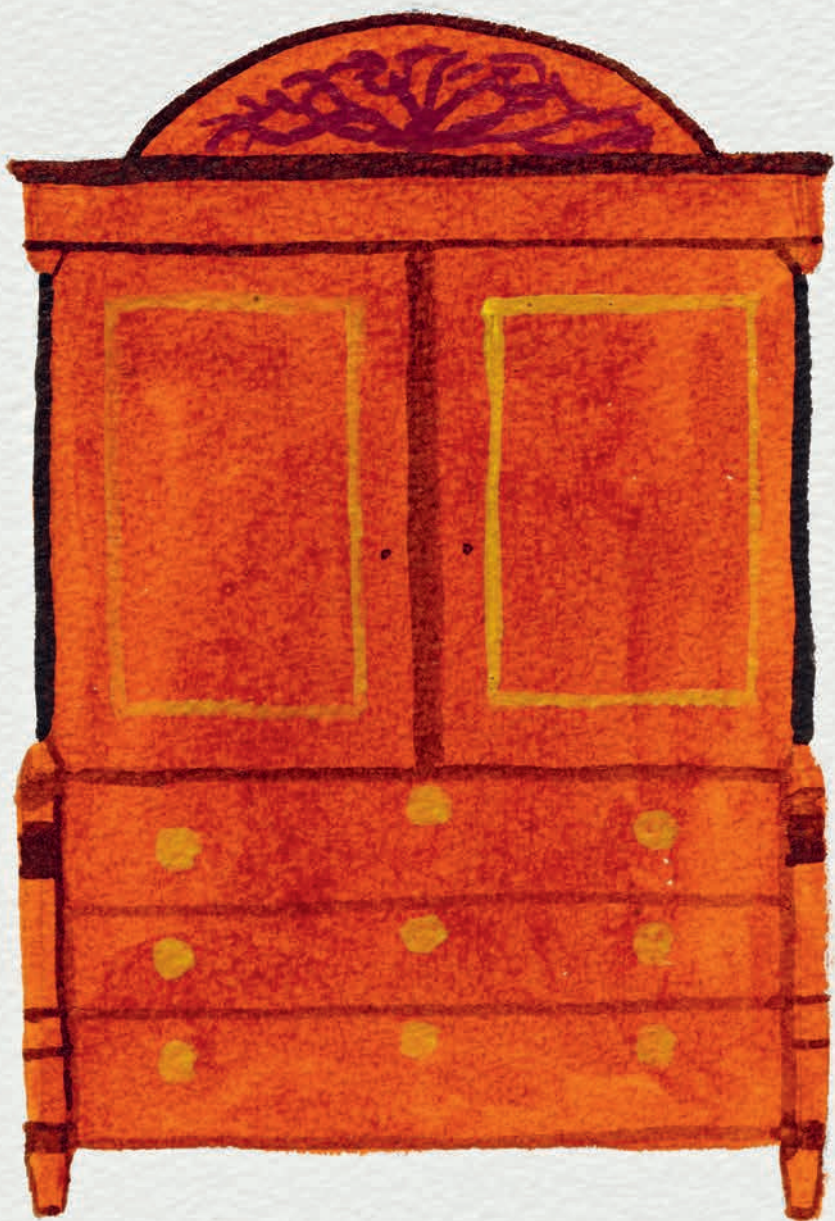




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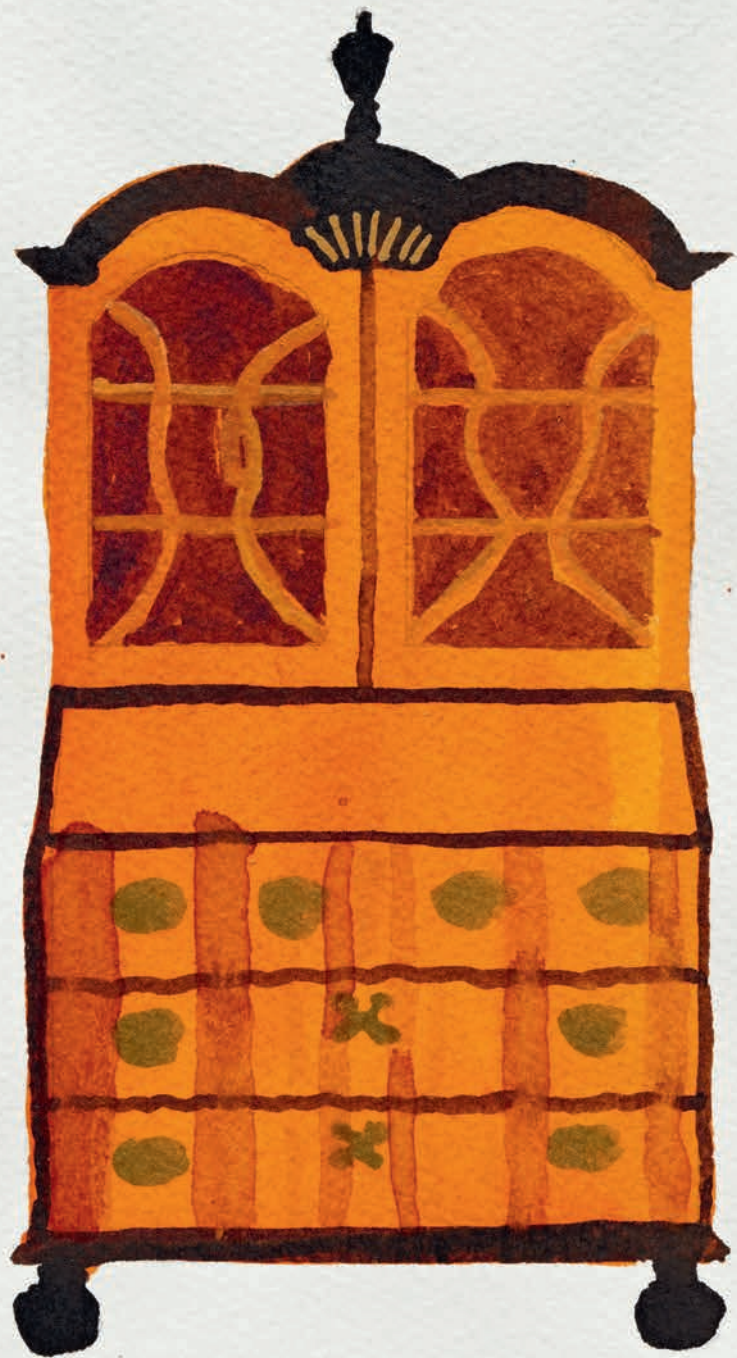
