

# THE STILLNESS, THE DANCING

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Elisabeth Ariëns

Amsterdam-based visual artist **Chantal Elisabeth Ariëns** explains how embracing vintage print-making techniques helped her create often dreamlike images that came from a place of emotional honesty. Jon Stapley reports.



Where Are You #8



Where Are You #28

Chantal Elisabeth Ariëns likes to get her hands dirty. That's me being quite literal – the images you see on these pages are made using a printing technique called photopolymer etching. We'll get deeper into how it works shortly, but one thing that strikes you on watching the fascinating videos available online of Ariëns at work is how black ink gets absolutely everywhere. It's smeared on paper, matted in gloves, buried under fingernails.

The results, as you can see, are worth a little mess. The printing techniques are an integral aspect of the images displayed on these pages – Ariëns' series *Where Are You*, a collection of landscape

and portrait images that are exhibiting at Bildhalle Amsterdam until the end of July. Although they include human figures and recognisable landscapes, the images also have a timeless, dreamlike quality that is enhanced by the monochromatic printing technique.

It's a stark, beautiful and beguiling series of images, and one inextricably bound up in the personal journey the artist has taken to get to this point.

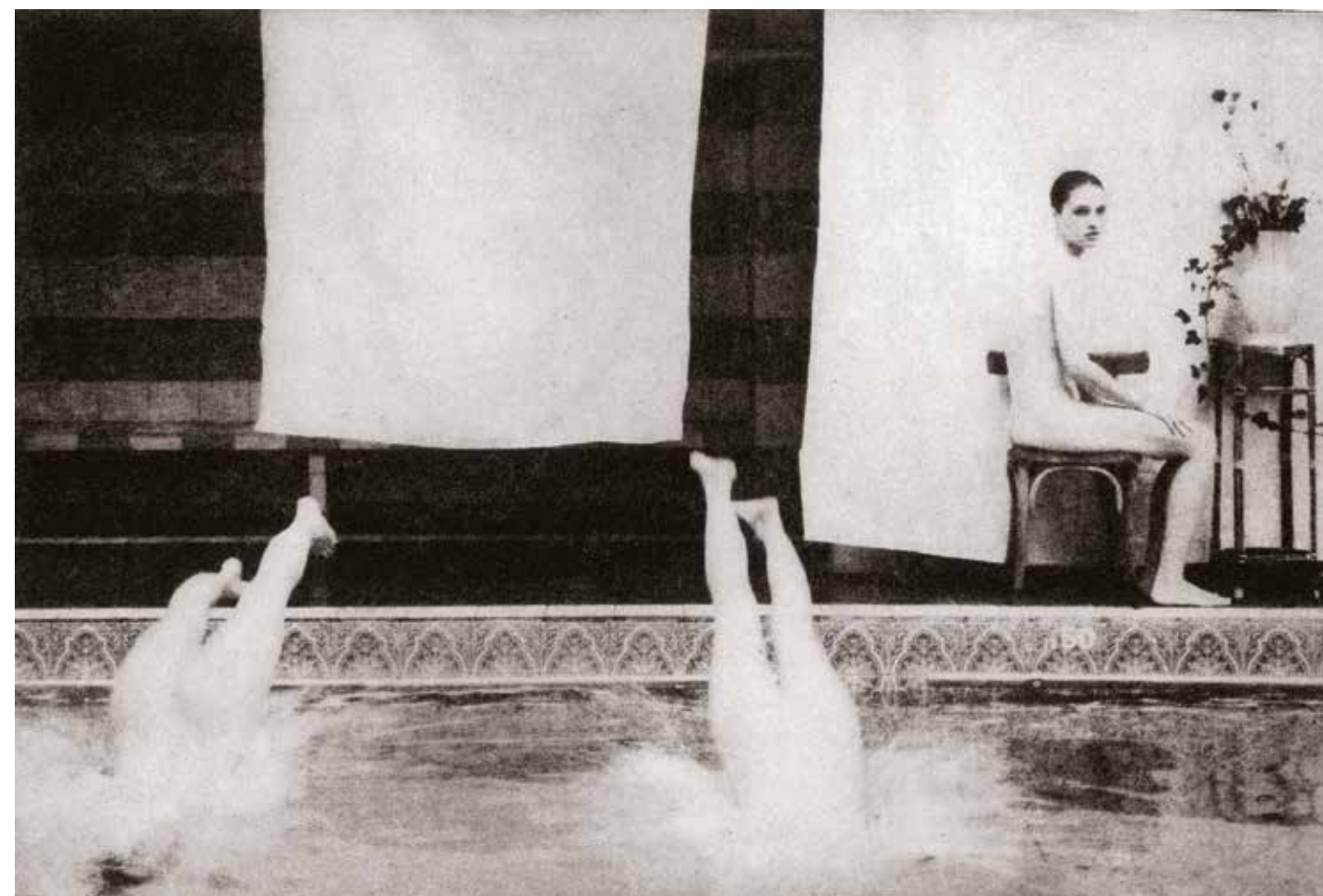
For Ariëns, exhibiting this work is a chance to return to a significant turning point in her life. '*Where Are You* is the title of the first series that I made,' she says. 'I started – I think in 2017 – to photograph without any concepts. I had been working for years for clients, for magazines. It was fantastic work, but I really wanted to see what would come from inside myself.'

