

Roos van Geffen

The central question posed in Roos van Geffen's artistic practice is: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to live and die, to feel and remember? She explores various ways to reveal the essence of humanity.



Seeing the high beams of a million galaxies flick on

Your work brings up very existential feelings. Do you fear death?
No, I am not afraid of my own death.

What drew you to explore existential themes in your art? Was there a particular moment or experience that sparked this interest?
Making works about existential themes was not a conscious choice for me. Instead, my art stems from personal fascinations and experiences, all of which together explore what it means to be human. I am compelled to keep asking questions, searching, and starting anew until I capture the essence, which I transform into visual art. This approach is integral to my artistic practice and not a particular moment in time.

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I have an innate desire to uncover the heart of things, and this has led me to consider existential questions. However, I don't sit in my studio thinking about which existential question to explore next. Over time, I've become more aware of this creative process, and I can now pinpoint the common thread running through my work more accurately. In the last seven years, my art has become more candid, truthful, and straightforward.

Your artwork, Drift, features large underwater portraits of people, including children, that gradually deteriorate over time due to their surroundings. You've explained that this piece explores the relationship between the environment and human interaction. What did your exploration reveal?

Rather than providing definitive answers or solutions, I consider my works as invitations for viewers to connect with the deeper layers of the human experience and our relationship with the world. Drift embodies two opposing concepts: it captures the fear of water, including the fear of drowning or being submerged by rising water, as well as the fear caused by our destructive treatment of the earth. At the same time, the artwork depicts serene faces gazing out at the world, gently carried by the water. This image combines fear and beauty, as flowing calmly can lead to better solutions, while fear often paralyzes us and leaves us stuck. As an artist, I find it fascinating that a work can both frighten and attract the viewer simultaneously.

Drift was commissioned by a municipality as part of a larger public space project about the future of the area. I spoke with children aged 10 and asked about their deepest desires and fears, many of which revolved around climate change. The image for Drift was born from those more conversations. Also, I had recurring dreams for years in which one of my children was carried away by water, with their face floating just below the surface. It was only when I installed the work in the canals of Almere that I realised I had created my own nightmare, as well as my own desire to let the flow of life carry me freely and serenely.

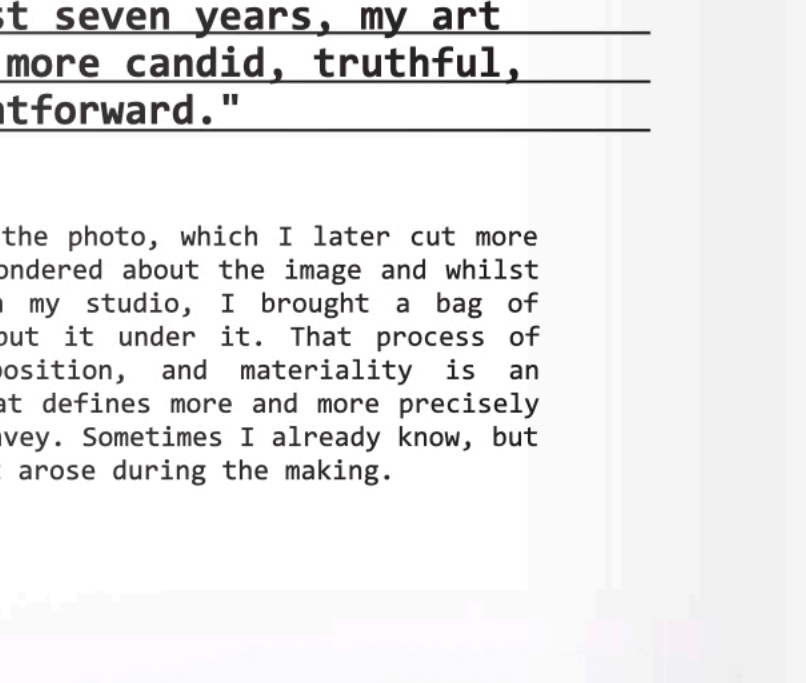
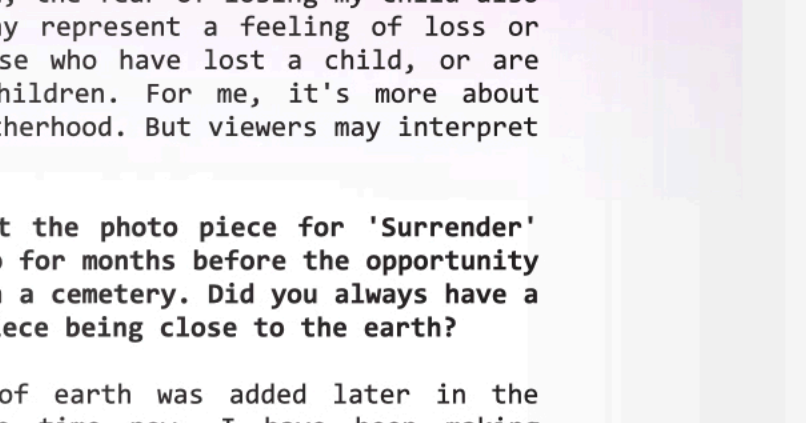
What is your most important work so far?