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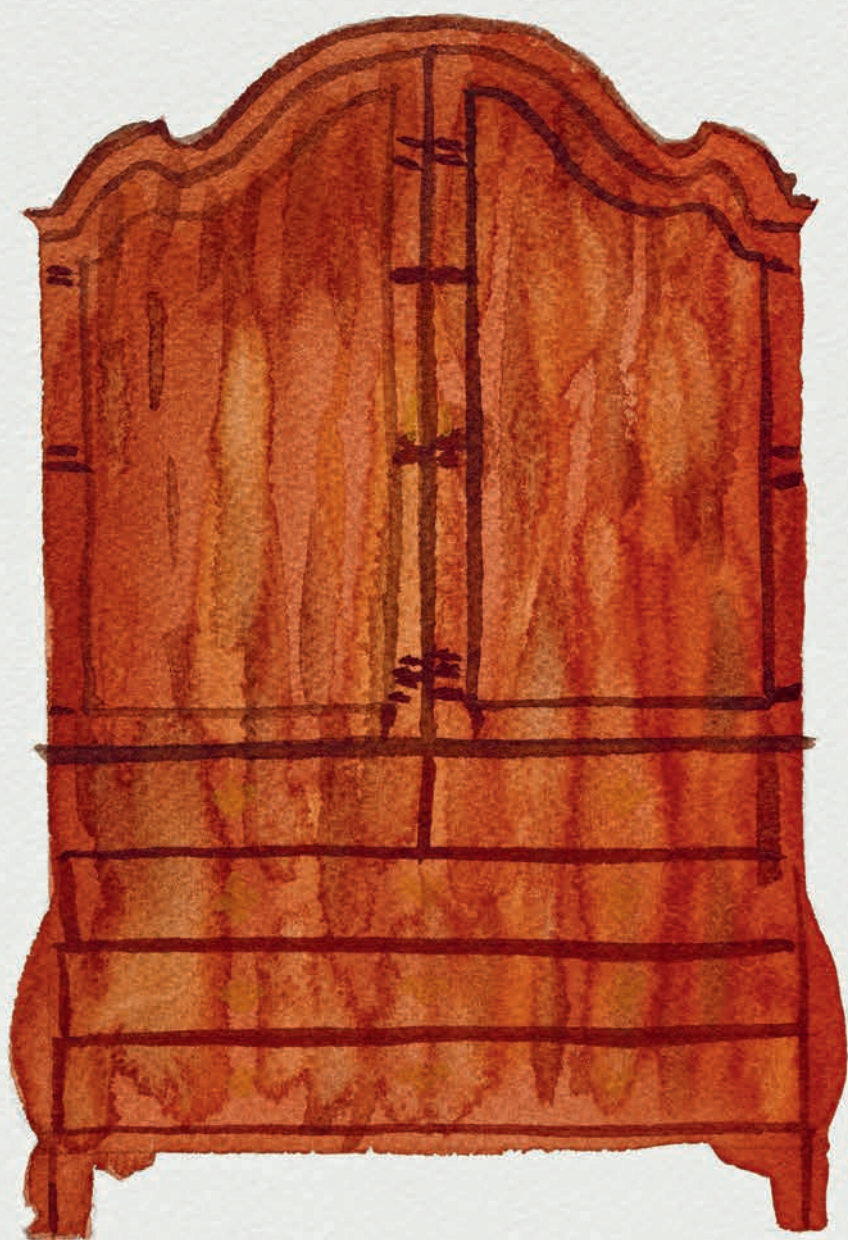
Hollands kabinet 72 24/12/10 Svdt4



