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Jacqueline de Jong, *Gitane, coup de force (Gitane, Take Over)*, 1978, oil on canvas, 26 1/2 × 38".

Jacqueline de Jong

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In the late 1970s, still in her thirties but having made a name for herself as editor of the *Situationist Times* (1962–67) and as a Cobra-adjacent painter of suicides and car crashes, Jacqueline de Jong turned her attention to a rather Pop subject: billiards. Created in Amsterdam, the eight paintings on view here—part of a series comprising more than twenty “Billiards” paintings, 1976–79—featured different permutations of felted tables, glossy balls, wooden cues, cubed chalk, and male players depicted from odd angles and intimate proximities.

The particular game featured in these paintings is carom billiards (or French billiards), played with three balls on a pocketless table. The artist’s interest in this sport was at least partly semantic: Cheeky titles in a mix of French, English, and Dutch underscored the auto- and homoerotic undertones of men playing with sticks and balls. The puns work best in French, as in the 1978 painting *Tirer le diable par le queue*, which translates literally as “Pull the devil by the tail,” but whose meaning is similar to the English expression “Live hand to mouth.” There is also a double entendre in French, as *queue*, the word for both “cue” and “tail,” is slang for “penis.” Using distorting perspectives and exaggerated foreshortening, de Jong made an already phallic piece of sports equipment even more convincingly an extension of, or proxy for, male anatomy.

In *Op de Queue nemen* (Taking It on Its Queue), 1977, a player seen from behind at close range bends at the waist to aim his incredibly long stick (seemingly longer than the table) at one of three oversize balls. The painting focuses on the game, but in comparison to other works on view, its *mise-en-scène* appeared relatively rich. Here, de Jong brought in details of the room, including a brass pendant light, multicolored floor tiles, a television set, a beer ad, and a small table topped with an ashtray and a vase of flowers. Less narrative (but arguably more interesting) paintings hanging nearby zoomed in on contorted hands and carefully placed cues and balls (both still and in motion). The predominantly white-and-gray composition *Gitane, coup de force* (Gitane, Take Over), 1978, is divided horizontally by a cue supported by a pair of disembodied hands. Hovering above the cue, against the mysterious white background, an open cigarette pack (the brand of the work’s title) proffers itself to the viewer. Perhaps the painting is meant to evoke the pool hall’s smoky atmosphere, but more likely it is a kind of distillation. Here and in other works on view, de Jong trimmed her subject to its bare essentials: balls, cue, table, hands, cigarettes.

Similarly abridged, *Black Billiards*, 1978, is a bird's-eye view of a black-felted table with a cue and three balls. The composition is taken up by approximately half the billiard table, whose wooden rails—as seen on the left, top, and right sides of the composition—are sufficiently trompe l'oeil to be initially confused with the painting's actual wooden frame. While reveling in mimesis (the wood grain as well as shadows and reflections that make the table and balls look three-dimensional), de Jong also courts flatness and abstraction. Against the dark background, the red and white balls recall Wassily Kandinsky's cosmic orbs and certain geometric abstractions by Kurt Schwitters. Describing a potential shot, de Jong painted faint white lines connecting all three balls. Similar to the relationship between stars and constellations, the realism of this painting is complicated by an overlaid Conceptual illustration. In addition to providing de Jong with an erotic subtext, billiards—a game where colorful forms are pushed around on a flat surface with a wooden implement—inspired a whole new painterly approach. Unlike most of de Jong's other paintings, which are characterized by thick paint and expressionistic strokes, the “Billiards” series features smooth surfaces and subtle brushwork—a stylistic choice that underscores the slickness and finesse described in these canvases.

— Mara Hoberman

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