

Berlinde De Bruyckere Returns to Venice After 11 Years With New Works

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Holly Howe

ELEPHANT

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Photography by WayneChisnall

Belgian artist Berlinde De Bruyckere returns to Venice this year to present “City of Refuge III” at Abbazia di San Giorgio Maggiore. The exhibition is an official collateral event for the 60th Venice Biennale and runs until 24 November 2024.

This is the third iteration of her “City of Refuge” series, which originated last year with a show at La Commanderie de Peyrassol in Provence, France, followed by a second edition at the Diocesan Museum in Freising, Germany. While De Bruyckere hadn’t planned to do another exhibition in such quick succession, when she received an invite last year from Carmelo A Grasso – the director of the Benedicti Claustra Onlus monastery – she felt it was an offer she couldn’t refuse. “I’ve been coming to San Giorgio Maggiore Abbey for years. It’s packed with masterpieces of all times, and it’s always been a dream of mine to have an exhibition there to bring something that is relevant today into this long-standing dialogue between art and spirituality.”

The exhibition is shaped around the idea of art as a place of sanctuary and shelter, themes that feel especially relevant given current global issues. De Bruyckere expands: “I am heavily influenced by the world around me – the brutal images of war, the devastating consequences of climate change, the destruction of natural resources, the consequences of the pandemic. These human and natural catastrophes we encounter in newspapers every day are etched in my mind. I am a witness to society with a strong need to translate what I see into my work, to raise questions, open a discourse, ignite hope, perhaps, or provide some consolation. I try to capture both the brutality and the fragility of man and nature in my work. The current context determines how we read the work, but violence is of all times.”

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Photography by Wayne Chisnall

The name of the show comes from a Nick Cave song. De Bruyckere explains: “The title ‘City of Refuge’ resonates with everything we’ve experienced on a global scale in the last years. The pounding repetition of the phrase ‘You better run’ is terrifyingly accurate and applicable to all of the catastrophic events we’ve been confronted with. But for me, it’s also the reference to the biblical cities of refuge; the duality that lies in the concept of these cities, how they encompass both the

search for shelter and the danger, human cruelty and human kindness, something I think is as crucial for my work as for that of Nick Cave. His work has been an inspiration for me since the very start and has undoubtedly influenced my experience in art. Though we work in different fields, I think we both try to address the personal through the universal, taking inspiration from the classic stories, mythology, religion, and confronting those elements with the seemingly mundane, but equally intense shreds of everyday life.”

The show opens in the main church space, where three archangels are shrouded in blankets and installed on raised plinths, towering above visitors. Mirrors are placed behind the figures, connecting the works to each other through sightlines. These sculptures further develop the themes explored in her 2019 “Marsyas” works: “The casts of animal skins, unlike with the earlier ‘Marsyas’, are here fluidly draped over the human figure below, so that its head and shoulders stand out clearly, with pointed extensions that strengthen the suggestion of wings. The Arcangeli also recall the blanket figures I made in the nineties where the head and upper body of slightly hunched female figures are covered by a pile of blankets, simultaneously suggesting a scene of warmth and protection as well as deprivation and concealment. I added the mirror screens to the sculptural clusters of the Arcangeli to amplify and diffuse the experience of these angels. I didn’t want to present them as a single statue on a pedestal but as a presence lingering through space, appearing and dissolving as you walk along.”

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In the sacristy, tree trunks cast in wax sit upon metal welding tables. This installation references De Bruyckere's 2013 work for the Belgian pavilion, where a 17-meter-long tree trunk cast in wax was placed on pillows and bandaged with rags and blankets, suggesting the nurturing of a wounded body. She explains how this version differs: "Now eleven years later, in a growingly dystopian context, I chose to leave out the element of care, of human interaction. The tree installation in the sacristy is a post-apocalyptic setting, an image of ruin and ravage, gaining its element of rejuvenation, of life force, only from the power of the trees. This element of hope, despite the awareness of the horrors of the world and the understanding that we don't seem to learn from our mistakes, is crucial to me. Just like the *Salvati* painting in the sacristy: the presentation of Jesus in the temple depicted as a gesture of great promise and hope and at the same time with the awareness of the painter of what Christ's fate would be."

Over the years, each artist who has been invited to exhibit at the church has been asked to create their own version of the choral manuscript used by the monks. De Bruyckere was apprehensive about this part of the commission, acknowledging, "I have probably made around 17 drawings in the past three years!" For her interpretation, she worked with thick blue paper that had been used as folders to store drawings and sewed these pages together with gold thread to create her own version of an illuminated manuscript.

In the galleries located behind the church, De Bruyckere presents wall vitrines containing casts of legs with flayed flesh, inspired by the story of St Benedict throwing himself into brambles to overcome his carnal temptations. She also presents floor sculptures of wax casts of animal skins piled on top of each other.

