

LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY

SASKIA BOELSUMS

TERRA

## SUBTLE, WITH GRANDEUR

The Dutch landscape is a shy bride: it doesn't give itself easily. You need patience and knowledge to 'read' it. Let's be honest, in contrast to places like Grand Canyon or Yosemite National Park – the nature that I as an American grew up with – there is not a lot of spectacle here.

As a matter of fact, their landscapes are eloquent metaphors for the societies in these two countries: the Dutch reserved, the Americans ebullient. Here you have to conquer the landscape to make it yours, there you are the one who is overwhelmed, swept off your feet.

The Dutch landscape, in other words, is subtle. Photographer Saskia Boelsums knows how to capture that subtlety and how to add something un-Dutch to it: grandeur. By using the dramatic Dutch skies, as well as the variation in land and water, she manages to compensate for the lack of drama in this flat country. Land + light + sky fold together into a landscape in layers.

Her photography reminds me of Dutch landscape painting. This time not with a brush, but with her digital toolbox, she adds highlights, places emphasis, heightens effects. She feels entirely free to do so: the truth of the image is none the less for it, she feels.

And she is also pragmatic. Knowing that Instagram would mercilessly crop her pictures in a square, she decided to preempt the digital dogma and to compose her images herself in the prescribed format.

Her photographs, then, are created as carefully selected frames. That requires endless patience. Waiting for hours until the sun breaks through the clouds, or a cloud moves on, or the tide rolls in. And sometimes it doesn't. The sun and the clouds which are her most important actors, don't let themselves be pushed around. Better luck tomorrow.

One totally Dutch thing that you don't see in Boelsums' photographs: you don't see the extent to which the Dutch landscape is the product of human intervention. It's just there. In fact, you see very few people, or even traces of people, in her work: they are only allowed in when they heighten the drama, for example the man walking with his horses into the surf on the island of Ameland. The landscape is the main character. In all its subtlety and its grandeur.

Tracy Metz

## I AM STUNNED BY THE BEAUTY OF THE WORLD

Saskia Boelsums is best known for her landscape images with dramatic skies, but her mother always used to call her Little Miss Sunshine. A happy child who took everything into her own hands, being more of a doer than a thinker. She also finds this interview inconvenient: *"I am particularly good at asking the questions. I am not really a talker by nature, but much more a spectator, an observer."*

Saskia Boelsums grew up in the Dutch city of Amstelveen until her family moved to the Middle East when she was four years old. Her father was an engineer at KLM and was assigned to a position in Iran, before later being transferred to Curaçao. Her parents taught her that adventure is fun, that entering into something new can be enriching. Watching TV abroad during that time was not easy, which is why the family's evenings were filled with crafts, experimenting, and exploring. The years abroad helped shape her view of the world. *"If you play outside and see a child of your own age looking for food in a garbage bin, you have been confronted with inequality and relativity already at a young age."*

When she was twelve years old, the family returned to the Netherlands. She was excited. For her, it was the promised land where she understood everyone and where everything was possible. She started high school, but it didn't interest her at all. She wanted to *live*, to go out. For five years, she worked several different jobs, until the urge to attend art school finally rose to the surface.

*"I do these things very intuitively, there's not really a plan behind it. I have always been creative. I already knew that I wanted to become a visual artist when I was a teenager. So I would have complete freedom, would be able to organize my life in my own way, wear the clothes I want, and do my own things without people judging me."*

With a nine-to-five job a terrifying prospect, art school provided her with a license to be herself. She locked herself up for a couple of weeks to create a portfolio, went to admissions with paintings that were still wet, and was immediately admitted.

