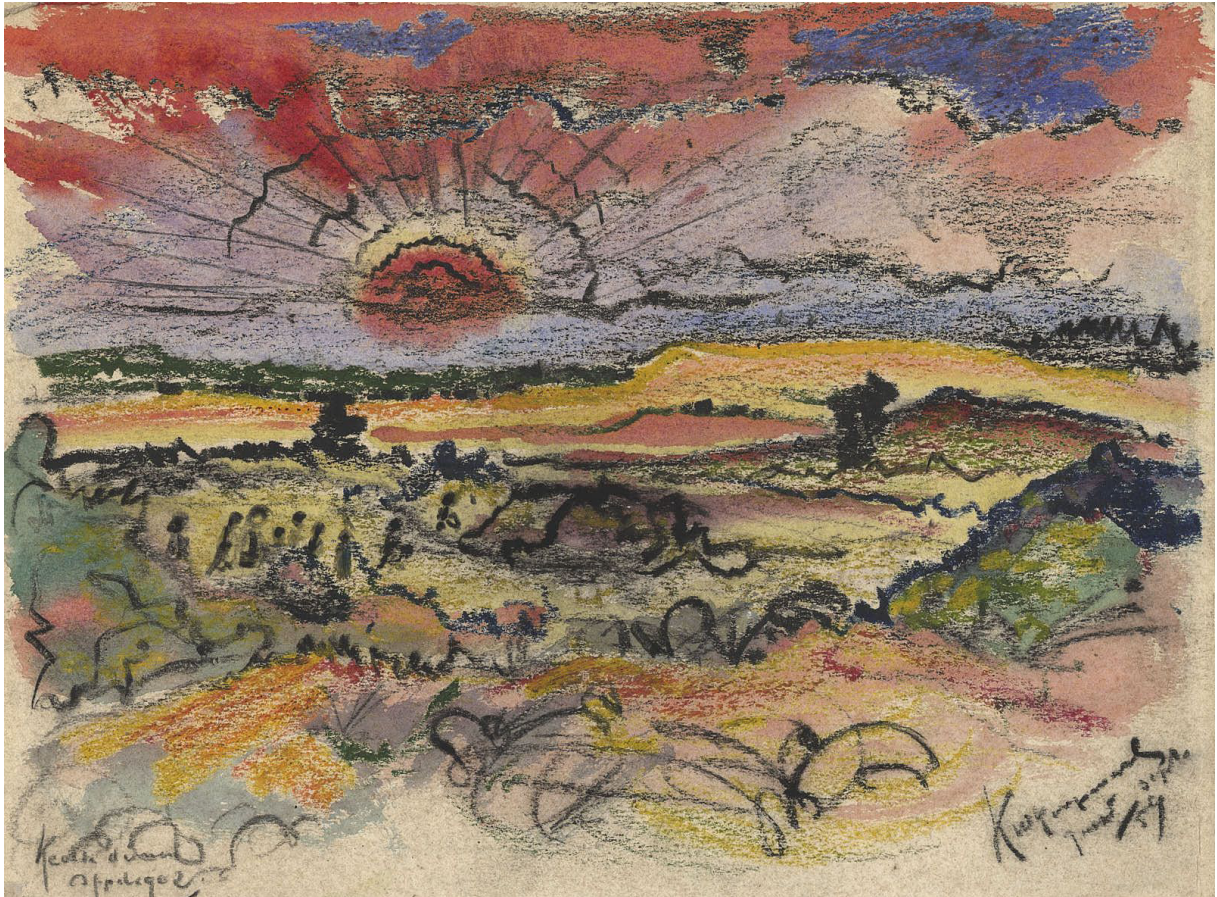


# THE SKY IS BROWN

Hand in hand with Klaas Koopmans:  
a travel through time and space



Klaas Koopmans, De kale duinen bij Appelscha,  
watercolor and crayon, 23 x 31 cm, 1959,  
collection Stichting Klaas Koopmans

Floor Demmendaal,  
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BA Thesis Art History, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen

## Introduction

This playthesis is auto ethnographic, in an attempt to create an art history for humanity.

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# I

It started with horses.

My parents' back yard in Friesland, where Frisian horses were kept to pull the golden carriage of the king on Prince's day. The black stallions were a steady and calm presence in the everyday background. Scenically they grazed through my childhood, extending our family to the meadows.



