

# **VANRIET** VANITY

**CHARLOTTE MULLINS**





All works illustrated in this book are in oil paint on canvas.

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## The Prologue

Jan Vanriet's love of books, poetry, language and its relationship to images, is apparent from the outset in this book. Just look at the cover: the graphic interplay between his name and 'Vanity', the scarlet intensity of the slabs of meat becoming an image of mortality under such a title, a metaphor for humanity. Vanriet thinks about, cares about these things, arranging the images and texts in this book himself, choosing the cover, the title, its treatment. So when 'Big Bracelet' appears as the book's opening image, a full-bleed double-page spread of a golden cuff, you know he considers it a seminal work.

Coming so soon after the title 'Vanity', it is tempting – perhaps intended – that we first read 'Big Bracelet' as a 'vanitas' in the Dutch tradition, a prized object, which nevertheless, points to the mortality of its owner. The bracelet belonged to Vanriet's mother, who died shortly before it was painted. She was a political prisoner in the Mauthausen concentration camp during World War II, where she met Vanriet's father. The bracelet is therefore a lodestone, an embodiment of her and of Vanriet's memories of her, its shiny golden surfaces reminiscent of the polished brass fittings in the theatre, which they frequented together when he was a young child.<sup>1</sup>

Vanriet's work in this volume, mostly from the last three years, extends to nine series. Presented in a loosely chronological fashion, each series is divided by short introductions and is punctuated by poems, songs, sketches and watercolours. These works are the latest in a long and prestigious career that has seen Vanriet represent his country at the São Paulo and Venice biennales and, more recently, stage ambitious exhibitions at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp and the National Museum in Gdansk.

Since 1986, Vanriet's family history has informed much of his practice, particularly events around World War II. Recent series include 'The Music Boy' (P. 11), which depicts his grandmother and uncle – his mother's twin brother – playing the accordion as a boy before the war. 'The Homecoming' (P. 8) shows the effects of the war: the same uncle's eyes now appear hollow and empty, all youthful vigour and optimism departed. 'Losing Face' (2013) included around seventy portraits of some of the 25,000 Jewish and Roma deportees from Dossin Barracks in Malines to Auschwitz. 'Bella' (P. 10) is from this series, a head-and-shoulders portrait of an elegant woman in a patterned blouse, feathered hat and veil. Vanriet has painted her without eyes, as if she is fading from view. He has given her a partial identity – she's no longer a number, but a person with a name. However, the painting suggests, this can never be total, it can never rescind the past.







# The Contract



In 'The Contract', a polyptych of eleven paintings stems from a small black-and-white photograph of Vanriet's parents taken shortly after the end of World War II. He has removed the original setting; all that is left is a couple embracing. Vanriet describes his parents' courtship, if we can call it that, as something from a movie. Vanriet's father was held in the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. His teenage mother was moved to the same camp and it was there that Vanriet's father first met her, recognising her Antwerp dialect, a touch of home. He tracked her down after the war and the photograph on which 'The Contract' is based was taken just before their marriage. 'The Contract 1' looks like a still from such a movie, the frame of the film reel visible top and bottom, the figures dressed in the grainy tones of black-and-white cinematography.

To have survived the camp, to have found each other again – no wonder they are smiling. But the image as Vanriet has interpreted it, again and again, is complex. The man is smoking as he embraces the woman, a cigarette wedged between his fingertips, the gesture half-hearted. Her hands do not extend around his waist, but are pinned to his chest, creating a barrier, as if protecting herself from him. He grimaces; she averts her eyes. Everything that seemed to suggest an embrace at first glance now points to the reverse, a forced closeness (for the sake of the camera?) in 'The Contract 7'; an awkward moment as he treads on her toes in 'The Contract 6'.

All their years of marriage are distilled into these images. The clinch: a premonition of a difficult relationship. The marriage: a contract rather than a love affair, held together only by their shared experience of the concentration camp. In 'The Contract 4', just their feet are visible, balanced on top of an inverted red triangle. This triangle was their 'badge' in Mauthausen, marking them out as political prisoners. It nearly fills the canvas; there's little room left for personality, for freedom, for choice.

In 'The Contract 7', the figures seem to cling together, their identities slipping, becoming faceless, unidentifiable. They do not have to be identified as Vanriet's parents, for a sense of conflict, of trauma, of loss to be sensed. The couple could be your parents or mine; they could represent your marriage or mine, the repeated motif suggesting the variations possible at one moment in time, the complexity of existence.







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