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Despite being a well-known, respected, and revered contemporary artist, De Bruyckere is incredibly humble and acknowledges that some of the visitors to the space may be tourists who are simply coming to see the church and will be unaware of the exhibition taking place or familiar with her work. In order for these visitors to gain a better understanding of her process, she presents two vitrines with an assortment of source materials for her work in the final room of the exhibition. She also includes another archangel sculpture – “Liggende Arcangelo I” – which is lying down and is at eye-level height, allowing people to explore the work and the materials she uses up close.

De Bruyckere is reflective about returning to Venice to exhibit new work: “It’s always a special experience, and to have this opportunity after eleven years is extraordinary. A lot has happened in these eleven years; the world has changed, the art world has changed, and my experience as an artist has developed. I asked myself the same question when I started this project; what is different in what I want to achieve or convey.”

“I think my work for the Belgian pavilion was still a hopeful one; the fallen tree was surrounded with gestures of kindness, soft pillows, bandages made from old blankets in soft pink hues, and the light coming in from the cupola was filtered. There was an atmosphere of serenity, of quiet healing. Looking at the City of Refuge installation in the sacristy now, I think there we have a much more urgent situation, almost a catastrophe that is captured in a certain moment. Where is the hope in that image? I’m not sure it’s there. It’s a frozen image. I think of something that happened and wants our attention. It’s the sudden shock of the moment when we no longer know how to deal with the situation. Perhaps there is hope in the title *City of Refuge*: art as a refuge, a haven. Not a safe place in the sense that we need to soften the blow, be careful or restrict ourselves in any way, quite the opposite.”

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Amparo e tormento

A sensibilidade trágica e barroca de Berlinde de Bruyckere diz-nos que a consciência não dispensa o corpo

TEXTO CELSO MARTINS

Os cavalos são uma obsessão da arte contemporânea. Dos animais vivos exibidos por Jannis Kounellis às pinturas líricas de Susan Rothenberg, passando pelos espécimes embutidos em paredes de Maurizio Cattelan, há um mar de representações equinas que explora a condição paradoxal de um animal elegante, imponente e, ao mesmo tempo, frágil.

É trágica e estranhamente erótica a visão da artista belga Berlinde de Bruyckere (Gante, 1964), como o mostra a sua primeira exposição individual em Lisboa, na Galeria Pedro Cera, uma apresentação que reúne obras de 2014 até ao presente. Nela, o cavalo não é um mero arquétipo ou projeção simbólica, mas uma presença intensa, quase real, que nos confronta com a metamorfose, o sofrimento e a inexorabilidade da morte.

Na peça "No Life Lost II" (2015), que abre a exposição, três desses enormes animais jazem uns sobre

os outros, enquadrados por uma grande vitrina, uma referência simultaneamente *povera* e monumental que reforça o *pathos* da peça. Os bichos têm a cabeça tapada por um pano que lembra as roupas de uma leprosaria ou os trapos gastos de um prisioneiro de um campo de concentração. É sintomático que o tema do cavalo tenha entrado na obra de Berlinde quando se encontrava a pesquisar nos arquivos do WWI Museum, em Ypres, na Bélgica, e se deparou com fotografias daqueles animais mortos durante a I Guerra Mundial. São simultaneamente cavalos, animais e instintivamente uma ressonância de todo e qualquer sofrimento. O que é decisivo aqui é que Berlinde faz-nos perceber isso com o nosso próprio corpo, trabalhando a escala, o enquadramento, as superfícies. O seu interesse não é, porém, o da taxidermia. Estes são corpos ausentes, resultado de um molde a partir de um enchimento com resina

que cria uma espécie de corpo negativo (como no espaço negativo) e nele subtis alongamentos e retrações morfológicas expressivas que atenuam um hipotético naturalismo.

As duas peças de parede são de uma diferente natureza. Simultaneamente mais abstratas e igualmente orgânicas, sugerem tanto selas de montar como trazem consigo a ressonância de órgãos sexuais reforçada pelas texturas em materiais como a cera, a madeira, a corda e várias torções têxteis. Mas nos seus trabalhos mais abstratos, as formas tornam-se mais subliminares. É o caso dos cinco desenhos a lápis e aguarela aqui incluídos, cuja indefinição devolve em espelho um trânsito dos órgãos sexuais feminino e masculino entre o humano, o animal e o vegetal. No trabalho de Berlinde, as subtis referências à história da arte não são nunca uma caução cultural nem um modo de pôr à distância a experiência dos sentidos. Vemos isso claramente na derradeira peça, que mostra um potro em pose de abandono sobre um plinto de pedra toscamente cortada. Podemos vê-lo como uma figura sacrificial semelhante a um *agnus dei* ou pensar nela como em estado de repouso.

