



Anne Geene

Out of the ordinary

De
Mesdag
Collectie

Den Haag



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Anne Geene

Out of the ordinary

Artist Anne Geene (1983) records the hidden beauty of nature and compels us to think about how we, as human beings, interact with the natural world. Taking a quasi-scientific approach, she collects, researches and organises the world around her.

Geene arranges natural materials into aesthetic compositions, playing with the human urge to order the apparent chaos of nature. She invites us to reflect upon things that we do not normally notice, and in doing so, she transforms the everyday into something out of the ordinary.

Most of the works shown here are new works that Geene has made for this exhibition. They bear a kinship with pieces from The Mesdag Collection, the museum garden and the coastline near The Hague. The sea and beach have become an inextricable part of Geene's life and work, just as they were for Hendrik Willem Mesdag and Sientje Mesdag-van Houten in the 19th century.

No matter how tempting, please do not touch the artworks. They are fragile – just like nature.

Take the stamp and put it in the right place: first, find today's date, and then the month of your birthday. In this way, you will participate in a research project that does not actually lead to anything, and in doing so you will become part of the exhibition.

Large garden room

Collecting

Anne Geene is a fervent collector. Her studio in The Hague is crammed full of plants, stuffed animals, books, archive boxes and photographs. Sometimes, she tries to find as many examples as possible of one type of object; at other times she selects just one example of each type. She studies and orders the collected items, looking for patterns that she can integrate into her art.

This is also why Geene feels at home here in The Mesdag Collection, which is a real collectors' museum. While wandering through the various rooms in the museum, she was struck by several paintings from the collection. Looking at them evoked her own associations with the world of plants and animals. In this exhibition, Geene presents new work that was born of those observations in a way that blends perfectly with the historical character of this museum.

Margaretha Roosenboom (1843-1896)

Still life with cauliflower and endive, 1892 or later.

oil on canvas

The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Jean-François Millet (1814-1875)

Still life, c. 1860-65

oil on canvas

The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Vegetables preserved in alcohol, 2025

Some very everyday vegetables are the stars of the paintings by Millet and Roosenboom. Geene decided to display the leek, endive and cauliflower by preserving them in alcohol a method used frequently in the natural sciences and medicine. The colours have leached away, producing an alienating effect, and the structure of the vegetables will also change in the course of the exhibition. In other words, this is a living still life.

Adolphe Monticelli (1824-1886)

Mountain path, c. 1872-73

oil on canvas

The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Sientje Mesdag-van Houten (1834-1909)

Head of a dog: Nero, 1875

oil on canvas

The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Display cabinet #1 and #2, 2025

Until the 18th century, collections were often presented in display cabinets. Two paintings from The Mesdag Collection form the starting point for this modern version. Geene was particularly drawn to Mesdag-van Houten's portrait of their pet. In her cabinet, she has placed associative finds and objects from among her possessions, which together tell a story: a photo of Buxy – a dog she once owned –, pigs' ears as a delicacy, and a branch from the museum garden. For the second cabinet, Geene selected another branch from the garden because she thought that it complemented Monticelli's wild mountain landscape.