Hollands Kabinet 100 20/11/11 SvAH



Dutch cabinet 101 - 22/1/11 - SvdtH



Hollands Kabiner 370, 18/10/11 SvAH

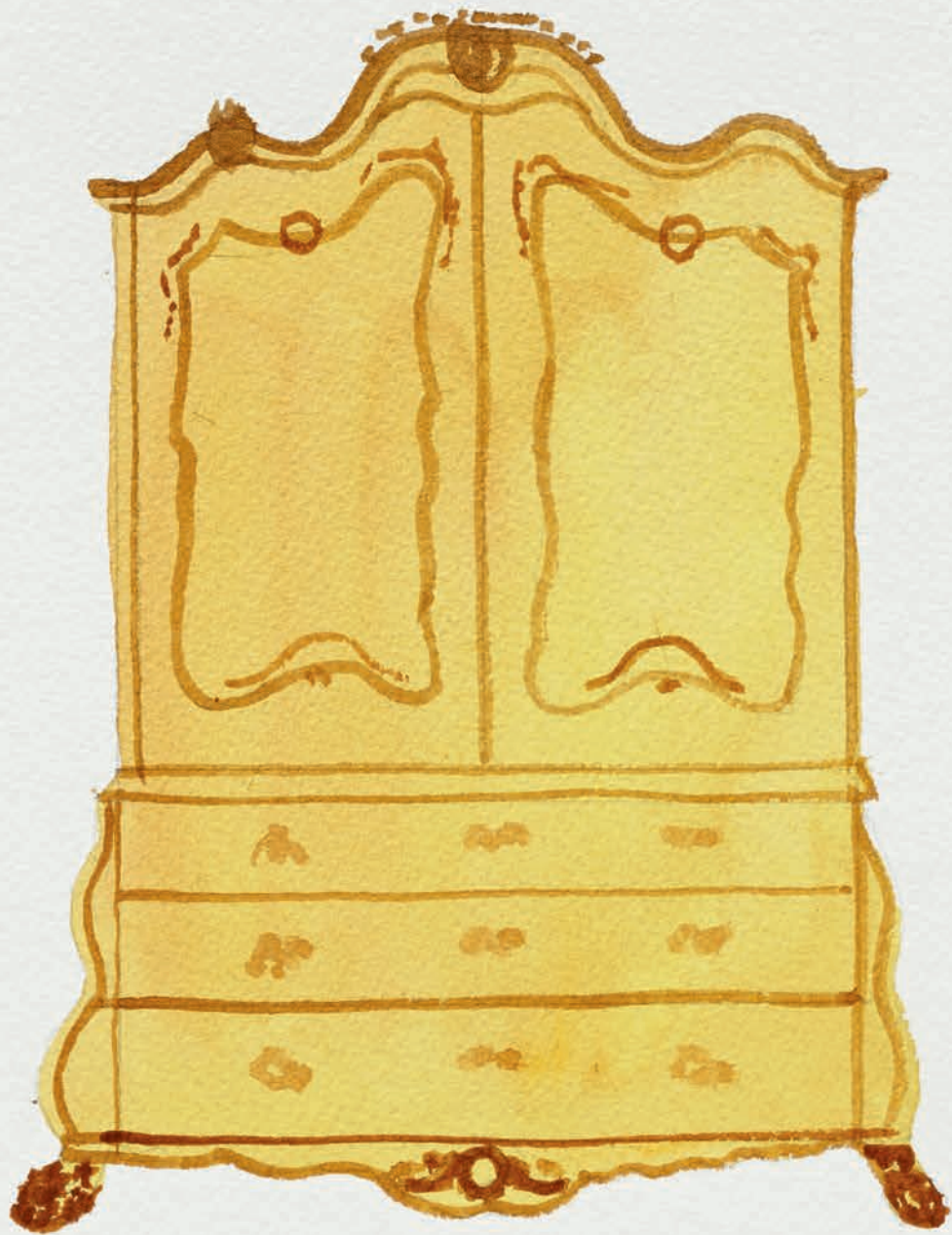


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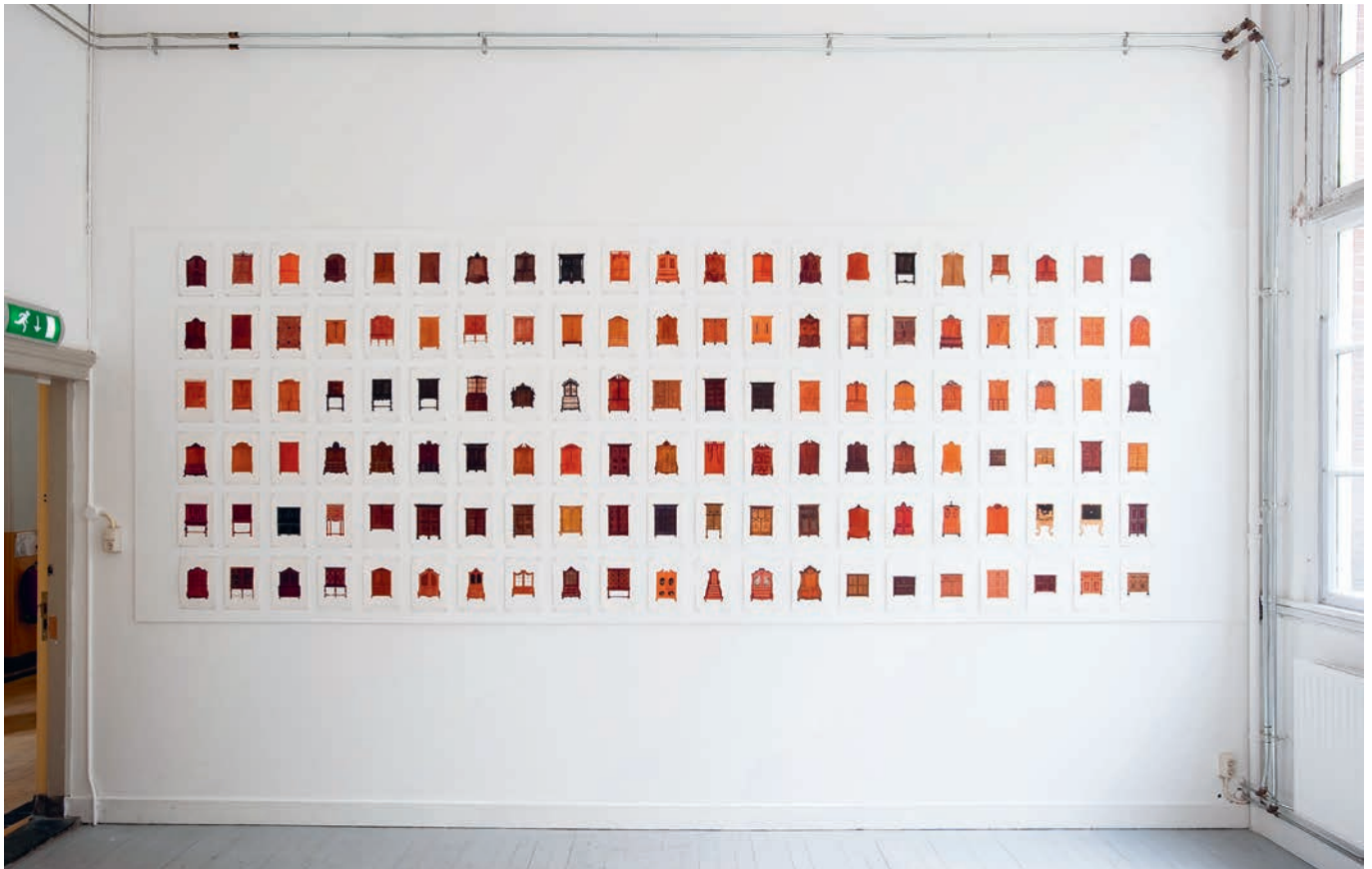


