



**Women in Art Now // Jackie Sleper**

## Utrecht

Taking the World  
into ConsiderationA Conversation with Dutch  
Artist Jackie Sleper

## / Mexico series / מקסיקו /

**Jackie Sleper**, *Devoción*, 2008, from the series "Dulce Y Amargo" [Mexico], resin, turquoise, silver rattler, red coral, ceramic butterflies, porcelain, garnets, 30x20; photo: Ruben de Heer

ביקי שלפר, *Devoción*, 2008, מתוך הסדרה "Dulce Y Amargo" נמקסיקו, שרף, אבן טורקיז, רעשן מכסף, אלמוג רדום, פרפרים קרמיים, פורצלן, אבני נופך, 30x20; תצלום: רובן דה היר

*Edward Rubin*

In a highly unusual mixture of schooling, Utrecht-based artist Jackie Sleper studied at both the College of Agriculture and Horticulture (now Wellantcollege) and the Utrecht Academy of Visual Arts. While art school honed her technical skills, "farmer's school," as she likes to call it, taught her about the fragility of life, the sanctity of nature, and the importance of working with others to get the job done. It also informed the figures of humans, animals, birds, insects, flowers and plants, that populate her paintings, photographs, as well as clay, porcelain, resin, and wood sculptures. Sleper collects her works into highly theatrical, thematic exhibitions. Based on many trips to China, Mexico, and India, these exhibitions examine—often with an ironic, humorous, and surreal touch—the threads that connect people on a daily basis.

**Edward Rubin:** In lieu of attending a public high school, you studied for five years at the College of Agriculture and Horticulture. This is so unusual. Did you actually plan on becoming a farmer?

**Jackie Sleper:** No! But I also didn't want to go to a regular high school like everybody else. I wanted to be free, outside, and on my own. When I first enrolled, there were 700 boys and me. I took all the courses offered in *Land and Garden*. This "farmer experience" taught me about life, the weather, the growth process, the cycle of life and death, and the behavior of all kinds of birds, animals, and insects. But the college wasn't totally about farming. There was a full academic program.

**ER:** You mentioned that at a very early age it was already



**Jackie Sleper** working on the series "Silent Whisper" [China], 2005; photo: Ruben de Heer

ביקי שלפר עובדת על הסדרה "Silent Whisper" [סין], 2005; תצלום: רובן דה היר

obvious to you, as well as everybody around you, that you were born to be an artist. How did this manifest itself?

**JS:** I was the rebellious one in my family. I wasn't content to sit silently in my room playing with dolls. At age five I was already a wild child, always doing the unexpected. When the family was out of the house I would rearrange all of the furniture so nothing was the same when they returned. I also built a little cave-like house from tree branches in our backyard. I collected things from the street, took small objects from my parents', brother's and sister's rooms, as well as small objects from around the house, and hung them on strings from the ceiling.

**ER:** After graduating, you waited seven years to go to art school. Why so long? Were you making art during those years?

**JS:** I wanted to go to art school, but it was very expensive and my father refused to help me financially, so I went to

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## / China series / סיין /

**Jackie Sleper**, *Al Dai* (I love you), 2005, from the series "Silent Whisper" [China], porcelain, red coral, 15x19; photo: Ruben de Heer

**ביקי שלפר**, *Al Dai* (אני אוהב אותך), 2005, מתוך הסדרה "Silent Whisper" [סיין], פורצלן, אלמוג אדום, 15x19; תצלום: רובן דה היר

work to save money. I had many jobs. All the while, I was drawing and painting. Though I had no formal training, I was good enough to be commissioned by the cities of Utrecht and Dusseldorf to create murals, which paid well. I started out as a realist painter and, by the end of the first year, I was also taking photographs.

**ER:** Your diverse exhibitions and projects have intriguing titles such as "Silent Whispers," "Dulce y Amargo," "Black Jack," "Shadow of Life," and "Soil: Under the Skin of India." How do you plan such large ensembles? How do you come up with your titles?

**JS:** I really don't plan my exhibitions as such. Ideas just come to me. More than thinking what I am going to do, I feel it. As a teller of stories, I see myself as an intermediary, a midwife. Sometimes an exhibition is triggered by an event. My mother's death, which set me to thinking about the boundaries of pain and suffering, resulted in "Black Jack." It was only after visiting Mexico and seeing the joy and hardships that the people face every day that the title of "Dulce y Amargo," which translates to 'bittersweet,' popped into my mind. It is the same with China. "Silent Whispers" refers to the country's censorship.

**ER:** You work with assistants, curators, various craftspeople, and other artists.

**JS:** I love working with all kinds of people, including members of my family, who sometimes model for my work. I learned

first-hand how to work closely with other people at farmer school. It's a matter of respecting what they do, understanding how they fit into the overall picture, and minimizing your own ego. Right now I have two main assistants, a husband and wife team. Both are accomplished artists. They work with me on casting and making molds. I also work very closely with Enzo Forulesano, a professor of ceramics in Florence. I use ceramic flowers, birds, insects, butterflies, scorpions, rats, and sheep to adorn my sculptures. I design these myself, make a mold, create various prototypes, and Enzo's students use these examples to create as many as I need. I also incorporate other manufactured and handmade objects into my work, things that I find in flea markets, jewelry shops, children's stores, and factories around the world.

