

TULIPOMANIA

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Tulipomania was a brief, two-year moment in history during which thousands of Dutch citizens were bewitched by the newly introduced tulip. Merchants, tavern owners and artisans exchanged futures contracts for tulip bulbs hundreds of times in a single day, selling and reselling for absurd amounts until single bulbs were trading for more than the price of five ships or even two houses. The fervor came to an abrupt halt within a single day in 1637, when during a routine auction in a Haarlem tavern, buyers refused to speculate any further. Within hours the news travelled across the United Provinces, plummeting Dutch noblemen and farmers alike into financial ruin.

In order to fully understand the extraordinary delusions and madness of crowds surrounding tulipomania, one must place themselves within the context of early 17th century Dutch society. In 1590, the United Provinces liberated itself from the Holy Roman Empire and quickly became the leading global maritime and economic force. With the continental aristocracy unseated, social status became solely determined by income, the urban merchant class being in the dominant position. Social mobility was not only encouraged by Dutch Calvinism but also fueled by a culture of fatalistic risk-taking, most likely resulting from the outbreak of bubonic plague.

Only one symbol however, far greater than an estate, or even a commission by Rembrandt, could validate one's financial success - the tulip. Based upon the period of the same name, Tulipomania is a collection of works that reflects the rage and frenzy that was brought about by the delicate flower.

Michael Assiff's paintings are loaded depictions of natural scenery drawn from Rousseau's popular jungle paintings. A first layer of leaves and foliage is meticulously hand-sculpted using liquefied plastic and subsequently covered in a second layer of the same material, colored in USDA Certified Organic Green. The organic subject matter of Assiff's work stands in stark contrast to the artificial material that is used to make them. His paintings embody within them the notion of a manufactured, manicured nature landscape and similarly, tulips as a speculative commodity.

The violent machinery of industrial, agricultural production is also seen in Valerie Keane's work. Her sculptures begin as abstract silhouettes, which are continuously manipulated and fetishized into highly affected objects of emotion and exaggerated motifs of violence. In this new sculpture, Keane's intricate web of knots and chrome pipes can also allude to the complicated and entangled network of promissory notes that are often exchanged on the futures market.

Julien Ceccaldi's paintings portray scenes of mental collapse and diabolical states of being. Although his paintings reference Japanese comics, both in style and in narrative, they are also eerily reminiscent of the anti-tulip propaganda seen in pamphlets and paintings during the 1630's. These satirical images place the villain Flora, goddess of flowers, alongside the two-faced goddess Fortuna, the both of them surrounded by Dutchmen gripped in folly.

Parisian florist Pierre Banchereau's tulip bouquet is an interpretation on the pronkstilleven – the Dutch genre of ostentatious still-life painting. Popular during the Golden Age, pronkstilleven often depicted ornate and sumptuous bouquets of flowers. The fundamental unreality in pronkstilleven, however, is that bouquets of flowers were not at all common at the time; even the wealthiest Dutch preferred to display their tulips single-stem. The bouquet, and pronkstilleven, therefore can be interpreted as a form of vanitas painting, illustrating the emptiness in material excess and extravagance.

Contributions from Francis Picabia and Man Ray are meant to broaden viewers' understanding of 17th century Dutch sociopolitical landscape well beyond the context of tulipomania. The illustrations contain unnerving, illogical scenes, highly reflective of the mood of Europe during the Surrealist movement. Although dating from the early 20th century, these works echo the deep anxieties that were brought about by transformation of Dutch society during its Golden Age.

Will Benedict and Sergei Tcherepnin's piece "Psychotic Music School" is a sound-sculpture that momentarily produces a captivating and hypnotic humming. At times, however, it leaves the spectator void of any simulation. The intermittent noise/silence mocks the spectator with waves of irrationality and inadequacy, much like the burnt-out crescendo experienced by the Dutch at the sudden crash of the tulip market.

In "Self-Contained Investment Module and Contingency Package", Sterling Crispin compiles a Bitcoin miner, an emergency food storage bucket, heavy duty flashlight, dual band radio, water filter and survival knife into a laser-cut acrylic shell. Three LED fans with blinking text reference hacker culture and films, market collapse narratives and exponential return singularities. Conceived as a post-economic crash survival kit, the piece brackets the inherent human predisposition towards speculation over multiple places and periods of time, from Dutch tulipomania to the recent global economic crisis and beyond.

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