



THE COLLEGE OF STOIC PHILOSOPHERS



Marije van Wieringen

The following paintings and text were done in 2014 when Marije was a student at Marcus Aurelius School of the College of Stoic Philosophers. The text and photos below are reprinted from her blog with her permission.

Stoic Ethics Project - The First Sketches

I'm studying Stoic philosophy at the Marcus Aurelius School, and for this term (the Ethics Term) I'm doing an art project: a series of paintings about moral development.

The first painting will be of a baby - the ancient Stoics believed we are born a *Tabula Rasa* (a blank slate), but with the seed of goodness within us.

So earlier this week I had a photo session with my nephew Jip (pronounced Yip), who is four weeks old. The best painter's model you can imagine! He's a lovely easygoing little fellow, but like all babies he moves constantly to train his motor skills (very clever of him). So for the purpose of this painting I took hundreds of photos to get a good idea of what he looks like, from all sides, and started working from the photo's.

To the right you see a few of the sketches I did today. For three of the drawings I used charcoal; the one on the bottom left is in pencil.

I would like to let the development of the owl, symbol of wisdom, to synchronize with the development of the humans in my paintings: from egg (symbolizing the beginning), to fledgeling, to sitting owl, to flying owl, symbolizing perfect wisdom.

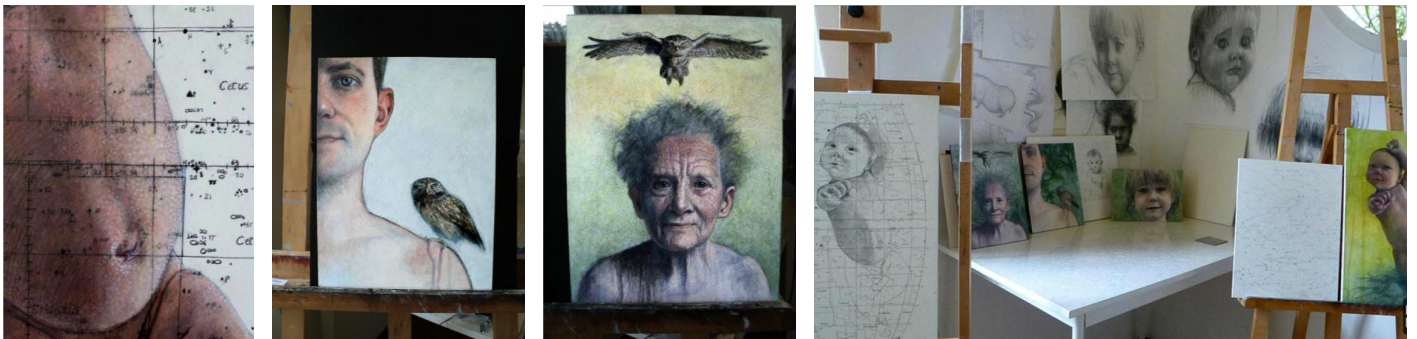
I like the word play in Dutch: owl fledgeling (*uilskuiken*) means silly fool... And the ancient Stoics believed that everyone who isn't perfectly wise is a fool - luckily, they also believed that no-one could be perfectly wise, so that's a relief. I quite like the idea of being an '*uilskuiken*'.





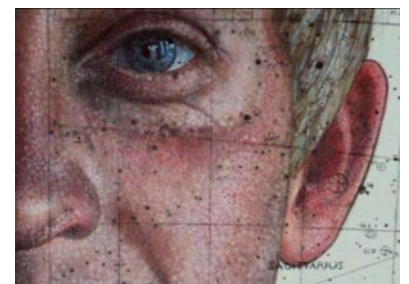
Becoming

As part of my studies at the Marcus Aurelius School for Stoic Philosophy, I made a series of three paintings about human moral development, starting with a baby (Tabula Rasa or blank sheet), then a man (Prokopton or Stoic student), and the third one is Sophos, the sage. This last one is something that most Stoics hold to be an unattainable ideal of perfection, but worth striving for anyway.



