

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.



29 / Hendrik van Leeuwen, painter, photographer, writer, The Hague, the Netherlands

Hendrik van Leeuwen—otherwise known as “hndrk”—is a painter, photographer, art teacher, art critic, columnist and book editor who first came to the US in 1994. His first wife, a high-school teacher in Delft, the Netherlands, participated in an exchange program and traded homes and jobs with a teacher from Grants, New Mexico. Hendrik found himself on top of a dry mesa outside a town that had boomed shortly after WW II thanks to rich uranium finds but by the 1990s had lost much of its importance and many of its digging inhabitants. By then just a motel and fast-feeder-infested stop off the freeway from Albuquerque to Flagstaff and beyond, about the only thing reminding of the bountiful mining years was (as is) its Museum of Mining. Blasting caps, ore carts, ventilation tubes, a fake shaft and much more replicate an underground uranium mine; displays tell the story of Paddy Martinez, who in 1950 was the accidental discoverer of the yellow cake that brought short-lived fame to the town. The Jackpile Mine and other mines in the area for a while were the source of half of all uranium oxide mined in the US.

Coming from a 17th-century town house on a narrow yet stately Delft canal not far from where Johannes Vermeer painted his ‘Girl with a Pearl Earring’ and much more, it took a while for Hendrik and his family to acclimatize in the dusty ghost town. His wife tried to introduce sexual education at Grants High only to be met by a tomahawk-wielding and “Shame!” screaming PTA. Hendrik himself found some

occupation at teaching field hockey to the female inmates of the state penitentiary. With their kids they spent the weekends exploring the lava flows and ice caves of El Malpais National Monument and the Anasazi ruins of Chaco Culture National Historic Park, as well as Acoma Pueblo and El Morro National Monument—all not far away. One weekend they had to stay at home—this was after they'd received a phone call announcing my arrival in Grants. At that time, I didn't know Hendrik, had never met him; a good friend in the Netherlands had advised me to go visit her cousin who was spending a year in New Mexico, in a place called Grants. "If you happen to be in the area..."

We've kept in touch ever since. Hendrik and family came to visit when years later—meanwhile, they had returned to the Netherlands—I myself was living in New Mexico; and he came back after he had divorced and was dating Gina. Together they came not only to New Mexico but also to Kansas. Hendrik taught a master class abstract painting at The Gallery at Pioneer Bluffs. He knows about art and is a great art teacher who has run his own private "school" in Delft and The Hague for many years. The weekend at Pioneer Bluffs was a great success; Gina and Hendrik's stay in Matfield Green was unforgettable because of the grandiose rice table Gina, of Indonesian descent, prepared while she was in town.

Hendrik has the eye. A born observer, no detail escapes him; he picks up all fine nuances in any art work from any period and is able to analyze and describe them in precise and amazingly clear words for his students and, in the years he wrote art critique for a regional newspaper, for his readers, too. The eye became even more apparent when Hendrik started writing daily columns for his newspaper—observations of city life so sharp and intimate each one became a little jewel. Eventually, photos were added, and suddenly there was visual proof of the eye because he could shoot straight like no other; and then there were only photos needing (almost) no text—and if he added text, he used few words while telling a lot. See: www.flickr.com/people/hndrk and go to: -hndrk-'s photostream.

For his 'Lady in red', shot in his physician's waiting room, Hendrik, never shy for a word, broke the ice with a short conversation. "Is this a red day for you?" he asked. "The way you dress cannot be a coincidence. Not only the clothes match perfectly, you even picked a red chair..." She happily admitted that clothes were her passion. "I have lots of them, in all colors, so I can have my blue and gray days as well. They express how I feel." But how did one select? "Do you already plan for the next day when you turn in?" he ventured. "Why yes," she said, "To wake up in the morning and to see a perfect combination already laid out—that makes the start of a day much easier, don't you think?" Hendrik nodded, thoughtful of his own dressing habits. "Next patient," the physician coughed...

One of the most impressive of Hendrik's toils is the book 'Contour.Continuity', a confrontation of 111 contemporary Dutch artists and their art with the past—with the historic collections in three Delft museums. Hendrik wrote the catalogue and as always used few words to open up a world of relationships. The catalogue shows what Dutch old art and Dutch contemporary art have in common. Styles may differ, but human experiences are comparable throughout time. Hendrik's lines almost form haikus: "No image comes closer than the self-portrait. The painter is forced to apply paint to himself." Or, "Nothing can be absorbed in one view. Observation is the collection of impressions." Or, "Each ending is clothed in a wrap of history." I am sorry I cannot show text and images, for the statements (translated from beautifully used Dutch language) become truly meaningful when seen in context.