

Focus

Atelier van Lieshout

by Rebecca Dimling Cochran



Clockwise from upper right: *Untitled*, 1987. Beer crates and concrete tiles, 40 x 120 x 120 cm. *Autocrat*, 1997. Mixed-media installation, exterior and interior views. *La Bais-ô-Drôme*, 1995 (interior). Mixed media, 245 x 213 x 670 cm. *Mobile Home for the Kröller Müller*, 1995 (exterior). Mixed media, 300 x 800 x 700 cm.



Traditionally, an "atelier" was an artist's workshop, where apprentices carefully crafted works by hand under the tutelage of a master. Atelier van Lieshout is, in fact, an apt moniker for the studio that the Dutch artist Joep van Lieshout established in 1995. Filled with a variety of artisans working on several different projects, the Rotterdam space is not merely a house of production. It is a place where the unique vision of a talented group of people comes to life.

Atelier van Lieshout's oeuvre is difficult to classify. Sculpture, industrial design, and architecture all seem to play an important role in the conception and construction of their work. Although the Atelier exhibits in museums and galleries throughout Europe and the United States, more than 50 percent of their production consists of functional pieces designed for residential and commercial spaces. Thus they blur the distinction between "fine" and "commercial" art and defy most forms of labeling.

A graduate of the Academy of Modern Art in Rotterdam, Joep van Lieshout grounds his work in the classical tenants of sculpture: composition and proportion. His early constructions coupled found objects such as bright red plastic beer crates and rough concrete paving stones. By balancing the components' visual weight in symmetrical, geometric arrangements, Lieshout



achieved a rhythmic harmony that seemed to marry the disparate materials.

Lieshout adopted similar principles in his creation of more functional artworks. In "Collection 1989," the standardized measurements of pre-cut lumber functioned as the basic proportional element for a series of utilitarian tables and shelving units. Each piece was coated with what has become the signature of Atelier van Lieshout: a brightly colored polyester resin. This incredibly light material leaves a hardened shell, which is both durable and waterproof. Even without internal supports, the malleable component can be molded into freestanding elements such as sinks, hand basins, baths, and kitchen units as Lieshout's "Collection 1990" demonstrates.

In a direct challenge to the value assigned to unique works within the traditional fine art market, Lieshout produced these "Collections" in unlimited multiples. Beyond the pieces created for exhibition, others were made and delivered to order. Numerous site-specific commissions soon became a natural extension of this program. In 1990, he built a bar for serving drinks within the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam. This led to bars and restroom facilities for Rem Koolhaas's Grand Palais Convention Center in Lille (1994), busing stations for the cafeteria in the Museum of



Modern Art in New York (1995), and a renovation for the Alliance Française in Rotterdam (1995–1996), among others.

Each of the discrete objects placed within these interiors consisted of either a hollow shell of molded polyester or simple coatings over a basic interior frame. To accommodate his desire to create self-contained works, Lieshout developed a new compound, which combined interior and exterior layers of strong, glass-fiber reinforced polyester with light, brittle polyurethane foam. This “polyurethane sandwich construction” allows the creation of walls in which the polyfoam acts as an insulator and the hard shell is durable and watertight.

Atelier van Lieshout uses this sandwich technique to make self-sufficient, portable housing units. Some, like the *Modular House Mobile* (1995–1996), come replete with cab and engine. (In 1996, the unit was actually driven between exhibitions in New York, Chicago, Winnipeg, and Los Angeles.) A truly functional unit with a toilet and shower at the rear, it is not without its creature comforts; the seats and dash are covered with woolly fur and the floor is lined in cowhide. The contrast in both color and texture between the hard, utilitarian shell and the plush, warm furnishings infuses the work with an element of decadence. This is similarly true in Lieshout’s

Bais-ô-Drôme (1995), a traveling party on wheels. Hitched up to a vehicle, it becomes a utopian retreat with all the necessities: a large bed, an integrated sound system, and liquor dispensers mounted on the wall. A commission for the Walker Art Center, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1998), has a different twist. A permanent full-scale wood cabin, designed after traditional pioneer shelters, connects to a 50-foot moveable trailer. This detachable “room” also functions as a “Mobile Art Lab,” which the museum plans to take into the community for hands-on activities, performances, lectures, and community gatherings.

Made-to-order variations of these portable housing units can be constructed from Atelier van Lieshout’s *Master and Slave Units* (1994–1995). The stretched skin wall panels of the “master unit” are screwed to floor and roof and can be dismantled to attach various “slave units.” Depending on the function of the building, each owner can select from a sleep unit, a lounge unit, a bureau unit, a utility unit, a dinette unit, a sit-pit unit, or a staircase unit. For example, the *Mobile Home for the Kröller Mueller* (1995), which is parked in the museum’s sculpture garden, has a sleep unit, a utility unit, and a sanitary unit attached to the “master” frame.

While self-reliance and self-provision are integral components of these units,

each caters to a particular taste or lifestyle. Atelier van Lieshout’s newer work takes a broader perspective. Based on what they consider to be the practical necessities of contemporary society—shelter, protection, reproduction, and a few extracurricular pleasures—they have designed units with specialized functions that, when placed together, can create a self-sufficient community. *Autocrat* (1997) is a spartan survival unit fitted with a device for catching rainwater, slaughtering animals, and salting and preserving meat. (It should be noted that the Atelier has, in fact, slaughtered and preserved a pig, documentation of which was shown at the Galerie Roger Pailhaus in Paris in 1997.) In 1998, they premiered their “Workshop for Alcohol and Medicine” and a “Workshop for Making Bombs” in Toulouse, France.

New works that further illustrate the Atelier’s vision of a self-reliant utopian world began a U.S. tour in January. Their *Saw Mill/Tree Cutting Unit* (1998), *Chemistry Lab* (1998), *Kitchen and Dining Container* (1998), and *Modular Multi-Person Bed* (1998) will be among the various objects, models, drawings, and watercolors exhibited.

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***The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly*, 1998. Mixed-media installation at the Walker Art Center.**