My most important work is Mother and Child, because it's the work closest to my heart. I made my mother's hand of soap, and washed my hands with that same hand daily and filmed the different stages of deformation. You see that the soap hand becomes smoother and more vulnerable. Ultimately, the ends of the fingers are very thin; a finger even breaks off. In this work associations with love and care can be felt, as well as more complex feelings such as suffering and dependence. But for me it's also a work about forgiving my mother for things that went wrong during my upbringing. Now that I am a mother myself, I realise that as a mother you act as best you can, but you make unintentional mistakes. Washing with mother's soap hand can be seen as a purification ritual, from the desire to be able to wash away pain.

Your work questions meta-narratives about life and death. 'Surrender' shows a clearly missing core. How should this be interpreted?
The artwork "Surrender" depicts a hole in the belly area, revealing the earth underneath. This self-portrait was born from a sense of emptiness and self-doubt I experienced at the time. The hole is not only a symbol of emptiness, but also connects it to the earth.

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It represents fertility and the cycle of life. At the time, I was pregnant and felt a bond with those who preceded me and would success me.



Mother and Child, 2021, Digitized 16 mm color film in loop (5:29"), 2 41 x 26 cm
maple wood boxes, soap, myrrh oil. Installation photos: Gert Jan van Rooij.

After I gave birth, the fear of losing my child also grew. The hole may represent a feeling of loss or emptiness for those who have lost a child, or are unable to have children. For me, it's more about emptiness than motherhood. But viewers may interpret it differently.

You mentioned that the photo piece for 'Surrender' sat in your studio for months before the opportunity came to show it in a cemetery. Did you always have a vision for this piece being close to the earth?

No, the element of earth was added later in the process. For some time now, I have been making drawings of a female body with a red, black, or coloured circle at belly height. At one point, I had a life-sized photograph of myself, lying naked on a piece of paper, printed and hung up in my studio.

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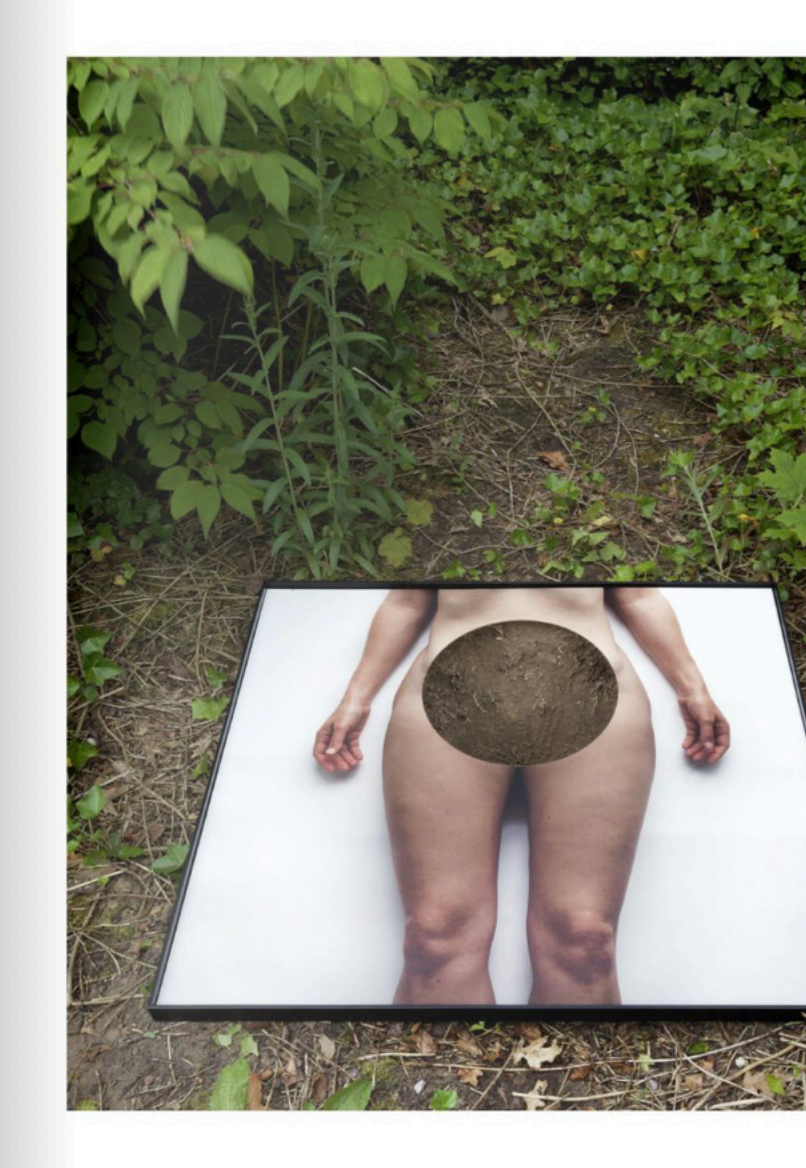
I tore a hole in the photo, which I later cut more precisely. As I pondered about the image and whilst messing around in my studio, I brought a bag of garden soil and put it under it. That process of photo size, composition, and materiality is an intuitive one, that defines more and more precisely what I want to convey. Sometimes I already know, but with this work, it arose during the making.



Surrender, 2021, Photo on aluminum steel, earth, 97cm x 85 cm x 65 cm. Site specific work in the garden of Museum Tot Zover at the Nieuwe Ooster cemetery in Amsterdam.



Drifting in Time, 2019, Digital C-prints on 77 x 94 cm oak frame.
Installation photos at the Museum Tot Zover: Gert Jan van Rooij



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