Small garden room

The coast of The Hague

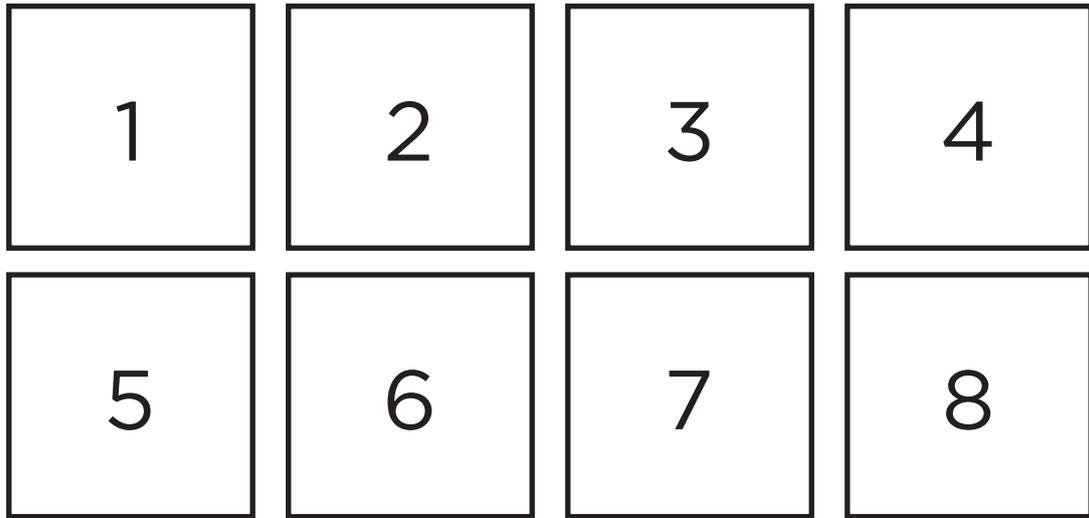
Anne Geene moved to The Hague thirteen years ago. Although she grew up in Brabant, far from the dunes and the beach, she has come to love them deeply. 'I am always struck by the light and the landscape there, but also by the things I find on the beach, which I often cannot even place'. Geene draws inspiration from the objects that wash up on the beach, many of which she has added to the collection in her studio over the years. She sorts them according to type or colour, or sometimes uses random arrangements, to make semi-scientific installations.

In doing so, Geene compels us to look at everyday, natural objects in a totally different light. The Mesdags also loved the beach, and painted the local coast and the North Sea time and time again. A hundred and twenty years ago, Hendrik Willem Mesdag said: 'People don't see the sea; painters teach them to see the sea'.

'Every detail tells a story - whether it's a blade of grass, a leaf, or a shell. It's about how you look at it.'

Euspira nitida, 2025

Euspira nitida, otherwise known as the common necklace shell, is a flesh-eating sea snail. Using its sharp tongue as a rasp, it works away at shells for hours so that it can eat the flesh inside. Gene is fascinated by this. Once you know, it is almost impossible to walk on the beach without looking for shells with a perfect hole. Museum employees also collected specimens, which Gene then arranged in a vibrant pattern.



1. European Sea Sturgeon, 2014
2. Sand Goby, 2014
3. Herring, 2014
4. Common Stingray, 2014
5. Greyling, 2014
6. Alabama Shad, 2014
7. Greater Pipe Fish, 2014
8. Short-snouted Seahorse, 2014

Geene loves to experiment with photographic techniques. These salted paper prints were made using water from the North Sea in combination with a silver nitrate solution, which makes paper photosensitive. As a fitting subject, she chose a colourful variety of sea creatures. The shades of brown and refined lines reminded her of fossils. Many of these animals are under threat of extinction.

salt print on paper

Carapaces of cuttlefish, 2025

You are bound to have come across these on the beach, or you may have seen them lying in a bird cage. They are the carapaces of cuttlefish, a type of squid. Geene has arranged them as a school of fish.

Displayed on the dark surface, they take on a whole new context independent of the places they were found.

Mussels, 2024

Geene sees beauty in every organism in nature; even in minute objects that people normally never take a good look at. Take the barnacle, a crab-like organism that needs to attach itself to a hard surface and so is often found clinging to mussels. Every barnacled mussel has its own pattern, which makes it unique. Geene has framed them, elevating them to the status of art. The smooth mussels in the other frame reminded her of insects' wings.

Cockels, 2025

Jellyfish, 2025

Dutch shrimps, 2025

Small Colenbranderzaal

Into the garden

A garden is the ideal place for people to shape nature to their liking. For this exhibition, Anne Geene visited the garden of this museum to pick beautiful and diverse leaves and blades of grass. 'This garden is kept very tidy; there is no uncontrolled growth, which was a pity for me'.

Rooted in photography, Geene has used a scanner to make photo montages. She scans the leaves one by one before sorting them digitally. Her compositions challenge us to regard them with attention and tranquillity.

Be sure to take a walk in the garden after you have seen the exhibition. Who knows - you might notice something you would normally have overlooked.