Esta teatralidade ambígua releva de uma sensibilidade barroca da carne, da pele, de uma intensa proximidade orgânica que ora exala violência, ora oferece empatia, porque é tanto morte como respiração, tormento e amparo. A violência, o sexo, o amor, a morte. Materializem-se em corpos humanos, como noutros trabalhos, ou em figuras animais ou vegetais, os temas de Berlinde são os temas de sempre da arte, porque são os que atravessam a história da própria Humanidade. O que no seu trabalho faz a diferença é a combinação de uma intensa noção de fisicalidade com uma espessura trágica. Como se quisesse que soubéssemos que a consciência não dispensa nunca a capacidade de sentir. ●



★★★★★

NO LIFE LOST
— AFTER HUMANITY

Berlinde de Bruyckere

Galeria Pedro Cera, Lisboa
até 24 de dezembro



BERLINDE DE BRUYCKERE

FEATURES / ART

Berlinde de Bruycker: Plunder | Ekphrasis

EMMA SINGLETON

DIGITAL / SUMMER 2022 / 3 min Read



Installation View. MO.CO. Berlinde De Bruyckere, *Plunder | Ekphrasis*. Photo: ©Mirjam Devriendt

After a flight delay, a rush to the hotel, and a dash to Mo.Co at 9pm, I found myself confronted with the shapes, waxy smells and erotic work of Berlinde de Bruyckere. In the cloak of dusk peeking in through the windows. I remember my sense of awe and intimidation were triggered upon entering Plateau 1, a room filled with Bruyckere's guardian angel like figure series *Arcangelos* and *The Tre Arcangeli* 2022. These are a group of human-like figures created for the exhibition; *Plunder | Ekphrasis*. The work been described by others as enigmatic and ambivalent and reminiscent of the three Wayward Sisters in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, wild, inhibited and intimidating. Their bodies covered by hides masking growths, the shapes of wings and concealing the faces of the six beings.

Moving on through the empty rooms – apart from myself and the curator – it is striking how elegantly the sculptures, drawings and layered works on show draw continuously on the relationship between humans, plants and animals morphing together to fight notions of exploitation. Each of the spaces is filled with the artists array of pieces taking it in turns to add their own chapter to a modern-day novel bound together by wax. I get a sense of trespassing, as though the works live here without the need for viewership, as though they have created their own primal world built by the artist for herself and them to inhabit; for viewers to visit only at certain times as though teasing glimpses without risk of loosing secrets. This is what makes Bruyckere's work so spellbinding, so alluring and confronting. It is the skill and subtlety that stays with you after just a moment of gazing.

The whole experience from the labour of the flight delay to the last smell of wax has personally stayed with me months afterwards. Bruyckere's world and methods of creating a story that like the *Arcangelos* is stuck somewhere between take off and landing.

[Plunder | Ekphrasis](#) is on show at Mo.Co. until October 2nd 2022. (Montpellier, FR)

EMMA SINGLETON is a designer, writer and a researcher based in London.



Berlinde De Bruyckere, *Aletheia, on-vergeten* (Aletheia, Unforgotten), 2019, mixed media. Installation view.

Berlinde De Bruyckere

FONDAZIONE SANDRETTO RE REBAUDENGO

Within the minimalist architecture of the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Berlinde De Bruyckere's solo exhibition "Aletheia" offers an extraordinary progression, beginning with the artist's formidable sculptural technique in wax, before taking a clear step in the direction of immersive and environmental installation.

Drawing its title from the Greek word for *truth* or *disclosure*, the exhibition derives its formal vocabulary from a skin traders' workshop the artist visited in Anderlecht, Belgium. The show commences in the hallway, with *Nijvel I* and *Nijvel II*, both 2019 (and titled after the Belgian town known in English as Nivelles), two wax casts of fragments of animal skins compressed into solid blocks, mounted onto bronze casts of ordinary wooden pallets. When piled up, the headless pelts bring to mind geological stratifications of rock, perhaps a reference to the passage of time and to the continual, apparently chaotic and inevitable superimposition of events.

Visitors then proceed to the main room, where, with *Aletheia, on-vergeten* (Aletheia, Unforgotten), 2019, the artist has restaged aspects of the Belgian skin traders' workshop, where freshly flayed skins, which arrive daily directly from the slaughterhouse, are stretched out and coated with salt. De Bruyckere makes wax casts of these processed pelts, which she then piles onto wooden pallets. The resulting installation offers a powerful metaphor for the drama of the present-day political climate and for human existence as a whole. Simultaneously seductive and disturbing, the mounds of wax pelts lend the scene incredible formal delicacy and multisensory—tactile, olfactory, visual, and acoustic—intensity.

Fragile and heavy, the skins are tinted with appealing faint hues, ranging from gray to a pastel pink reminiscent of human flesh. There is barely a trace of blood red. The floor is coated with salt and appears to be the same shade of white as the walls, creating a perceptual glitch that transports viewers to a metaphysical dimension. Animal fur is visible in places, both as an accidental remnant of the casting process and as an intentional element grafted on by the artist, who carefully shapes her creations to achieve a disconcerting verisimilitude. The odor of the wax, however, betrays the visual illusion.