Hollands Kabinet 425 12/12/11 SvdM





Hollands Kabinet 534 30/3/12 Svdm



Sara Sejin Chang (Sara van der Heide), *Hollands Kabinet/Dutch Cabinet*, 558 watercolour drawings, 26 × 18 cm, 2010 – 2012, collection Van Abbemuseum. Installation presented at De Appel, Amsterdam.

## DUTCH CABINET

**By drawing 558 cabinets, one for each day of the right-wing Dutch government, artist Sara Sejin Chang (Sara van der Heide) mused on the colonial past and the queering of politics.**

In 2010, artist Sara Sejin Chang (Sara van der Heide) embarked on a series of works entitled *Hollands Kabinet* ('Dutch Cabinet') as an act of resistance provoked by the Rutte Cabinet, the conservative coalition government that took office in the Netherlands on 14 October 2010 thanks to the support of the far-right Freedom Party. She illustrated each day of this cabinet's period in office with one watercolour of a Dutch cabinet on paper. 558 days and 558 paintings later, the Rutte Cabinet resigned, marking the end of the series as well as the end of the first 'liberal' government in the Netherlands.

Since the Dutch language contains many words that carry a multiplicity of meanings, the poetics of irony and the play on words was not lost on many speakers. For the Dutch word *kabinet* is also the informal, vernacular term for the Dutch government.

Seven years later, we are on the eve of the formation of another Rutte Cabinet, and its line-up is strikingly homogenous, white, and male. This experimental essay seeks to reflect on this series of artworks as an artistic, queer and political gesture of resistance in the midst of a very overt and pertinent state of *déjà vu*. After all, each one of the 558 paintings is an effort to queer\* Dutch politics and the concept of authenticity by reading the historical relationship of the Netherlands to its complicated colonial past along the woodgrain.

*Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.* — Audre Lorde

These 558 Dutch cabinets embody stories, biographies, and wood from elsewhere — or what philosopher Édouard Glissant might perhaps have called wood from *Broccoli*. Wood that embodies the other. In the documentary *One World in Relation* by filmmaker Mathia Diawara, Glissant uses the metaphor of broccoli to point out that 'everyone likes broccoli, but I hate it. But do I know why? Not at all. I accept my opacity on that level. Why wouldn't I accept it on other levels? Why wouldn't I accept the other's opacity?'