*"I absolutely loved my time at the art academy. Five days a week of being busy learning the things I wanted to!"*

She chose to major in spatial design. She later combined that with graphic design, but her heart wasn't really in it after all, and aside from that, it was increasingly becoming a computer profession. *"During the final year, there was one computer per five students, and we were all just standing there around that screen. And suddenly everyone would start designing ellipses with rounded letters in it. I didn't like that. I wanted to build and saw."*

After graduating, Saskia Boelsums designed baroque bird feeders with pillars, copper domes, and gold leaf. They were a success, attracted a lot of media attention, and she was steadily able to expand her clientele. *"Until I thought to myself: 'I don't want to build bird feeders for the rest of my life.'" She moved to the rural province of Drenthe, found a studio, and met her husband. "He is a writer, and we quickly started talking about how we could make exciting combinations of text and image. And we did!"*

A large structure of scaffolding wooden planks, pillars, and chains was their first installation, with a retro computer screen at the top where words appear and disappear as if typed in real-time, as if one can follow the thinking process. The text is printed in a large box beneath it, and a paper shredder in a third box produces an increasingly large shredding pile in a perpetual process. *"The Ministry of Interior had set up the Museum van Overbodig Beleid ('Museum of Unnecessary Policy'), and our installation became the figurehead of this initiative. We've shown it dozens of times at different ministries and formal events, and a mayor, state secretary, or minister would come to press the start button."*

Numerous commissions for installations in the public space followed, for example, a bridge deck on Drenthe's border with Germany was covered with images and text. As a result of that project,

they received a phone call on a Friday afternoon from Het Drentse Landschap, an organization that manages estates and monumental buildings, asking *“Whether we wanted to come and have a look at a former ox barn that had been converted to a living-working house. We had been looking for a house for a while and I had a certain image of it in my head. It had to be detached, somewhere in the countryside, with many natural materials. I couldn’t believe my eyes! This house was surrounded by meadows and fields. Built in the old style with reeds and straw, with oak planks in the interior. It was incredible.”*

It was only in the countryside that Saskia Boelsums discovered how much she loves silence and how much she needs it to recharge. *“Since moving there, I continue to be amazed, that there’s so much happening all the time, also throughout the seasons. I still look outside every night to see the starry night sky, or to watch the moon shine if it’s out. It feels as if I have become more sensitive when there are fewer stimuli around-me, and I can be more open.”*

She started shooting still lifes after buying a pomegranate at a supermarket and wanted to share her wonder about its beauty. She thought about painting it, but the challenge of discovering a new medium was stronger. She then decided to delve into photography for at least four years. Still lifes are her first subjects. *“Very ideal: I just put a table next to the window to make a composition and played with the light, and for my materials, I went to the greengrocer a little more often.”*

She chose to share her learning process by posting a picture on social media every day. As an open art studio, and as an incentive to keep going. She didn’t care about making herself vulnerable in this way, since not doing something out of fear would be a bigger shame. *“Soon, I thought: ‘I’ll never stop doing this, I love this too much!’ It was one great experiment in form and texture: from the most traditional arrangements with fruit and vegetables to freezing a hydrangea in a block of ice. Endless play.”*

After a period of shooting still lifes, Saskia Boelsums began to experiment with portrait photography.

Her husband turned out to be a good and patient model, he even regularly ended up in a box with water. When she shot a series of images of him in open nature on a horse she had built underneath a beautiful cloudy sky, she discovered how much she enjoys shooting outdoors, marking the start of her transition to landscape photography.

Inspired by stories about the beauty of the coast, she travelled to Texel, one of the Dutch Wadden Islands. *“I stood on a dune and just kept taking pictures. Foaming waves, sand drifting in the wind, sunlight reflecting off the water, it was such a fantastic experience. On Sunday morning, I posted my first dune picture on social media, checked my accounts in the afternoon, and wondered out loud what that 2K meant!”*

Social media has turned out to be a powerful tool and her number of followers has rapidly grown. She comes into contact with people who want to buy her pictures, but she also gets approached by organizers, gallery owners, and journalists. Her landscape photography is getting noticed, appreciated, and she is being invited to exhibitions both national and international. *“It’s amazing how fast my network has expanded through social media. In that respect, a whole new world has opened up to me. My recent solo exhibition in New York came from a message on Instagram! And it all can be done from a wonderfully quiet place in the countryside.”*

In recent years, Saskia Boelsums has focused on capturing experiences and catching beauty. The pale reflection of moonlight on a frozen lake, the golden-yellow glow of a grain field on a late summer day, an almost translucent green wave in a gray, turbulent sea. Moments that she experiences not only because she spends so much time outside, but also because she deliberately looks for them after doing some thorough research.