Crime and violence are hidden by the allure of the setting, and we are confronted with what has transpired only when a larger sense of history breathes down our necks. As if in a flashback, skins heaped on wooden pallets, sometimes stacked two by two, appear as mass graves, as if they have lain there for who knows how long. The salt is no longer salt, but rather snow that crunches beneath the soles of one's shoes and covers up the atrocities that have been carried out. In silence, it softens memories and distances grief.

What is created, then, is a space of suspended judgment, where it is possible to encounter one's deepest fears. Viewers are left with space for a possible redemption. Returning to the solitude of the hallway, they are greeted by three wax casts of skins (*Anderlecht*, *Anderlecht II*, and *Anderlecht III*, all 2018), carefully folded like warm, clean blankets.

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

— Veronica Santi

FRIEZE

Berlinde De Bruyckere on Not Escaping Death

The Belgian sculptor's new work in San Gimignano reflects on mortality, medieval assertions of power and the migrant crisis

P BY PAUL CAREY-KENT IN REVIEWS | 02 JUL 19



Having made her name in the 1990s with quietly compelling pseudo-anatomical sculptures of flesh, Belgian artist Berlinde De Bruyckere has subsequently adopted a less explicit approach in her work. The nine sculptures on display in Italy's most-visited hilltop town were all finished this year but might reasonably stand as a retrospective of De Bruyckere's means of suggesting the human body indirectly: through blankets, horses and, particularly, trees – whether trunks as torsos, branches as bones, sections as dismemberments. The tone is consistent; in the gallery's words: 'The sculptures illustrate an archetypal pain and reflect on timeless human themes such as vulnerability, mortality, loneliness, suffering and remembrance.' De Bruyckere isn't necessarily gloomy about that. As she's said: 'We are always trying to escape from death [...] but it's all part of us, we don't have to escape from it.'

Modestly titled 'A single bed, a single room', the show actually spreads out over several rooms across two locations. The base structure of a former water tower provides an atmospheric backdrop for the most direct figuration in the show, a bronze of a horse slumped on a slab of rock in a peculiar pose in which the front legs cover the eyes. The title, *Honte* (2018–19) – 'shame' – leaves us to wonder whether the horse is dead, suggesting human responsibility for its fate, or consciously avoiding any interaction with viewers and their possible guilt.

Berlinde De Bruyckere on Not Escaping Death

Frieze, 2 July 2019

Paul Carey-Kent



Berlinde De Bruyckere, *Honte*, 2018-19, lead, Belgian slate, 75 x 210 x 95 cm. Courtesy: the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA, San Gimignano, Beijing, Les Moulins, Habana; photograph: Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio

In a stripped back former apartment space overlooking the main square, De Bruyckere has hung semi-opaque tablecloths over the windows to ensure there's no unmuting of the eight other works' brown and grey hues, which make for a subtly stimulating abstract language. *Infinitum* (2017-19) puts elongated glass cloches, such as might have displayed holy relics, onto the domestic staple of a dining table. The tall domes echo San Gimignano's famous towers, just visible through the window. They are filled – uncomfortably fully – with wax casts of wooden lumps, most of which are bandaged towards the top with cloths sufficiently tattered to suggest long-standing and little-treated wounds. Are they amputations? Perhaps, but there is also a phallic thrust to them, reminding us that the city's famous towers were medieval assertions of power.

Another effective undermining of the domestic setting is a pair of works (*Walburga*, 2019) in which blanket-covered branches rest on skeletal iron beds. Such a set-up might speak of intimacy: the bed as the location of birth, love and death, the traces of those who've slept there. But these blankets have been left outdoors for many months, so they are worn, tattered and far from homely; they hint at the problems faced by migrants, many of whom arrive in Italy from north Africa.

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Berlinde De Bruyckere, *Infinitum*, 2017-19, iron wood, glass, wax, textile, rope, epoxy, 1.6 x 2 x 1 cm. Courtesy: the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA, San Gimignano, Beijing, Les Moulins, Habana; photograph: Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio

Deux Corps (2019) puts myth in play through a union of two massive upright tree trunks that – unlike those in Walburga – have been denuded of bark. They stand in the frame of a tall wardrobe which has lost its door and internal fittings. De Bruyckere has said that, for this sculpture, she had in mind the tale of Baucis and Philemon from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It tells of two simple people who offered the gods such thoughtful hospitality that they were granted the gift of eternal life as trees standing side by side in the forest. Why, then, the removal of bark, invoking the better known, and more disturbing, story of the flaying of Marsyas – an arrogant satyr who challenged Apollo to a musical contest and lost? It's as if De Bruyckere couldn't quite bring herself to make the work upbeat.

