angeles and New York City, Wainscott and East Hampton—and again I may have forgotten a few place names. This list proves Gerard cannot have been a lazy artist. Show after show, and each or at least most of them presented new directions for his paintings, drawings, and sculpture, new interpretations of themes that were a constant all through the half century he spent creating.

I was introduced to Gerard in I guess it was 1969, when he was living in The Hague. I was building a small art collection for a company I worked for and selected a few of his screen prints—and acquired two for myself as well. All of his life Gerard, when not painting, spent most of the time discussing art heatedly while dining well and drinking wine and *eaus de vie* with great enthusiasm. So, I must admit that I left him early in the morning of that dark, wintry night, all but sober, for the 50 mile drive home. Luckily, in the nights of 1969, road traffic in the Netherlands was as rare as it is in rural Kansas in 2013, so I made it to my warm bed undetected and safe.

Years later I acquired more of his works, including a remarkable drawing from the period he kept experimenting with pencil, and a large painting called 'White on White', which it was indeed; on two very heavy sheets of very expensive handmade white paper he painted two contrasting fields of roughly applied white, broad horizontal lines. They were opposites, just like many of his drawings and paintings would show in years to come in an unbelievable variety and diversity—the dyptich being a recurrent feature of his work. There was a twin 'Black on Black', too, which was bought by the Boymans van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam. Mine on white was never framed; the sheets hang freely each from two nails and of course they changed color over the years; the sun turned the white paper sort of sandy-colored, then like bamboo, and the paper collected a few fly specks; the white paint changed color, too, but kept most of the original clearness. It isn't a painting loved by everyone, but I do.

Contrasts, opposites. While in Japan, he intuitively brought together different characters that vaguely remind of Japanese calligraphy as well as haiku in the two fields that divided the work. While in New Mexico, the opposing elements were the results of what his eyes saw and his soul sensed of the history and culture of Pueblo Indians and Hispanics. I often wonder what he would have created once he had been confronted with the emptiness of the prairie, its monotony of green in the summer, of silver-grey in the winter. Would he have found possibilities in the endless grasslands for his characteristic juxtaposition of two parts in a single sheet or canvas, and of forms in which there is a constant tension between what remains visible and what is obliterated?

In the catalogue for an early retrospective exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (1993) I read: "Within a brief space of time the Netherlands, country of painters, brought forth those two great opposites and starting points of the 20th century, Van Gogh and Mondrian. In the work of both we encounter the emotional radicality which was fueled by the desire not to beautify painting but to keep it alive in an innovative fashion. Between the two masters the wide field of variants in modern painting was formed: painting liberated on two fronts. Gerard Verdijk has his own place in this field—a painter with a light, instinctive, fragile touch, but combined with a studied control of the hand's movements. His is lucid work, personal and intimate in its considerations."

Lucid, personal and intimate. So were his favorite recipes. I remember: put chunks of turkey breast and goose liver paté into champagne *demi sec* (a full bottle); add snips of black truffles; add salt and pepper; cover with puff pastry; put the mixture into a pre-heated oven; let it steam, steam, then cut away the pastry. The scents of all the goodies will fill the room. Is there any better perfume than "Gerard's Soup"? It's like eating your dreams.