

MEET THE MODERN MASTERS

Amsterdam's art scene is so much more than Rembrandt and Van Gogh. And right now, it's time for a new generation of artists to take centre stage...

Words MARK SMITH Photography MARCUS KOPPEN

For some years now, visitors strolling across Amsterdam's Museumplein – the manicured expanse of grass bordered by some of the world's most revered art institutions – must have wondered what on earth was going on. Alongside the grand Rijksmuseum and the revered Concertgebouw concert hall, a mammoth, eye-popping, white structure was taking shape under an enormous tarpaulin. To some, it resembled an outsized piece of Tupperware scattered by some picnicking giant; to others, it looked like an enormous domestic bath. Unsurprisingly, it was the latter nickname that stuck.

With the unveiling of its bathtub – aka, the extension to the Stedelijk Museum – last month, Amsterdam became the proud owner of a world class, 21st-century art museum. Like Paris's inside-out Pompidou Centre or the twisted titanium weirdscape of the Guggenheim in Bilbao, the structure is as

provocative as the works it contains. The largest open-plan gallery space in the Netherlands, it's a building that can also now do justice to the collection's enormous haul of work by artists such as Tracey Emin and Mark Rothko.

It couldn't have come at a better time. The Stedelijk's more famous neighbours – namely, the stately Golden Age treasure trove of the Rijksmuseum, with its awesome collection of Rembrandts, and the ever-popular Van Gogh Museum – are closed until 2013 for extensive renovations. This means that the city's bleeding-edge contemporary art finally has an opportunity to emerge from the shadows of the long-dead painters who have defined Amsterdam's artistic landscape for decades.

And take advantage of it they have. Right now, across the city, young artists are having what you might call a moment. They're taking over galleries, warehouse spaces – even ●



Clockwise from left, plastic cutlery sculpture at the Tjdelijk Museum; Eva de Klerk, who created an art space in an abandoned shipyard in the Noord district; *Sky Over Snæfel*, by Allard van Hoorn; the Stedelijk Museum



empty walls. Some are hosting events, while others have turned their homes into exhibition spaces. In short, the city has put itself on the modern-art map like never before.

"The Netherlands in general and Amsterdam in particular have become important testing grounds for artists from around the world," says Ann Goldstein, the Stedelijk's American director. She sees Amsterdam today as a laboratory for the arts: schools, artist-in-residence programmes, galleries and alternative spaces are offering unparalleled opportunities for up-and-coming talent.

Goldstein has opened with *Beyond Imagination*, a headline exhibition of work by young contemporary artists who, although they hail from all over the world, have chosen Amsterdam as their base. "I think the city has always been open to new cultures and ideas," says German-born video-artist Julika Rudelius, whose work appears in the show, "and that has to do with the city's trading past."

Across town, another big-name institution is pushing the boundaries for contemporary art. The reopened De Appel

Arts Centre disdains labels such as museum or gallery, but its glamorous new premises, a stone's thrown from the city's Central Station, showcases highly conceptual work by promising Dutch talents, including installation artist Allard van Hoorn. His *Sky Over Snæfel*, a massive, wall-mounted collection of eerily glowing bulbs, is a live abstraction of online images of the sky over an Icelandic volcano. Hauntingly beautiful, it is as inventive, in its own way, as the blazing landscapes of Van Gogh.

If all of this sounds a bit, well, obscure, then a new and completely different style of cultural curator could well prove to be your creative cup of tea. City-wide, a glut of unoccupied commercial premises – courtesy of the global financial crisis – has given artists with really big ideas a whole new kind of canvas to play with.

Step forward the 60 Layers of Cake Foundation. This summer, it took over the vacant Overhoeks office block across the IJ waterfront from Central Station to create the Tjdelijk Museum, an environmentally minded temporary landmark, incorporating beautiful, giant sculptures fashioned from household refuse. The entry price? Three empty plastic drinks bottles.

Co-producer Clarine van Karnebeek sees such waste-not-want-not initiatives as the modern-day successors to the famous Amsterdam squatting movement of the



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