Magnolia – *Magnolia virginiana*

Hortensia – *Hydrangea*

Ivy – *Hedera helix*

Copper Beech – *Fagus sylvatica* f. *purpurea*

Japanese Spindle – *Euonymus japonicus*

English Oak – *Quercus robur*

Wood Anemone ‘Honorine Jobert’ – *Anemone hybrida*

Herb Robert – *Geranium robertianum*

Common Dandelion – *Taraxacum officinale*

Bay Laurel – *Laurus nobilis*

Iris – *Iris germanica*

Privet – *Ligustrum*

Holly – *Ilex aquifolium*

English Daisies – *Bellis perennis*

Hedge Bindweed – *Calystegia sepium*

English Ryegrass – *Lolium perenne*

Scaly Male Fern – *Dryopteris affinis*

Black Locust – *Robinia pseudoacacia*

Shrubby Veronica – *Hebe rakaiensis*

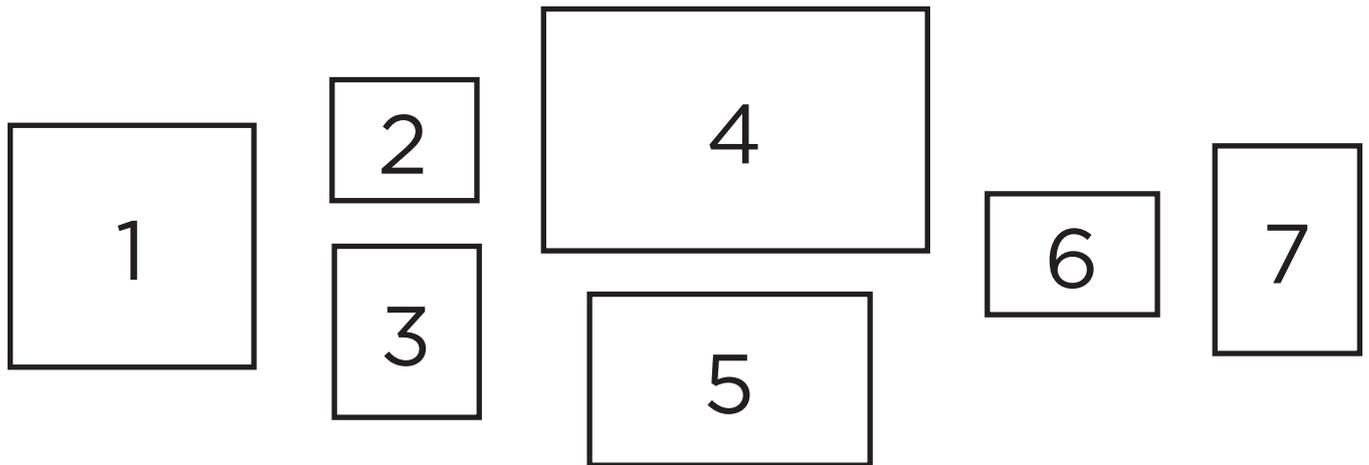
Japanese Azalea – *Rhodendron japonicum*

Magnolia, 2024

For a short time each spring, the garden of The Mesdag Collection is enchanted by the flowering magnolia. Geene saw it for the first time last year, and immediately gathered the fallen petals. Some were still bright pink, while others had begun to wilt. She scanned them, and digitally turned them into a motif that resembles teeming bacteria under a microscope.

inktjet on archival mat

Eeuwig Herbarium Mesdag



1. Wood Anemone, 2025
2. English Oak, 2025
3. Shrubby Veronica , 2025
4. Copper Beech , 2025
5. Black Locust , 2025
6. Herb Robert , 2025
7. Japanese azalea, 2025

Geene creates time capsules of plants by merging the printout of a scan with part of the real plant on a single sheet of paper. To do this, she picked leaves from trees, including the copper beech in the back garden and the English oaks in the front garden, which were here before the Mesdags moved in. In this way, photography enters into an eternal relationship with the past and the present, and the decay that is part of the cycle of life is revealed in a beautiful way.