Stoic Target Practice

I have just finished the second in a series of three paintings on the subject of moral development, entitled: Prokoptón (a prokoptón is someone who makes progress). It's about how to become a better person - and how hard it is.



The starmap serving as the background for the painting contains the Saggiarius constellation (the name can be found by the man's left ear). Saggiarius means archer.

You can bend over backwards trying to be good, but still, the outcome of your actions is something that is not in your power, no matter how wonderful a person you are being. That's why I refer to the Stoic symbol of the archer in this painting. Of course, an archer's ideal is to hit the bull's eye. However, even for an archer of olympic standard there are many things not in his power that can put a spanner in the works. There might be a sudden gust of wind, the arrow might be imbalanced, or the archer might get a sudden stitch in his side or muscle spasm.

The Stoic archer's goal, then, is not to hit the target; it is to shoot well: you can't do more than your best.

The owl of wisdom is sitting on the man's shoulder, ready to whisper some good advice into his ear, but its talons are digging into his flesh, drawing blood.



Our psyche is something that most of us find hard to manage. You only have to look at the statistics to know that this is so: large numbers of people are in serious psychological trouble, or will be at some point in their life. Living hurts. What Stoics wish for people, is for them to realize that they can learn not to give in to those fears and desires that are harmful to themselves or others.

Pain, fear, and desire are like alarm bells that go off in our brain, alerting us to danger and opportunities. What Stoics want to learn is to keep a little distance, a little wiggle room between thought and action. We want to teach ourselves to recognize false alarms. So hopefully, we won't start running blindly when the next siren goes off.

That learning process can be pretty painful, which is the reason for the injuries caused by the owl's talons...

Knowing that we only have to be concerned with what is in our power; knowing we can learn to choose not to give in to fears and desires: it's a relief, because what this

knowledge brings is our surest chance of happiness: a happiness that does not depend on anything in the outside world. It's hard work, of course. But so worth it for the times when we succeed!

The Blank Sheet



Baby horses can stand right after birth, baby turtles crawl out of the egg right into the sea, but when we humans are born, we start with nothing. It's amazing really, how much of our humanity is missing at the beginning. As babies we not only lack the co-ordination needed to fend for ourselves; we have no knowledge of the world to make sense of it, to make fun of it or to reason with it (or rage against it). Least of all do we know how to reciprocate in a relationship, how to

behave in polite company, how to curb our impulses for the good of others: in other words, of morality.

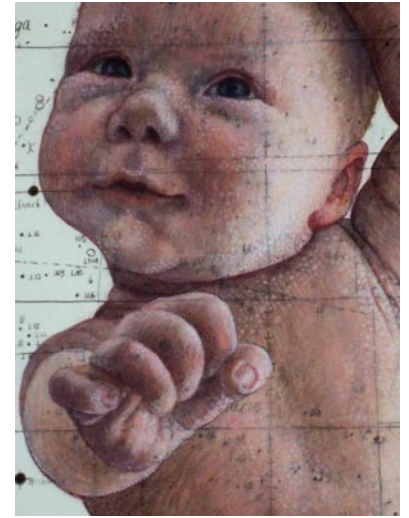
Ancient Stoics had a good term for this: they said that we are born 'a blank sheet' (or Tabula Rasa). We know nothing about how to be a good human being, although we carry the 'seed of goodness' in us, waiting to come to fruition. The sheet still has to be written on.

My model for the Tabula Rasa was my little cousin Jip, four weeks old. A baby so new that everything about him was still unfocused: his eyes, his movements... a human being at the very beginning of life.

As a background I have chosen a map of (part of) the universe. This is a modern astronomical map, we are modern Stoics after all. The Stoic idea, now corroborated by science, that we are part of the universe, that our atoms are as old as the universe and will continue to exist within the universe after we die, is symbolized by the lines and numbers of the map going right through Jip's body:

He is literally part of the astronomical chart, and it is part of him.

A cross-section of an egg is part of the map; this symbolizes two things. First, exemplifies the seed of goodness, from which, with the right care, the owl of wisdom will grow. Wisdom, being the mother of all cardinal virtues, stands for morality in my painting. Secondly, the egg symbolizes the egg of the phoenix, the Stoic symbol of the universe and renewal of life.



