

## OUR FAVORITE ARTIST IN AMSTERDAM: CHIEL VAN ZELST

Former Night Mayor of Amsterdam, a squatter back when it made a statement, and a bit of a dark horse on the Amsterdam art scene – Chiel Van Zelst invites Amsterdo to his Rokin studio. During a painting session the artist describes how he came to paint cityscapes that express the raw nature of Amsterdam, which tourists come looking for.



Chiel Van Zelst is not your typical city painter – his style is a magnificent jamboree of colour over a solid framework of shape and form. Chiel's sketches are black and white iPhone images, which he transforms into vibrant cityscapes. While his work is a psychedelic crossover between Van Gogh and Street Art, the artist is a down-to-earth businessman, who knows how to make art that sells.

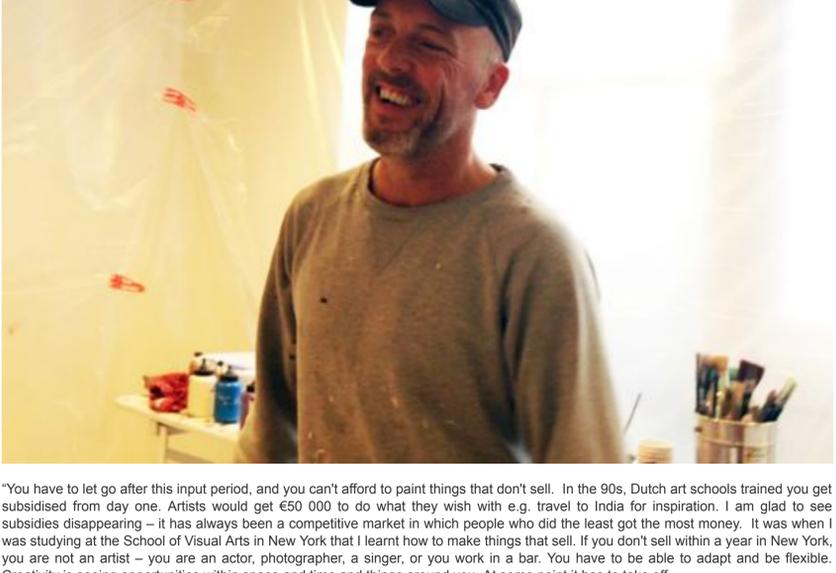
Chiel greets us at his pop-up space, which is open both to visitors and passers-by alike. He looks smart in a light sweater splattered with small, colourful paint spots. Before we know it, Chiel has whipped out a black marker and turned to a work in progress, while keeping the conversation flowing.

"I was born in Amsterdam a while ago, and raised here during the 70s and the 80s. A lot of people left after the war. The houses were boarded up with wood when I was growing up; it was a post-war scene well into the seventies. It was still a very different world here in the 80s. There was the kind of roughness that you see in my paintings. This city is totally finished now – there is none of the roughness that you see in my paintings – nothing rotten, no dirty place, or even a disturbing person.



"My work is homage to Amsterdam – to how it used to be. It used to be a playground for us when we were kids – there were open spaces and old houses that we used to climb in and play out our fantasies, create our own world. Later on we created our own environment in squatting – a house, a gallery, a studio or a restaurant ... You have an idea and say "This is a restaurant now. This is a gallery."

"I always wanted to be an artist. I was already painting when I came to study art Gerrit Rietveld Academy. I was a little confused when we had to get into experimental art – writing diaries, making video and doing performance art. I did a lot of conceptual work as a student. I painted very complicated things that were required of you – maybe a Swastika, or something about Muslims. You ended up making things that would appeal to the press, cause a riot, or use dead animals. I just wanted to make things in my own way. I wanted to paint what I see on the streets.



"You have to let go after this input period, and you can't afford to paint things that don't sell. In the 90s, Dutch art schools trained you get subsidised from day one. Artists would get €50 000 to do what they wish with e.g. travel to India for inspiration. I am glad to see subsidies disappearing – it has always been a competitive market in which people who did the least got the most money. It was when I was studying at the School of Visual Arts in New York that I learnt how to make things that sell. If you don't sell within a year in New York, you are not an artist – you are an actor, photographer, a singer, or you work in a bar. You have to be able to adapt and be flexible. Creativity is seeing opportunities within space and time and things around you. At some point it has to take off.