Portrait of the garden at The Mesdag Collection, 2024

Just like a portrait of a person, this portrait of a garden incorporates all the characteristics of the museum garden. Geene picked every type of leaf that she could find and, inspired by her personal insights, made compositions based on shape or colour. In this composition, she sees a fantasy character, whereby the triangular fern in the middle forms the spine. What associations do you have?

inktjet on archival mat

Lawn at The Mesdag Collection, 2024

During the period leading up to her invitation to make this exhibition, Geene actually wanted to work only with grass. 'There are innumerable grass blades on earth, but despite this, it remains an underappreciated plant. Everyone just walks on it'. To increase our appreciation, she picked blades of grass and the small plants growing among the grass, scanned them, and mounted them in the same circular shape as the garden. This was a painstaking and time-consuming process.

inktjet on archival mat

Teratology Mesdag, 2024

Teratology is the study of deviations. Geene sees similarities in the deviations in plants, and groups them together as if they were a new species in a playful counterpart to natural science. 'A lot of what I make up is nonsense'. These partly eaten leaves from the museum garden form a pattern that has a festive feel to it, as does the autumn confetti to the right of the window.

inktjet on archival mat

Autumn, 2024

inktjet on archival mat

Nature is to be found everywhere in The Mesdag Collection; not only in the museum, but also in the garden. Look, and above all, just step outside and take a walk in the garden. If you look carefully, you will see small labels next to those species that Anne Geene included in her Portrait of the garden.

When the Mesdags had this house built, the garden looked very different to the way it looks today. Although it has undergone significant changes through the years, one thing has remained constant: the large copper beech in the centre.

Grote Colenbranderzaal

Common necklace shell

The necklace shell is a carnivorous snail whose main diet consists of bivalve molluscs, such as thin tellins and bean clams. Using its sharp tongue as a rasp, it patiently makes a round hole in the shells of its prey. Once the hole is complete, the mollusc inside can be sucked out. The entire process can take up to 60 hours, not least because the snail also has to digest its own weight in meat.

Necklace shells can be found on beaches from Norway to the Mediterranean. These shells are becoming increasingly common due to the quantities of sand that are sprayed along the Dutch coast.

Cuttlefish

The cuttlefish, also known as the sepia, is an intelligent species of cephalopod and a master of camouflage. These animals can effortlessly adapt their pigmentation to their environment: if on sand, they become sand-coloured, among seaweed they display a green and red pattern and when next to stones, they look grey. By doing this they protect themselves against predators. At the same time, this is also how they communicate with other members of their species.

Cuttlefish have a special carapace, sometimes called 'sea foam', which aids their ability to float and makes their bodies more robust. When they die, their carapaces wash up on the beach. Bird lovers often put these into bird cages; the birds peck on them, increasing their calcium intake, which helps them to produce eggs with stronger shells.

The state of the North Sea

How is the North Sea really doing? We asked the North Sea Foundation (Stichting De Noordzee).

In addition to the cuttlefish, the common necklace shell and the mussel, there are approximately 1,300 other multicellular species in the Dutch part of the North Sea. Although it is home to some wonderful nature, this sea is not doing well. Natural reefs have disappeared, pollution caused by humans is still a problem, and the effects of climate change are manifestly visible. Many species, from plankton, sea birds and migratory fish to marine mammals, are in a bad way. Action is urgently required to make this sea clean and healthy again and bring the intensive human activity into balance with nature. The North Sea Foundation strives to achieve this goal every day. What will you do?

An extraordinary collection

Place an object under the bell jar; just something very ordinary that you happen to have in your pocket or bag. It could be anything, a stone, or a shopping list. Write a text label to accompany it as if it is a work of art.

If there is already an object under the bell jar, move it to the cabinet and put it in one of the archive boxes together with its label.

Note: Please do not leave any organic material, as that would not do the museum any good.

Interview met Anne Geene

Sit down, make yourself comfortable and put on your headphones to listen to the conversation between Anne Geene and Renske Suijver, curator of The Mesdag Collection.

Length of conversation: 17 minutes

You can also listen to the conversation on our website: scan the QR code



‘My work is about the way people look at nature; how we examine everything, give things names, how we want to pigeonhole and manage. I exaggerate this tendency to categorise in my work. I often decide when a collection is complete based on a time limit or a demarcation I have established beforehand. As such, it is a nod to science’

Anne Geene

Signs with plant species scattered in the garden of The Mesdag Collection

Magnolia – *Magnolia virginiana*

Hortensia – *Hydrangea*

Ivy – *Hedera helix*

Copper Beech – *Fagus sylvatica* f. *purpurea*

Japanese Spindle – *Euonymus japonicus*

English Oak – *Quercus robur*

Wood Anemone ‘Honorine Jobert’ – *Anemone hybrida*

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