



**Afra Eisma** is a multi-disciplinary artist who works in The Hague, the Netherlands. She graduated from the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague and spent a year at Central Saint Martins, UK, during her studies. Her work has been exhibited at numerous galleries and museums including Fries Museum, CIAJG, Kunstinstituut Melly, 1646, de Vleeshal and Art Brussel. She was nominated for the prestigious Royal Award for Modern Painting in 2018 and de Scheffer Prijs in 2022. Most recently, she exhibited at the Fundació Joan Miró and Dhaka Art Summit.

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# THE TETLEY

Exhibition guide

## Afra Eisma *splashdown tender*

23 June – 22 October 2023

The Tetley presents *splashdown tender*, artist **Afra Eisma**'s first UK solo exhibition. Eisma's textile works spill out across the gallery spaces, accompanied by soft sculptures, paintings, sound works and ceramics.

A sense of fun is essential to the exhibition, which is included in Part Two of **LEEDS 2023**'s Year of Culture – that focuses on playing.

You are encouraged to sit and rest on, feel and cuddle, and gently engage with the central artwork on display in the Atrium. Throughout the run of the show, the exhibition will also play host to school children, early years visits and community groups.

Eisma's work reimagines various environments, from the domestic scene of a lounge, to the inside of a stomach; in the Atrium, you're invited into a friendly meeting of aliens. The artist works to facilitate intimate and unusual social settings beyond the environment of the family home. This desire to create warm, joyful and inviting spaces is a response to increasing unease, discomfort and uncertainty surrounding socialising following the pandemic, and resulting isolation.

Using bright colours and playful approaches to engage with darker emotions and experiences is a recurring method for the artist. Garments veil activist slogans, a stomach becomes a container for rumblings and long arms offer to take you by the hand. Seeking to imbue the space with a certain liveliness and informality, as well as pleasures, assembly and embrace, Eisma also creates room for anger, ambiguity and reflection.

## Otherworldly beings and emotions

*splashdown tender* is an exhibition about feelings. The artist enjoys using feelings as a starting point for her practice and as a key immaterial medium within her artworks. She uses art-making as a way to deal with certain emotions, such as anger, and as a practical way of processing complex and often contradictory thoughts.

In the **Atrium**, you're invited to join a friendly gathering of beings as part of the artist's new commission. The giant tapestry on the wall, *celestial dreams*, is a vessel containing ants, aliens and other creatures; peering, tentacled tendrils spill out from the top. With joyful, vibrant colours, this installation offers a tactile experience: take off your shoes, feel the tapestry floor and textile surfaces.

Eisma wants everyone to feel welcome and enjoy this space for thinking, relaxing and meeting. She also encourages you to reflect and talk about your own feelings, as you might in your living room or around a campfire, using the warm environment to reveal our most tender and honest selves.

## Stomachs and containers

Eisma's work is inspired by various influences including Danish visual artist **Ovartaci**, as well as literature by influential female authors such as **Begum Rokeya**, **Audre Lorde** and **Ursula K Le Guin**. The characters we encounter – such as the creatures in the **Atrium** – are created from Eisma's imagination and interwoven with ideas provoked by these authors' writing.

For example, Le Guin's *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* focuses on containers and receptacles as ways for thinking about human history – a way of looking past our association of ancient life with hunters and spears. Le Guin refocuses our attention away from aggressive, phallic tools to think instead about the bags we use to collect and gather, rather than the weapons employed to hunt or conquer.

Eisma applies this idea to our bodies. **Gallery 3** is reimagined as a *primordial mother stomach*, a container for feelings as well as the primary receptacle and holder of nourishment, and the deep red paint throughout the exhibition gives a sense that you're travelling through a bodily passage. Our stomachs hold butterflies, knots and other 'gut-feelings', as well as food – while grumbling and rumbling away. The reverberating stomach sounds reflect on the embarrassing intimacy of involuntarily noisy organs; when magnified, they are ominous but also comic.

In **Gallery 8**, half-open eggs reveal imaginary figures contained inside their own spherical mini-worlds, they peek out from cupboards, including the artist's self-portrait, holding a javelin and teddy bear.

Images and characters, such as those spilling out of the vase in the **Atrium**, reappear throughout the show, forming a language echoed in Eisma's watercolours and ceramic drawings. This is the first show that Eisma has exhibited her watercolours in.

## Lampshades and universes

In **Gallery 4**, Eisma presents a mysterious giant lampshade. On the underside of the cavernous lampshade is its own guiding cosmology, so when you look up, you see a universe, contained within this reimagined household object. Eisma's cosmology includes details of her life: a portrait of the artist and her best friend; a car with friends moving to Berlin; sitting in a sauna with a date and their uninvited guest.

In **Gallery 2**, Eisma's world-building is realised in microcosm with her puppet theatre. Sunflowers, creatures, eyes – motifs played out in large scale in other installations are realised here in miniature.

## Heart-shaped javelins

In **Galleries 5** and **7**, Eisma welcomes us with colourful elongated arms, which reach out longingly and invite us to take them by the hand. This offer of hand-holding is a recurring motif of solidarity throughout the exhibition.

Alongside and as part of the artist's exploration of companionship and harmony, a key emotion Eisma explores is anger. Despite the perception of anger as a bad emotion, the artist likes to see it as a source of power for change.

The heart-shaped ceramic javelins in **Galleries 5** and **7** are both fragile and long-lasting, objects that can 'stir things up', but also can be used like a bow and arrow. These javelins are a metaphor for the amount of energy we can spend on meaningful matters that we'd like to address. When 'shooting' your own heart-shaped javelin onto an issue, there is one less javelin within your quiver of arrows. This supply of angry, change-making energy we carry is not endless.

In **Gallery 1**, sombrely twirling dresses – *warrior garments* – form a troupe, the fanciful, princessy clothing containing messages of anger. Underneath these forms of armour are Eisma's personal activist reflections – addressing issues from the right to have ownership over our bodies to having the right to protest – as well as references to other texts, such as **Delphine Bedel's** *Silence is broken*.

### Afra Eisma, *dandelions' milk*, 2023

£150, Edition of 10

Made from glazed ceramic, this pair of boney, friendly aliens are dancing and holding hands in solidarity, as they shapeshift into one unit, shedding their glazed skin.

**View the edition downstairs in our shop.**