**ER:** Why China, Mexico, and India?

**JS:** Each visit has its own story. I chose to go to China. The uniqueness of the culture intrigued me, as did the restrictions—visitors were not allowed to travel freely. In 2004, when a "free zone" for tourists was allowed, I went with my family to China for six weeks. This resulted in work about China's

culture, history, politics, religion, and what it was like being an 'everyman' or 'everywoman' living in today's world—subjects that I explore in all of my work. My trips to Mexico and India took root at the Florence Biennale in 2005, when I first showed my China-based work. Mexico was pure serendipity. Matty Roca, a prominent Mexico-based curator and one of the Biennale's jurors, was so impressed with how I presented life in China through my work that she invited me to do the same for Mexico. Thanks to Matty, "Dulce y Amargo" ended up traveling to eight museums throughout Mexico. In homage

to Matty I created *Rocatizada* (2008), with moving parts to indicate the amazing swiftness of her mind and body. India is another story. I met New Delhi-based curator Sushma Bahl in 2005, but it wasn't until 2010 that my trips to India, and the possibility of exhibiting my work there, started to unfold. Right now, Sushma and I are negotiating with several Indian museums for a traveling exhibition of my India-inspired work.

**ER:** Could you talk about *Fertilidad* (2008) from your Mexico series, *Follow Me* (2009) from "Shadow of Life," and *Black Eye Star* (2010) and *Pithora* (2010) from the India series.



## / China series / סיין /

**Jackie Sleper**, *Tenzin*, 2006, from the series "Silent Whisper" [China], mixed media: porcelain, resin, 105x90; photo: Ruben de Heer

**ביקי שלפר**, *Tenzin*, 2006, מתוך הסדרה "Silent Whisper" [סיין], סכניקה מעורבת: פורצלן, שרף, 105x90; תצלום: רובן דה היר

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**JS:** *Fertilidad* (2008) is dedicated to the fertility of the Mexican people. I used clay so that the figure would look like a recently unearthed Mayan sculpture. The man is carrying a porcelain doll from the 1920s. Sprouting out of the top of his head are hundreds of tiny colorful animals that I bought on my first visit to Mexico. The doll is standing on a spray of turquoise gemstones. On top of the doll's head is a little amethyst on which a butterfly has landed. The butterfly is one of my symbols of life.

In *Follow Me* (2009) I found the Madonna statue on which I painted a black face and hands, brown hair and a golden crown, at a flea market in Maastricht. I designed the sheep, which represent the people, and fabricated them in Florence. They are white sheep, not black sheep, because white sheep follow and the black sheep never follow. To add a touch of the surreal, as well as a bit of reality—because people go every which way—I placed some of the sheep upside down. The roses, along with the religious medallions, and the tin hands and legs protruding from her back, are Mexican votive offerings—the same types that the people hoping for the Madonna's curative blessing place at her feet in churches—from Mexico. The sculpture is open to interpretation. It can be seen as the Madonna praying for the health of the people, or it can bring to mind Karl Marx's statement that "religion is the opium of the people."

In *Black Eye Star* (2010), the boy's head, which I found in a flea market in Utrecht, is made of white porcelain, which I painted. The garland of birds around his neck, bought in a Christmas store in St-Malo, symbolizes freedom. The same with the dancing butterflies on his head, which also symbolize the souls of his ancestors. I used a Black Star sapphire to highlight the intensity of the boy's third eye. You never know what caste an Indian child belongs to. Maybe he is an untouchable. If so, then he has no life as a child. *Black Eye Star* says that every child, whatever his caste, is free and protected by spirits.

*Pithora* (2010), a blue monkey sculpture, is the result of a visit to the ancient pilgrimage site of Galtaji Temple which is just outside of Jaipur. It is known as the Monkey Temple, since tribes of rhesus macaques, all seeking food from the tourists, live there. The monkeys are incredibly cheeky. They've been known to steal, pull your hair, or even worse, hit you. I saw one particular proud and beautiful male monkey, and I thought of him as a metaphor of the Indian man, who has freedom and holds power, as opposed to Indian women. To



## / Black Jack / בלאק ג'ק /

**Jackie Sleper,** *Devoré* (Devoured), 2012, from the series "Black Jack," porcelain, shells, fresh water pearls, 39x22  
photo: Art Direction and Photograph Petra Janssen – Studio Boot

**ג'קי שלפר,** *Devoré*, 2012, מתוך הסדרה "בלאק ג'ק", פורצלן, צדפים, פניני נהרות, 39x22; תצלום: פטרה יאנסן, סטודיו בוט

emphasize his duplicitous nature, I painted a batik mask on his head as a mask to camouflage his actions. I also added a codpiece of fresh water pearls to indicate the sacred status that he enjoys.

**ER:** Art historian Tineke Reijnders discussing the "lavish decorations" in your work says that "as a hunter, you draw your cultural catch into your pieces...with grace and beauty." Your use of diverse objects in composing your sculptures adds an alluring, if not exotic, aspect.

**JS:** I intentionally juxtapose handcrafted and manufactured objects with those found in nature. I like to mix low art with high art, the old with the new. Each of my objects, as well as the completed sculpture itself, tells a story that rattles both brain and eye. Such mixing of past and present histories encourages a lively conversation between my work and the viewer. Not coincidentally, this same poetic process is how we create our own day-to-day reality. And in a larger sense, it mirrors the integration of society. What I really want my work to do is to communicate the wild onrushing joy of being alive. If such an exchange occurs then I am happy. ♦

## אדוארד רובין בשיחה עם האמנית ג'קי שלפר

## / India series / הודו /

**Jackie Sleper,** *Pithora*, 2010, from the series "Soil: Under the Skin of India" [India], mixed media: resin, freshwater pearls, antique glass eyes, 125x92x32; photo: Rene van der Hulst, Art Direction Petra Janssen – Studio Boot

**ג'קי שלפר,** *Pithora*, 2010, מתוך הסדרה "Soil: Under the Skin of India" [הודו], טכניקה מעורבת: שרף, פניני נהרות, עיני זכוכית עתיקות, 125x92x32; תצלום: רנה ון דר הולסט