Hynders, oil on canvas,  
80 x 50 cm, 1999,  
collection Fam. Ypma

I was told once, that horses have bigger hearts than we do and therefore have more love to give. If love is warmth and God is love, I understand why we respect them and leave them be. They are greater than us, there is no need to deny it. We have only been given the hands to render them in all their God-given glory.

You knew that, too. In the painting above, three horses huddle together in a space the color of their brownish hides. The viewer is the fourth. They transcend. Eyes closed, their skulls close but not touching, they seem to be silently communicating what we all long for most: peace. This moment of exchange, their warm breath mingling, seems to be more important to you than their surroundings. Breathe with them. Relax.



## II

Our family's farm was close to a lake. Once upon a time, I fed the horses  
in my orange life jacket.



De Leijen, oil on canvas,

70 x 80 cm, 1985,

collection Fries Museum

In the picture you painted, the lake is the color of the sky. In my memory, the lake was brown.

There were summers when we couldn't swim in it because of the algae, a consequence of the overfertilized ground surrounding it.

There were winters when we couldn't ice skate around its edges.

### III

Becoming used to not being perceived, I moved into a wagon.



Earnewarre, oil on panel,

62 x 51 cm, 1963,

collection Fam. Bruinsma

I stayed just outside the city of Ghent, you see, where some of your work happens to be locked up in Museum Dr. Guislain.

During winter it was super cold. There was no central heating in my box bed, bathroom or kitchen. I almost did not survive.

I met all sorts of figures. A woman baking philosophical bread and a man who ran the European mermaid centre, a man named Gabriël or Lucifer depending on the day, a musician who slept on a bare mattress without blanket, circus artists, theatre makers from the 60s, you name it.

I could make a fire in the yard in front of the wagon to meet people and tell each other stories. I did not judge. That's why they accepted me.

I would rather be with them, right now.



## IV

That's where things started to mix up.



Huizen aan water in Blokzijl,  
drawing on paper, 1959,  
collection Stichting Klaas Koopmans

I think it is best to describe it as *fragmentation*, or suspicion. In trying to be open and receptive for what all these different free spirits told me about their belief system, I lost my own sense of reality. Reality became malleable, the frames I was told to color inside the lines of all this time, did not exist for these people. Was there ever a frame?

Klaas Koopmans created without one, he drew on whatever material he could find with whatever material he could find, like lipstick. He wasn't strictly allowed to draw during one of his stays in a mental hospital, but he found ways to do it anyway. As if his art was threatening somehow to people caring for him, or to other patients.

One's reflection of their reality, either based in reason or in disorder, shouldn't be an issue. Being dragged into or absorbed by someone should technically not be frightening, as long as the reader or viewer has a strong enough sense of self to "remain seated" while absorbing it. I was *outsidered* and isolated myself, for being ill.

As if illness was my fault and not a byproduct of a sick circumstance. The fear of the ill is a fear of losing one's own sense of self, which, if lost that easily, is not a secure sense of self at all. As if my illness was not as much mine as yours to learn from: I, a mirror, temporarily reflecting perpetual light.

Losing one's sense of self is, in some religions, part of spiritual awakening. Aren't we meant to lose our false sense of self, our stubborn convictions and limited sense of understanding at least once in our lifetime? The insane keep us fresh. And besides, how *else* should we react to insufferable cruelty and injustice? Aren't you insane to keep your wits?

How about we *don't* kick dogs who have already been kicked. We *don't* try to stop a man creating something that might challenge us. And we still lock (the work of) a man away who has shown vulnerability and a deep sense of understanding with accompanying grief when the rest of the world failed to do so. It is our task to try and foster compassion.

What I mean by this, is the fact that part of the *Gestichtstekeningen*, a series of drawings Klaas Koopmans made, are being kept and occasionally exhibited in Museum Dr. Guislain, a former mental hospital. Having refuted the difference between the ill and supposedly healthy cowards, I beg to differ his (Koopmans) current position in art history.

He did the work, he felt it all, he pushed through it, he created, he showed and we put not only him but his work in an asylum. In a traumatizing space, in this case. Where torture devices are displayed under the disguise of being educational, but in reality only reminding us of the distasteful practice of othering the ill, supporting it therefore.

V

I survived and met your son.



Simmer yn Grinslân, oil on canvas,

100 x 70 cm, 1981

collection Fam. Yp



Your son moved to a village called Warfhuizen, after winning the lottery. He is an artist like yourself, but he mostly sticks to indoor painting for as far as I have seen. When you walk into his atelier, a huge painting of a furnished room welcomes you.

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