So, Ariëns embarked on an unplanned photographic journey. She shot landscapes and portraits with models, experimenting with different compositions, techniques and ways of working. It wasn't clear what, if anything, might unite these images, and it was only when she brought the images together for the first time that themes began to emerge.

'It was very surprising to me, actually,' she says. 'Because it all had to do with loss, and with grief. I saw so many dark images. I lost my younger sister, and I thought I had put a lot of the grief behind me, but because I was so open, in this way of photographing, I think I gave it the chance to come out. It was also a time when I was starting to get deeper into meditation, and this combination worked in a certain way to open doors. It really got personal, and that >



Ode #05



L'Apesanteur #11



< was what I had been longing for – to make work that was more personal.'

Ariëns grew up around photography – her father was a professional photographer and bought her a toy camera when she was just four years old. This meant Ariëns was familiar with the darkroom from a very young age and has long been au fait with the process of making a print. Even so, her first real passion was not photography – it was dance: ballet, to be specific, with eight years spent at the ballet academy in Tilburg, the Netherlands, dreaming of dancing with world-famous companies. However, the reality was not quite the right fit: 'I had some experiences dancing with companies, but it was different to what I had had in mind as a child.' So, at 30 years old, Ariëns found herself searching for a new passion to throw herself into.

'In the beginning, I had no idea,' she says. 'I did some modelling jobs, and I didn't really like it, but I got to work with some very good photographers. It was like a photography school. And from there, I slowly started to photograph, and started working for magazines, until that moment when I realised I wanted to work for myself. Then everything changed for me.'

*'So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.'*

Photopolymer etching is quite an old printing technique. It involves transferring an image to a transparency, placing it on top of a metal plate coated with photopolymer film, then using a very strong UV light to project the image on to the plate. From there, the light-sensitive layer can be washed off, and a print can be made with ink and paper.

Interestingly, in Ariëns' case, her images are first shot digitally and then transferred to this physical, chemical medium. 'I love this combination,' Ariëns says. 'I go from digital to analogue.' This reversal of the norm is a highly tactile process, and that's just how Ariëns likes it.

'To really work with my hands, to dive deeper into the craftsmanship – to me, that is very rewarding. I love to work with my hands and to work almost like a painter. My works are not paintings, but I sometimes feel that working with the ink, and using different inks and the papers... it's more intuitive, I would say. I love this >

Opposite (top) **Where Are You #15**

Opposite (below) **Ode #01**

Right (top) **L'Apesanteur #3**

Right (below) **L'Apesanteur #1**





part of the process. And that's what gives a special character, I think, to my prints.'

