

*Poetry.*

*Not Alice in wonderland,  
but Alice arrived just now: is this again  
a new wonderland? No, this is just  
reality, after a long absence.*

*If only politics were like this  
arriving in reality as in an  
old fermette, and say: this is a  
supporting wall, it must remain,  
this wall and that must go  
we'll create large rooms.*

Arie van Geest is a great painter and I was surprised that as a Carrollian I had never heard of him before! When I met him in January at the meeting of the "Nederlandse Lewis Carroll Genootschap" he showed both books and I asked him if he would let me write a small review for the Lewis Carroll Society. All Carrollians can now get acquainted with his imposing work! See: [www.arievangeest.com](http://www.arievangeest.com) [Editor's note: The author wishes to thanks to Ron Stans for his corrections of the text.]

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elements in a large room: a window in the wall looks out on the Tower of Babel by Pieter Breughel de Oude. In the centre there are fragments of Tenniel's Alice in a shattered mirror; her reflection is also broken! To the left and right of Alice there are paintings by René Magritte: *Le Miroir Vivant* (1928) and *L'art de la conversation* (1950). It is impossible to describe all the associations when considering these four elements, but this painting gives a beginning.

Of course my first association was a "religious" one: the promised land ... the Israeli people leaving Egypt to march to their "promised land". Later on, in your childhood days, that land may have evolved into "paradise" or "heaven" and now it may be Dreamland, Neverland, Nowhereland or Wonderland for you. However, Van Geest derived this title from a lyric by Ry Cooder about migrants leaving their homeland: *When you reach the broken promised land ...*

There are more than 30 paintings in this book, the first dating from 2011 and the last one from 2016, all oil on canvas and most of them are much larger than one square metre! Nearly all of them depict Van Geest's garden in France, his beautiful garden ... but is it a "Garden of Eden" or a lost paradise, a garden of evil or a "locus amoenus", or is it a *Toovertuin*, an enchanted garden? Is it a secret garden, a "hortus conclusus" ... is it guarded and, if so ... who are the guards? I don't know. You have to find out for yourself. Your perception might be strongly influenced by your mood!

To me it is a fairly friendly jungle and I think it is disappointing that there are so many Disney characters in this "miracle garden". Even Alice is the blonde "WD-Alice" dressed in blue ... Nevertheless, her confrontation with the Dodo in "Rendez-vous" is full of eloquence and reveals they are discussing Darwin. The paintings I like best show real people: Van Geest and his wife Bernjea in the "Pool of Tears" or his granddaughter Moana in "Songbird". Moana reminds me of beautiful Alice Liddell.

In "Songbird" there is Moana, "lying on a wooden 'altar', surrounded by watery blue and lit by rays of light radiating through an abundant green, [she] is a reference to Ophelia" by John Everett Millais. Van Geest's painting, though, "celebrates life". Lewis Carroll met several famous artists; Millais was one of them ... he photographed the painter, his wife and two of his daughters. Not just coincidence? It might be interesting to find out if there are more similar "interconnections".



"Songbird" (Moana), 2015, oil on canvas, 110/140 cm, collection artist.

This book also provides new associations every time it is opened: the holy grail and a ferryman, a building resembling an Auschwitz shed, Martin Luther King and Jimi Hendrix, etc. ... wandering in a wonderbook.

In both books much is said about Van Geest and his paintings: the way they were created and a lot about what they show. For me that is very helpful. I would not recognize many elements. The more you know, the more you see! There is also a lot about what the paintings are trying to tell us. I think that the "message" often is hard or even impossible to understand ... language can never explain all that art tries to tell. That's why art exists ... painting, music, dance ... maybe poetry can, by not mentioning! The author Wouter Welling writes on page 20: "This meaning must not be defined (...) A painting remains an illusory surface (...) it compensates actual reality, which may be experienced as harsh and meaningless."

Another interconnection: I have just read a poem by one of my favourite poets: Herman de Coninck (1944-1997). Yes, it is about "Alice" and not ... and it is in France!

**ALICE (HIGH, LOW AND IN BETWEEN)**

*The Broken Promised Land*

Arie van Geest, Text: Wouter Welling  
Exhibition Catalogue, for the 2011-2012 exhibition,  
Van Spijk/Rekaf Publishers, Venlo, 2016.  
27cm x 21cm, 24 pages (14 reproductions in colour)  
ISBN 978 90 6216920 7

Arie van Geest (1948) is a Dutch visual artist who met Alice for the first time at a very early age, four years old ... and he taught himself to read! Also in 1962, *Donald Duck* was published in The Netherlands, the famous weekly "happy magazine" for children. Soon, reading Disney was followed by reading Cervantes, Andersen, Grimm and of course Lewis Carroll: a terra incognita behind the mirror!

Not only Alice in *Wonderland* has had a huge influence on his paintings since 1968, so have *Les chants de Maldoror* by Comte de Lautréamont. However, over a decade Alice dominates his work and she comes to represent his alter ego more and more: it tries to put our so-called reality into perspective in a clear and classic design of surrealistic scenes. After an absence in the eighties, Alice returns in the mid-nineties, but in the "Newerland of the art of painting" she is now accompanied by for instance Pinocchio, representing the "he", and Peter Pan, the eternal boy without a shadow.

The series *Desolation Row* (Bob Dylan has become another source of inspiration) arises in 1999. It takes stock of imaginary beings from the domain of mad insanity ... "we're all mad here"! Between 2009 and 2011 Van Geest works on a series of twelve paintings called *ALICE (HIGH, LOW AND IN*

*BETWEEN*), a "quest" through the history of art closely intertwined with Tenniel's illustrations.

The summer of 2011 marks a new period with another series: *The Broken Promised Land*. In France, in the garden between his summer-residence and the river Vienne, his heroes and demons play a prominent part in the imaginary circus of the mind, surrounded by proliferating plants in bright sunlight! However, an undeniable danger lurks in the woods of the children's lost paradise! Moreover, "Everything is interconnected" (one of Van Geest's one-liners), so the echoes from the past are still resounding: the child is the father of the man!

**Alice (High, Low and In Between)**

In ten of the twelve paintings (125 x 170 cm, oil on canvas) there is an illustration by Tenniel in the centre, in silent homage to the first illustrator of "Alice in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass". Each painting is a closed domain in itself ... though it is in search of a connection with and a transformation into the next. You might say it is a kaleidoscopic merry-go-round, a message made up of fragments of reality in which the language of dreams is essential.

Most of the paintings are accompanied by fragments of letters Van Geest wrote to some of his friends. Letters in which he writes how Alice confronted him with a private-Isanami of enigmatic impressions that were to claim the direction of his activities for nearly two years! The series becomes an expedition through a continually changing and expanding "Wonderland-labyrinth" in which Alice is desperately searching for the emergency exit. There are several references to illustrious colleagues in the history of art: Pieter Breughel de Oude, Henri Rousseau, Johannes Vermeer, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Magritte etc. . Alice is not the only motivation for his work: "Life itself, with its melancholy versus its emotion as the two most important players, was the real starting-point for my artificial crusade against logic."

The catalogue comprises only 24 pages, but browse it every day and you will discover something new each time and wonder about all that was inspired by Carroll's *Wonderland!*

**The Broken Promised Land**

The title of this book is also the title of yet another painting (2011, oil on canvas, 125x170) from the series *Alice (high, low and in between)*. There are four image-