Jip

How To Be Good

Being a group animal is something we Stoics want to excel at. Put two Stoics together in a pub and after a while the chairs may well be flying, but this is one of the things we all agree about:

our only happiness lies in our own good behaviour.

If this sounds weird to you, think about it: there are things that you can change, and things you cannot. Of the things you can change, which choice would make you feel best about yourself: a selfish one, or a morally upstanding one? Hiding in a cupboard and secretly eating a whole bag of sweets, or sharing the bag with your friends?

The selfish choice might seem tempting, but most of us would feel guilty afterwards (not to mention sick). And believe me, guilt is incompatible with happiness. Whereas the moral choice, however tough, will make us feel good about ourselves. Any psychologist will tell you that that's basically a very good thing.

I call the feeling I have when I get it right and do the moral thing 'Stoic smugness'. I don't get to feel that smugness often enough, but I do know I want more of it.

So what makes a good person? And how do I become one?

Over the next few weeks, I'll be examining these questions for 'The Ethics Project' which I'm doing for my Stoic philosophy course.

So please stay tuned - updates and full explanations following soon!

Below you see a detail of the first painting. I just started with the colour; as you can see it's still very blotchy and uneven, and the eyes are a bit funny (still waiting for their layer of paint, after that the squint will be gone).



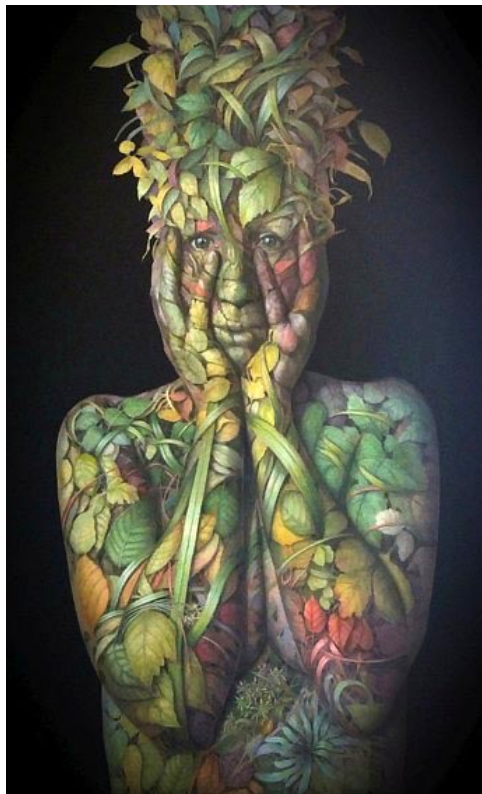
Ekpyrosis





Cohesion

"Cohesion", oil on canvas, 2019, 160 x100 cm. Shortlisted in The Netherlands for painting of the year 2019.



Marije V. van Wieringen

About Marije



Marije van Wieringen

I began as an academic and ended as an artist. For me, this unusual switch in life has always remained important. It not only provided me with a framework for my thinking and some of my dearest life-long friends, but a background in research also gave me the ability to combine the analytical with the creative.

Recurring themes in my work are people, nature, and man's nature. My work started out realistic, based on an academic training of many years. Over the years, I started stylizing my images, just a bit at first, but more and more later on, transforming shape and twisting reality. I also became fascinated with non-traditional materials like perspex and epoxy resin, because of their transparent qualities.

No matter what medium I use, I always seem to end up breaking up the surface of the work with dots of paint or small pen strokes. This is not a technique I deliberately developed, but something that happened over time. When painting, I work with oil on canvas or panel, and always with an underpainting. My drawings on acrylic glass are done in reverse on the back of the glass, and the finished work is mounted approx. 4 cm off the wall, so the drawing casts a shadow on the wall, creating a double image.

CV:

1991 M.A. in Applied Linguistics, University of North Wales

1992 'Doctoraal' Engels, Universiteit van Amsterdam

2002 Schilderen en tekenen / Fine Arts Degree, drawing and painting, Wackers Academie, Amsterdam

2014 Fellow of the College of Stoic Philosophers (F.C.S.P.)