"The thing about being an artist is not being a crazy person in a studio – you still have to stay in this world. I do not have a gallery – I do not like a closed studio. I used to have a fixed place and paid a lot of rent for it. It is like a shop here (at Rokin 97). I am a businessman and my art sells. You can find my work in international places like hotels, airports, and all kind of strange places where people get in contact with art in a very low-profile way. I sell a lot to international first-time buyers, who take a painting along on a plane like a big, expensive postcard.



"This economic crisis is an opportunity. Now I take a pop-up space, arrange some utilities and I can use it. It is inspiring to be in a new place every six months or every other year – to meet new people and see new things. When I see that a place is up for rent, I call the number and see if I can make them a nice proposition – a painting, for example. You build trust. You see what people like, how they react to your work. It's marketing – you progress faster this way.

"It is very hard to be an artist when you are 23, you have to be a bit older and have some more experience. I am nearly 50 and only in the last few years has it kicked off. I used to be very much into networking – now I'm more on my own.

I do not have to do the odd jobs anymore, or throw parties. I used to organise parties in places like the Sugar Factory and Paradiso. Then here was this 'Situations Vacant' for somebody who wanted to promote the night, which is how I became the Night Mayor of Amsterdam. For 'Situations Vacant', I got to really appreciate the beauty of this city by night.

"I paint the Amsterdam cityscape, and have been doing this for quite a while. I do not want to make something that is from London, New York or Tokyo; I want to make it something that is from here. I get inspired when I walk down the street, see something, and then imagine it an hour later. I see Amsterdam as a traditional artist who wanders through the city and paints, or as a poet. I made a series of paintings for a gallery in Utrecht once but it did not feel the same. It took some nerve to paint the old school city thing – it is not disturbing, it does not say anything about the society. But it sells. I like to make art and to sell it also.



"A lot of people paint this kind of subject but not in this particular manner. I have a very strange way of painting and seeing things" says Chiel, shaking his paintbrush off onto the already lively canvas. "It is not what you paint but how you paint it. I work on several paintings at once. I turn them around, I go over them again – then it starts to vibrate and live. It is a bit chaotic – it is also a fight to get it to balance – you cannot do Apple Z on a painting. I like to mess it up so that it's not a painting anymore, so that you cannot show it to people. Then things start to happen in that Bob Ross 'happy accident' sort of way. Sometimes, we have to destroy our babies before something beautiful comes out of it. When people ask me whether a painting is finished or not, I say: "It is only finished when it's sold!"

"I paint other things besides cityscapes. I recently made an abstract series about the Vondelpark. I want to do some more series of paintings, but what I really enjoy is to go out on a bike with my iPhone, take some photos of the street and work on them in my studio. I'll stop at a spot because of a variation in people or setting. I am not going to paint on the street, there are too many people and it is always a performance. If Rembrandt had an iPhone I don't think he would draw on the street; he would take pictures and go to his studio. Photos are our sketches now. You have to make more. It is a very interesting and instant contemporary art-making technique. It becomes a continuous story that you work on.



"I was born around the corner and I know each shape and loop in these photos. They are in black and white so that I can really concentrate on composition and form. The photo has to become a painting in and of itself – not a particular spot or a dead photograph. You paint emotions and memories into it. I leave the photo (my composition, if you like) and start working it out as a painting. I combine drawing and painting in a street art and old-school Van Gogh style crossover. Here come in whatever strange colours I can find. There is a lot of coincidence – if the blue is finished, I will go for purple or red.

"I do not use everyday colours that you see in the street. Amsterdam feels druggy, hallucinogenic, and vibrant – these are my colours. People come to Amsterdam for this kind of spirit that I capture in my work. They are looking for this Amsterdam roughness, colour, and punk rock. Real Amsterdammers do not see this anymore.



"I hope that a hundred years from now people will see this roughness of Amsterdam that I put in my paintings – if they are still around! You have Andy Warhol's made with regular household paint still seen by millions. I use good material– plastic-based acrylic and very good linen. Yes, this will last," says the entrepreneurial artist who, despite embracing his past, has one foot in the future.

Focused on his business and his work, he does not have time to look back. But if you want to find out more about what it was that gave him a whiff of international infamy, read '100, 000 Fiets tielen'. In this autobiographical account of his squatting days, Chiel recounts how he stole 50, 000 bikes, and shares tips on how to nick one yourself while somehow encouraging you not to! Keep up with the news at <http://chielvanzelst.blogspot.nl/>