Does such focused engagement with a narrow emotional range over a 30-year career hone and reinforce the intensity, or does repetition lead to dilution? For all the familiarity of its underlying approaches, this grouping of works is a fruitful and substantive development of De Bruyckere's concerns, not only resonating with the historic location, but playing off the domestic exhibition setting to undermine any comfort that might ordinarily bring.

Berlinde De Bruyckere, 'A single bed, a single room' is on view at Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Italy until 1 Sept 2019.

Main image: Berlinde De Bruyckere, 16 november '18, 2019, textile, wax, wood, iron, epoxy, polyurethane, 1 x 4 x 1.3 m. Courtesy: the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA, San Gimignano, Beijing, Les Moulins, Habana; photograph: Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio

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Suffering and Desire: A Conversation with Berlinde De Bruyckere

Sculpture Magazine, 20 December 2019

Elizabeth Fullerton

sculpture

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Aletheia, on-vergeten, 2019. Wax, wood, epoxy, and salt, installation view. Photo: Paolo Formica

Suffering and Desire: A Conversation with Berlinde De Bruyckere

December 20, 2019 by Elizabeth Fullerton

Berlinde De Bruyckere's raw, visceral sculptures embody death, life, passion, and vulnerability. Through the 1990s and 2000s, she made life-size, cast wax sculptures of bodies that crouch, huddle, arch, writhe, and merge into one another in ecstatic Baroque agony. These embodiments of human frailty, their skin often punctured with gashes or mangled or ridged with seams, draw inspiration from Christian iconography, mythology, and cinema. Equally unsettling are De Bruyckere's sculptures of dead horses, their bloated bodies strung up like punching bags or stretched on racks as if for a colossal spit roast.

In 2013, De Bruyckere visited a skin trader's workshop in Anderlecht, Belgium; the experience prompted a profound shift in her practice. Soon after, she moved away from In 2013, De Bruyckere visited a skin trader's workshop in Anderlecht, Belgium; the experience prompted a profound shift in her practice. Soon after, she moved away from figurative depictions and began taking wax casts of animal hides, which she felt offered greater scope for addressing the pathos and suffering of life. She also returned to blankets, an early motif in her work, but, where they were once intact, they have now become distressed and rotted.

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Marthe, 2008. Wax, epoxy, metal, and wood, 280 x 172.5 x 119.5 cm. Photo: © Mirjam Devriendt

De Bruyckere's hide and blanket works are showcased to dramatic effect in "Aletheia," a powerful solo exhibition [on view](#) through March 15, 2020 at the [Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo](#) in Turin. The title means "truth" or "unconcealedness" in ancient Greek. Visitors enter through a narrow corridor, its path obstructed by five waist-high piles of skins (2018–19) packed into blocks that grow progressively more disheveled. The corridor leads into three rooms. The first contains *Palindroom* (2019), which resembles the large breeding mounts used for collecting semen from stallions. With its bursting fabric end barely contained by phallic leather casing, this sculpture provides a rare note of levity before the brutal revelation of the show's centerpiece, *Aletheia, on-vergeten (Truth, unforgetten)* (2019), in the vast middle room. Here, layers of animal skins splay over wooden pallets, salt dusting the surfaces and floor in quantities suggesting a snow scene. Individually, these lumpy piles mottled with orange, pink, and blue assume the form of contoured maps; viewed together under the industrial lamps, they recall Nazi death camps. The last room features three gigantic framed assemblages depicting swollen, carcass-like lilies and peonies, made with casts of skins, decomposed blankets, and wallpaper. Although the show has no overarching concept, death haunts the rooms. United by ambiguity, the works are neither abstract nor representational, animate nor inanimate, neither portraits, still-lives, nor landscapes. None and all of the above, they are something else altogether.

Elizabeth Fullerton: What was the genesis of the site-specific installation *Aletheia on-vergeten*?

Berlinde De Bruyckere: I had never been surrounded by such an amount of death as I was in the huge space of the skin workshop that I visited, especially considering that it was located next to the slaughterhouse and the skins had been taken off animals that were living just half an hour before. For me, that moment of bringing the skins from one place to another in plastic containers was when they didn't have any value anymore. They were like garbage. Then, the men in the workshop took care of the skins. They hung each one from a hook on a huge iron construction, which I found very phallic; and then they folded it open, a gesture that struck me as very sexual. It was like looking at an enormous vagina. Their gestures called to mind Eros, especially when they started to shovel salt on the skins; this was a gesture of ejaculation. That place illustrated the relationship between life and death, Eros and Thanatos. It provoked deep human emotions, not just relating to the animals.

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Aletheia, on-vergeten, 2019. Wax, wood, epoxy, and salt, installation view. Photo: © Mirjam Devriendt, Courtesy Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo

EF: Why was this encounter with the hides so affecting?

BDB: It was the physical experience of being there—the smell, the activity, the salt and the dripping skins, salt mingled with blood. There was the ancient ritual for preserving the skins, but I was also seeing a sort of abstraction and a way to speak about mass graves, the Holocaust, and the recent crisis of refugees who have died trying to reach Europe.

