

Casper Faassen
Photographic Works

Stilling life

Onno Blom

*Portrait of painter and
photographer Casper Faassen*

Earliest time. He must have been about seven when his grandparents took him to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Hand in hand, they climbed the wide stone museum steps before turning right into the hall of fame. His eyes darted to and fro, to the paintings in the alcoves. A landscape with swirling clouds, an angry spitting swan, a girl pouring milk from a jug. But they were not to be distracted and made their way straight to *The Night Watch*.

The closer he got, the quieter he became. The immense painting was full of movement; the militia company under the command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq and Lieutenant Willem van Ruyterburgh was getting ready to go on a march, but the boy was rooted to the spot. His grandfather – “look Casper, it’s written in golden letters at the top of the frame” – pointed out that Rembrandt, just like him, was born in Leiden.

Back at home, his father noticed the impression *The Night Watch* had made on him. “If you think that Rembrandt’s painting is so fantastic, why don’t you paint a copy in your room,” suggested his father. And Casper did.

He started by sketching an outline on the wall of the wooden box bed his father had built for his bedroom. After that, he used the cheapest, brightly coloured poster paints to portray the whole company in strong brush strokes: riflemen, regimental colours, drums, the man in red loading his musket, Banninck Cocq with his hand outstretched, Van Ruyterburgh in his shiny gold suit and the mysterious young girl in a ray of light.

His father, Frans Faassen, was the headmaster of a primary school who put the fear of God into people. When he clapped his hands, the class fell silent at once. He was strict, but just, wanting his children to maximise their true potential. When he saw how his son loved to paint, he built him a drawing board in the attic and gave him a sketch pad, pencils, pens, brushes and paint.

Casper spent all his holidays drawing, while the rain clattered against the windows. In the summer, when he and his parents and little sister drove south in their campervan with his surfboard strapped to the roof, he painted the sunset every evening. His father also taught him calligraphy. Sit up straight, give your elbows enough room so you can form the letters smoothly and evenly on the paper.

As a boy, Casper was full of energy. He was restless and was always getting into trouble. Things frequently got broken in the suburb of Leiden where he grew up in the 1980s – the Merenwijk, which he later jokingly dubbed ‘The Merenbronx’: a ball through a window, a scratched car. He was once picked up by the police for defacing walls with graffiti. Casper was clever, got good marks at Bonaventura College and played in all the sports teams. A popular boy, and yet he was occasionally sent out of class for causing trouble.

He was so good at sport that he was asked to play baseball for the Kinheim team in Haarlem. His father gave his approval but insisted that he applied himself and persevered. So Casper took his folding bike on the train to Haarlem for baseball training every afternoon. It paid off: he and his junior team at Kinheim became Dutch champions a few times. He developed a strong right arm – always handy for an artist – and was a real showman: fast, passionate, hooked on applause.

He was always drawing his sports heroes in his sketchbook: the basketball player, Michael Jordan, the baseball player, Ryne Sandberg and the tennis player, Andre Agassi. Some of his drawings were published in club magazines. His talent was soon recognised. His first published drawing, in a neighbourhood newsletter, was of a cat and the battered face of a woman. He must have been about 13. People saw all sorts of things in it, but he did not.

Casper did not want to show people how well he could draw, even though he was pretty proud of his skills. It was his way of processing the things he saw around him; not losing the moment. He captured things that flashed past and rendered them motionless on paper: drawing against time. It was also partly greed: coveting and conquering. He drew the most beautiful girl in a swimsuit from his O’Neill diary time and time again – until at last she was his.

After an intermediate year at college in San Diego in the US in the mid-1990s, where he combined sport with studying, he went to the VU Amsterdam to study communication sciences. It came easily to him. He threw himself into student life, joined the VU choir and the men’s society, Borgia. He lived in the society house on Oudezijds Achterburgwal 45 for a short time, where *’t Borgieën* can be seen above the front door, penned there by Casper Faassen 25 years ago.

