*Each cabinet encapsulates a Dutch family's exhibition of heroic, ordinary or stolen objects from Indonesia, India, Ghana, or South Africa*

In what ways do these wooden cabinets represent unknown, vacant, transitional places, opaque histories and interactions with humans from the past days, decades, or centuries? The similarities between the cabinets initially trick the eye into only seeing them as exoticized objects of desire, but the various shades of the wood, and the slight differences in design highlight that these fetishized objects of desire belong to a nostalgic Dutch past. Yet the *Hollands Kabinet* is still in dialogue with our present. It is as if time was on hold, then broken, and now constantly reckoning with our collective realities to remind us that the colonial project is not merely a forgotten memory, but present in our society while we are consumed with the new and the original.

This third Rutte Cabinet is not formed out of an urgency to repair histories or rekindle social policies. Rather, it is constituted by the Dutch people's nostalgia for a lily-white past that is symbolized by idyllic farmsteads, heteronormative family dinners, and great-grandmother's cabinet, which has been in the family for a century or more. The same century that constructed a single

reading of our collective histories still reproduces cultural amnesia and nostalgia in the present. Cultural theorist Gloria Wekker notes that this deep reservoir, a cultural archive, represents a sense of self that has been formed and fabricated. However, our objects do not suffer from colonial amnesia because they are often marked with people's interactions, migration histories, and cultures of taste and politics.

Chang's drawings acknowledge this complex and colonial nature of the Dutch cultural archive by placing the multiplicities of histories as small and meticulous traces on the doors, drawers, etchings, and handles of the cabinet.

*Knock.*

*Who's there?*

*No one.*

— Warsan Shire

The cabinets are also objects that narrate how Dutch domestic life has, for centuries, been entangled within the global colonial and patriarchal project. This is perfectly elucidated by the cabinets that are part of the collection of the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. Particularly, by the example of the cabinet whose construction, style, and decoration that can only and undeniably be read as 'Dutch' design.

Ironically, this cabinet was manufactured somewhere in South or Southeast Asia, as illustrated by the fact that no veneer or glue was used in its construction. In the hot and humid climate, glue was not used. In the Netherlands, wood was considered too valuable to waste. This particular 17th-century cabinet is missing an otherwise atypical drawer. In other words, when the cabinet is opened with a key, a bell rings to discourage enslaved people and/or servants from accessing it. The key must be rotated four times, which gives the owner enough time to hear the alarm. The design reiterates the colonial violence and hierarchy between the master and disempowered other.

*Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions...* — Edward Said

The cabinets in the drawings changed their shape, stance, colour, size and form for 558 days while refusing to remain historical and political bystanders. To look at how each cabinet can be a setting for a different story or home is to speculate on how each cabinet encapsulates a well-to-do Dutch family's exhibition of heroic, ordinary or stolen objects, trinkets, and treasures from Indonesia, India, Ghana, or South Africa. It shows that for the past four centuries, *elsewhere* has always been present in the comfort of Dutch social life. To pair the Rutte Cabinet with these wooden cabinets is to bring resistance to the fore and to open up hybrid and partial, elusive and repetitive, obstinate and strange readings of the colonial in the everyday.

Chang offers a work that questions the Dutch reading of history by retracing the presence of the 'minoritized other' as well as the colonial residue engraved within the cultural object that is the guardian of secrets and pride of Dutch treasures, valuables and personal archives. Furthermore, to engage with these artistic acts of resistance is to complicate one's own political understanding and role in society.

Critical theorist Simon Gikandi pushes us further into the speculative realm and invites us to think of what Chang offers the viewer, the other, as a set of questions about culture or of feelings that can function as important sites for change and transformation. In this context, the cabinets are queer settings of transformation in disguise. Or, are they merely homes that estrange our relationship and understanding of politics and histories?

\* The remarkable queer theorist Ann Cvetkovch uses in her publication *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003) queering as a methodology to approach and reclaim histories and archives that erased marginalized or othered individuals and communities.