When I first saw the pallets, I couldn't even tell that there were more than two or three skins. The mound was so enormous I couldn't distinguish the many layers and differences. This was something I took home with me—the need to find a solution to showing the layering—because you start with one skin and it's just flat, the same with the second one; but after 50, you start to see a new shape, and it's like the animal's form is coming back. If you look closely, you see parts that were once bones or a hip or a spine, and that is beautiful because they are not anonymous anymore. I was touched because the skins gave me a way to make the work more abstract, to address human tragedy in a kind and silent way.

EF: Presumably it would have been too obvious to introduce an element of smell?**BDB:** Yes. That was the opposite of what I wanted to express. It was too narrative and too close to the men's work. I also wanted to bring it to another level, to share the silence and loneliness of that place with viewers. I can't say that the smell was bad; it's the smell of real life. The skins weren't rotten—they were completely fresh. You got the smell of blood and the taste of salt on your lips. It was important for me to have this experience, but if you replicate those things you can't transcend them.

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Aletheia, on-vergeten, 2019. Wax, wood, epoxy, and salt, installation view. Photo: Paolo Formica

EF: This is the first time that you've stacked pallets on top of each other. Why the monumental scale?

BDB: I needed that impact. The scale and height of the sculpture is really important, making the viewer feel small. You can't get an overview. You enter and are overwhelmed by what you encounter, and you have to walk from one end to the other to have the complete feeling. You become part of it. That's maybe the moment where you can start to see the beauty and the silence.

EF: The skins in the corridor are presented differently, compressed like bales from charity shops.

BDB: That's a nice image; I also have that sense. I needed to start with the rigid blocks. You see them first, not knowing what you're going to see in the exhibition, and they stop you because you're attracted by the shape or the colors. Then when you look closely, you discover some hair and real skin inside. The first few recall Arte Povera. They look like they might be clothes ditched in a plastic container, or they may almost resemble a landscape, like the patterns you find cutting through marble. They challenge our perceptions, which also allows us to look at the other works in a different way.

EF: You've included fragments of actual horse skin tucked in among the wax layers in *Nijvel I* (2019), one of the stacks named after the town where a second trader was located.

BDB: I find it really interesting that you don't see it immediately. When you look harder, you discover there is real horse skin in the pallet. Is the inside full of skin or is it empty? Is it fake? I like these questions that you are not able to answer.

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Installation view of "Aletheia," with (left to right): *N vel II*, 2019, wax, bronze, epoxy, and iron, 120 x 108 x 123 cm.; and *N vel I*, 2019, wax, bronze, horse skin, epoxy, and iron, 118 x 106 x 116 cm. Photo: © Mirjam Devriendt, Courtesy Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo

EF: Are the hides an extension of the work you did with blankets?

BDB: The blanket has been a crucial element in my work from the start. In the late '80s, blankets were a universal symbol of intimacy and protection. We all had blankets on our beds; now we don't—they're old fashioned. When I started to work with wax, especially with the figures, I incorporated the blanket. In the 1990s, I made "blanket women" in which the body was covered with a blanket and just the feet and legs exposed. With *Aanéén-genaaid* (2002), which means "stitched together," the blanket became part of the body as a second skin. After this, I started to do the same thing, but all in wax. I was stitching together the wax parts while they were warm so I could let them grow into each other and deform the body. From then on, blankets became less present in my work.

The three Anderlecht skin pieces (2018) in the corridor are more related to my previous works with blankets. The blankets that I keep in storage are also folded and stacked on wooden pallets. Because of this link, I made the colors in one of the piles much lighter and more human than those of the first two Anderlecht skin piles. They are in light blue, pale pink, yellow, green, and gray so you have some references to the softness of the blanket. They are not so tough as the two Nijvel blocks at the entrance. The pile at the end of the corridor looks as if it has collapsed and is much grayer. It could be made out of lead or stone—the colors are heavier and the composition in decay.

EF: Why did you reintroduce blankets into your work?

BDB: I wanted to show the blanket in a completely different way, as something that was not strong anymore, unable to give comfort and shelter. For me, it is a metaphor for our failing society—we cannot keep our promises to create a system to alleviate poverty and protect refugees. I brought the blankets to my courtyard and left them lying on the earth, hanging in the trees. I let nature and time take over. They took away the color; they took away the blankets' strength and made dark spots and new patterns. I often call time and nature my "silent workers." The blankets started to rot and smell; they no longer have value. The blanket structures in my courtyard brought to mind the Jungle refugee camp in Calais. You can feel human fragility through a blanket that is falling apart.