For Ariëns, a big part of this work – and really all of her work – is exploring the relationship between the dark and light. In her artist's statement, she quotes TS Eliot: 'So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.' She feels that in all her work you can see this duality, the play between dark and the light, and it's there not just in a figurative way, but a literal one – in the physical act of making the prints, and the results.

'With this printing process, I can make it even stronger, this feeling of darkness,' she says. 'But also, the light. I can use the ink to make a really strong dark or wipe it away where I want more light. I can find the balance and shift the balance. It's very interesting to work with.'

Ariëns admits she is absolutely hooked on the print-making aspect of her practice. Last year she travelled to Italy to embark on an artist's residency working on the heliogravure print-making technique on copper plates. 'This is something I really

want to go on with, because with the copper plates you can work in a graphic way, and I think that can be very interesting in combination with photography. It has brought me really deep into print-making; I can feel that I'm just a beginner, and there are so many more ways to explore it. I'm very excited about that.'

As you can see, many (although not all) of the images in *Where Are You* involve people. The poses vary, but in many of the images there's a clear sense of movement, whether it's from the whirling of a woman's hair as she sharply turns her head to face the lens, or a garment trailing behind a blurred figure as they run across the frame.

Ariëns has spoken often about how important it is for her to maintain a good personal relationship with the models she shoots. She finds it vitally important to create an intimate atmosphere when working, and as such tries to keep the scale of the shoots to a minimum, and work with small teams.

'When I photograph, I like to be as close to myself as possible,' she says. 'It's good for the models because it creates a different atmosphere. When there's an intimate atmosphere, we feel connected, and when we're connected, so much is possible. For the models themselves, it's also a challenge to let go of poses and be able to be themselves, and work from there. I don't see it as work – although it is – I see it as play. Playing together.'

Or like a dance? 'Absolutely. And since I studied ballet, I know how it feels to move. I know what kind of feelings a movement can bring, or the other way around – how emotions can also bring movements. I really like models to move, because it means they become more themselves. When they are not able to stand and pose the way they are used to standing and posing, it becomes an adventurous way of working together; >

Top (left) *Filleet Garçons #5*  
Top (right) *L'Apesanteur #1*  
Opposite *Reverie #3*





**Where Are You #20**

< to move, to let go of posing and see where it takes us, and what images it brings us.'

Indeed, although she left the world of dancing behind, Ariëns feels that the experiences she had in that world have formed a vital part of her make-up as a photographer. 'It's in everything I do. Especially now my work has become more personal, I really use that background – I use the movement, my experience in the theatre. Everything comes together in my photography now.'

While *Where Are You* exhibits throughout the summer, it's shown in conjunction with some newer work of Ariëns – fashion and couture images, created using the same analogue print-making process. This project began when Ariëns was approached by a creative director in Paris. She was hesitant at first, but ultimately embraced the chance to inject a little of her own sensibility into a very different type of image.

'I tried to approach the couture images the way I would my personal work,' she says. 'It's not just about clothes; it's more about poetry, about bringing out a feeling, and once again about connecting with the models and putting them at ease and seeing what can happen. I'm actually not particularly interested in fashion itself, but it's really interesting to work the way I work and make these

couture images more personal.'

This feels like an apt marriage of old and new – a revisiting of Ariëns' former life in fashion, in modelling, in working for hire, but also bringing in the more personal, emotionally truthful sensibility she has developed in her artistic practice. For Ariëns, it's a potential blueprint of the future.

'When I look at my work and where

I will go, the most important thing is for me to stay close to myself; to be able to make my work authentic and personal. It doesn't matter what the project is, it has to be authentic.'

▣ ***Where Are You* by Chantal Elisabeth Ariëns is on display at Bildhalle Amsterdam in the Netherlands until 31 August.**  
▣ [chantalelisabethariens.com](http://chantalelisabethariens.com)



**Where Are You #30**