

[Review in Dutch newspaper NRC – 21 April 2023 – on the exhibition Totok, featuring artwork by Clementine Oomes and Nynke Deinema in What Art Can Do project space– rating: 4/5. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2023/04/21/kritische-getuigenissen-over-het-indische-verleden-a4162706> ]

Totok – Making sense of the Dutch East Indies. Nynke Deinema and Clementine Oomes. Until 29/4 in Gallery What Art Can Do, Amsterdam. Information: [whatartcando.com](http://whatartcando.com)



## Critical testimonies on the Dutch East Indies past

By Kester Freriks

### Gallery - The moving double exhibition "Totok - Indisch Besef" shows the violent Dutch East Indies past with subdued or, rather, emphatically dramatic works of art.

Black and white photographs from the former Dutch East Indies, – there are tens of thousands of them. They show a colonial past of the Dutchman in the East Indies. For artist Nynke Deinema, those photos carry something guilty. That is why she perforates them, drawing red scratches across them. She calls her method iconoclasm. Together with Clementine Oomes, Deinema shows her artwork at the exhibition *Totok - Indisch Besef* at the Amsterdam project space *What Art Can Do*. 'Totok,' a white European in the Dutch East Indies, nowadays a word with a negative connotation.

Deinema and Oomes share a background in the Dutch East Indies. Deinema's grandfather ran the enterprise Siloewok Sawangan in Java, producing coffee, rubber, kapok and cacao. One of Deinema's (1963) intensively edited family photos shows five workers, called coolies at the time. They stand barefoot and lift three crammed bales onto a scale or trolley. The black and white looks like a negative, an image from a distant past. Bead strings of hard pink run across the artwork and Deinema made red scratches across them, as a symbol, it seems, to erase colonial imagery. The series is called #Siloewok Sawangan and shows, among other things, a cocoa nut and tobacco leaves hanging to dry. Due to the equally careful and rigorous editing, the photographs have the power of contemporary, critical testimonies about the Dutch East Indies past.

## Disconcerting image

Clementine Oomes (1970) considers herself a second-generation war victim. Her mother, grandmother and aunt spent three and a half years in a Japanese internment camp. That horrific reality marks her past, and her work. *Closed Face* and *Closed Mouth*, in mixed media, show two portraits, one of herself as a five-year-old girl and one of a boy, whose face and mouth are hidden behind thin wire, like iron wire. Silence and imprisonment expressed in a disconcerting image. The series *Mama Saya*, displays a serene and at the same time raw beauty: small, pure white viewing boxes containing three beds with a pillow on top. It takes some time before you figure it out – I was first reminded of a poem by Gerrit Kouwenaar,

*Totaal Witte Kamer (Totally white room)* – Then you discover: the object must represent the hut in the concentration camp. Inside, Oomes places drawings in rough hard sketch lines by way of dramatic contrast.

Like Deinema, Oomes manipulates reality. Her work *The Map* is painted on the back of a painting stapled to a panel. The map from the title refers to the map of the Japanese concentration camp. We see nothing more than some lines, as if they are trying to show us the way.

Oomes is more explicit in processing her family's Dutch East Indies past than Deinema. With titles such as *Lost religion*, *Warzone* and *War green*, she explicitly refers to the violent past in the former East Indies. In *Warzone* (mixed media on canvas) we see fleeing figures against a chaotic background, everything drawn as if in a nightmare.

However differently Deinema and Oomes work, this moving double exhibition shows that the "East Indies consciousness" is one of traumas that seem to come from long ago, even though they are not. They are here now, still, represented in more subdued (Deinema) or, rather, emphatically dramatic (Oomes) works of art.