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Anderlecht, 2018. Wax, iron, epoxy, and bronze, 103 x 163 x 137 cm. Photo: © Mirjam Devriendt, Courtesy the artist

EF: What were blankets and hides able to express that bodies no longer could? **BDB:** The human body was no longer big enough for me to translate what was happening in the world. I started to work with horses in 1999 while I was artist-in-residence at the In Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres, where I saw images from World War I, especially of the dead horses, and their corpses became an important metaphor for the enormous amount of death in that war.

I always worked simultaneously with human figures and horses, but lately I've come to feel that we live in such a complex world and the body is not enough. With this group of works, I wanted to express something that we are not able to talk about, though it happens around us: a sense of helplessness. I hope that this is where art can open a dialogue—that people being in this space, walking around all this death, will be inspired by ideas about the real world and real life, and this is just the start.

EF: In the last room, you incorporate both blankets and skins in a group of flower works.

BDB: People often don't recognize them as flowers; they see corpses. They are overwhelmed by the scale. It's a wonderful compliment for me, going beyond my intention of working around the flower, especially the flower in decay. I'm not showing the lily when it's open, fresh, and smelling strongly. I show the moment when it fades and loses its petals. I've taken a lot of photographs of lilies over the years, always in their last days, because I see so much fragility in the wrinkles and skin of their beautiful petals. They fall off, and the stamen, the male part of the flower, is still up and leaking, so this masculine organ is very visible. From my photographs, I started to make small intimate drawings in which parts of the flower are combined with sexual organs.

That leads back to *Palindroom*, which has the image of a huge phallus. Normally this object acts like a mare for the stallion to mount, so they can collect the ejaculation. When you enter, you see a phallus, but it should be the mare, so it's all upside down. I thought it was good to start this show about very heavy themes in an ironic way.

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Palindrome, 2019. Wax, textile, steel, polyester, and iron, 180 x 200 x 220 cm. Photo: Paolo Formica

EF: The flower works display a tension between containment and expansion. They're tethered yet poised to overflow the frame.

BDB: This is something very important, shared by most of my works. There is a feeling that they want to grow and expand, but there is always an intention to restrain them. The blocks of skin in the corridor seem like they are forced to fit on the pallets. This goes back to my earliest works, when I was using cages. Looking at this, it's still a cage.

EF: To what extent are you inspired by religious iconography?

BDB: The image of Saint Bartholomew, who was flayed, came to mind while I was working on the skins. It was like there were all these saints, stacked onto pallets—endless piles of dead bodies, an enormous amount of loss. But the lilies and peonies were inspired by the enclosed gardens of Mechelen, which I discovered in 2016. These miniature garden of Eden sculptures in wooden shrines, full of flowers, relics, and religious statues, were made and collected by nuns working in a hospital. Though the nuns were dealing with human suffering, they could escape in front of these small boxes displaying the dream of paradise. Both suffering and desire are visible in the gardens. I discovered that a lot of the materials I use in my work, such as wax, fabric, thread, and wallpaper, were also used in the shrines. I asked myself, "How can you translate this very small box full of treasures into your own work?" I started to think about how to enlarge that feeling, how to enlarge a flower. Normally I work on a scale of one to one, casting the real human body, the real horse, but the flowers were so small that I couldn't do that. I always need a certain scale. I used molds of the skin to create flower petals because the inside of the skin is very sensitive—you have details like small parts of fat or veins. Knowing that the petals are made out of skin makes them even more human and open to interpretation.

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It Almost seemed a lily IV, 2018. Wax, wood, wallpaper, textile, lead, and epoxy, 281 x 238 x 40 cm. Photo: © Mirjam Devriendt, Courtesy Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo

EF: How do you make the skins?

BDB: I went to the Anderlecht workshop with my team and selected four piles of skins, and we made casts from silicon and plaster on top of the real skins. You have a lot of fragments because you can't transport or assemble the whole thing at once. There are holes and curves so deep they require a molding. Then we bring the molds to the studio. I make a wax cast of the original and place it on a wooden pallet. This is the first moment when I start to look and try to understand how I can change and deform it.

EF: You bring these molds of piles together in different combinations?

BDB: Yes. I might put the left part of one under another part, then make it higher, push it back, pull it out, make it larger. I did a lot of deformations on the top skins in the studio. I work with the wax when it's warm. I can pull, I can tear, I can do whatever I want, and if I'm not satisfied with the first attempt or the application of color fails, I can warm it up and adjust or start again since I have the molds.

EF: So the color comes after?

BDB: No, the color is there from the beginning. I paint straight onto the molds, using between 15 and 20 layers of color. What appears on the surface as dark gray, yellow, pale pink, or bluish, is in fact layers of different colors varying in intensity and transparency. They melt into one another, and their visibility on the surface partly depends on the temperature of the wax. When the temperature is high, even colors applied in the depth of the wax cast will melt through the first layer and become visible on the surface. I work blind, you could say. I start with the first layer, but from the second layer on, I have to trust my knowledge and experience with the temperatures. If I want the black visible on the surface, then after 10 layers I have to heat the black to the exact right temperature so it melts to the first level. It's very technical.