*“Sometimes, I see a beautiful meander, and I think: ‘Stunning, but the sky is rather boring today.’ Then, I write down the location and keep an eye on the weather forecast. As soon as the weather becomes more dynamic and there’s more movement in the air, I’ll visit the place again. It can take hours before*

*the perfect picture appears, but I don't mind. I simply love the outdoors."*

The specialist press often makes a link between her images and those of the Dutch masters. *"That doesn't surprise me. I stroll through the same landscapes and see the same skies as the old masters such as Jacob van Ruisdael, Willem Maris, and Paulus Potter. So, it is just as well my environment, my nature, and I capture my experience of it. Of course, I am inspired by them, as they are part of my history."* And then, with a wink, she adds: *"But a Ruisdael sky is also your sky, and mine."*

Saskia Boelsums' work has a strong signature: monumental and picturesque. She wants to show the essence of her experience, so that the atmosphere of the landscape can be felt through the image.

Saskia Boelsums was raised Catholic but is not religious. She does, however, feel a strong connection to nature, and she experiences it as a mystery, a great miracle. *"That has nothing to do with the church, but it does connect to 'something'. Or 'it'. Or 'everything'. Or 'nothing'. In Iran, we lived on the edge of the desert, and sometimes, there were these dust storms. You'd see threatening, dark clouds, in an almost apocalyptic biblical scene. We'd run outside to watch it unfold. So beautiful! It has made a deep impression on me. The realization that you have to surrender, because it is bigger than yourself."*

Social media plays a major role in the work of Saskia Boelsums. It offers a window to a global audience and also influences the format of her landscape images. Once stunned about the fact that Instagram was cropping her photos into square formats while also being surprised at the impact it had, she has decided to work within this compelling form. *"When something gets difficult, I start to like it. The square format forces me to show the essence of the picture. The crop is so important. Two pixels to the left or right can make a world of difference. It's a very delicate and intuitive process. And then suddenly, it's there. Suddenly I see, 'This is it.'"*

Her work consists of two phases. First, she gathers raw materials and then she edits her images. Working from the outside in: from roaming around in vast landscapes in every type of weather to the relative calmness of working on a computer screen behind a blackout curtain. The RAW files are pale and only gain their color by playing with contrast, sharpness, blurring, darkness, and light. As she does this, her background in the visual arts works to her advantage.

Where photography nowadays has become volatile because of the ability to see the results immediately, Saskia Boelsums' work remains more reminiscent of a traditional maturing process of making a painting. *"When I come home after a photography adventure, a careful process of selection, research, and consideration begins. Sometimes, I immediately know that an image is right, but there are also series that have to mature. I work on my images for a long time, as I try to convey the feeling I had when I took them. That is an intensive process, but I enjoy it immensely. It is just as exciting as being outside and taking pictures when it storms or when the moon breaks through the clouds and makes the world even more mysterious."*

Saskia Boelsums continues to challenge herself creatively. Her working process is slowly changing. In the past, she mainly let herself be surprised by what she encountered. However, lately, she already knows what type of image she wants to capture and then searches for the most suitable locations and weather conditions to catch that atmosphere. Going from the idea towards the image is a reverse process. Nevertheless, she is nowhere near being finished with landscape photography or with photography as a medium. *"I truly love this work and I enjoy it so much. I am repeatedly stunned by the beauty of the world. Sometimes, creating something can be a struggle, but making landscape photos seems to happen naturally, effortlessly. At times, I look at my pictures with surprise and think: 'Did this really come from me?' I just let it happen. It just flows like crazy. Amazing!"*

