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Installation detail of "Aletheia," 2019–20. Photo: Paolo Formica

EF: What is the role of chance?

BDB: I am very open to changes during the creative process. In the beginning, when we were working with the bodies, I was obsessed with ensuring that all the seams were perfectly closed. But there's always a part left. I started to put two parts together and saw a thin layer of wax made by chance, and I felt that it was even more fragile than what I had done. From that moment, I kept the extra material visible, so when people look at the legs and feet, they know they're not real. It happens during the process, and it's up to you to decide whether to clean up or keep these mistakes and tell another story.

EF: Your sculptures often entail props like pallets, vitrines, tables, stools, and racks. BDB: I have always felt myself to be both a painter and a sculptor. I'm not a sculptor who is sculpting. I start from casts and do deformations and put different elements together. Very often I start from old vitrines and old tables that I bring into my studio and work. It's not that the sculpture is made and afterwards shown in the vitrine or on the table. The vitrine will be the starting point. This is an important layer; it connects all these different stories as a sort of collage in three dimensions.

EF: Do you make sketches or maquettes?

BDB: The 2013 Venice Biennale was the first time; I made a scale model to position the work in the Belgian pavilion, determine the lighting, and find the right color for the walls. That helped a lot, so now I make scale models for all my exhibitions. This is much more important than making sketches or drawings. For me, drawings have a completely different purpose. When I draw, it is because I want to work out a new subject for myself. When I started to make drawings based on my lily photographs, I created a whole new group of related images. Making drawings is something very intimate that I have to do on my own in a quiet place.

EF: What is behind the title "Aletheia"?

BDB: The title always comes last. It needs much more time, and it's not just a title. For me, it has to contain every single work on view in an exhibition. To confer a title is like naming your child. It's a very personal thing. I was discussing this with my studio manager and her partner, a curator, who came up with this beautiful word "Aletheia," which means "truth" or "unveiling," and then for the installation, "truth unforgotten." This is what we all want to be in the end.

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INTERVIEWS

The bleak beauty of Berlinde de Bruyckere

Tim Smith-Laing

15 DECEMBER 2018



Berlinde De Bruyckere, photographed in her studio in Ghent in October 2018. Photo: Gianluca Tamorri

Looking at the recent works by Berlinde De Bruyckere currently on display at Hauser & Wirth Somerset (until 1 January 2019) is something akin to looking at the cross-section of an archaeological trench. Every piece in her two new series, *Courtyard Tales* (2017–18) and *Anderlecht* (2018), is formed from the careful accretion of layered materials – aged blankets in the former; stacked animal hides in the latter – that makes literal something that has always been there in De Bruyckere's work. Hers is an oeuvre in which layering – physical, personal, historical, and art-historical – is all-important. It is something that, even through the tatters of an old blanket, can give her work an almost vertiginous sense of depth.



Anderlecht (2018), Berlinde de Bruyckere. Photo: Mirjam Devriendt, courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; © Berlinde De Bruyckere

Suffering and Desire: A Conversation with Berlinde De Bruyckere

Apollo, 15 December 2018

Tim Smith-Laing

Born in 1964 in Ghent, De Bruyckere has built her career on work profoundly indebted to a long and local lineage of Old Master painters, to Christian iconography, and to classical mythology, translated through her personal history into a distinctively corporeal corpus. Working with animal skins and wax sculptures based on casts taken from human bodies, her work since the early 2000s has been concerned above all with the body and its flesh caught in a 'moment of pain' that reaches across and collapses the layers of history into a three-dimensional instant. As in myriad Renaissance martyrdoms, it is a moment that – in shows such as 'Suture' (Leopold Museum, Vienna, 2016) and 'The Embalmer' (Kunsthau Bregenz and Kunstraum Dornbirn, 2015) back to 'Schmerzmann' (Man of Sorrows, Hauser & Wirth, London, 2006) – De Bruyckere has explored as a locked interval of metamorphosis between total suffering and sensuous beauty. In a sculpture like *The muffled cry of the unrealizable desire* (2009–10), it is possible to trace the ghosts of both Marsyas and Saint Sebastian – tied to their trees and stripped bare for torture. While installing her monumental tree sculpture *Kreupelhout* (Cripplewood) in the Belgian pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale, she visited 37 different Saint Sebastians in three days, to pay homage to 'the incarnation of male beauty' that he represents in his agony.

In the new works at Hauser & Wirth Somerset, however, the body has disappeared, and the layers of history once cast or stitched into limbs and torsos have become more literal. *Courtyard Tales* and *Anderlecht* are, in appearance at least, minimalist works a world away from the figuration of the last two decades: the former a series of seven wall-hangings built up out of rotting and tattered blankets; the latter a trio of wax sculptures modelled on industrial pallet stacks of curing animal skins. When I meet De Bruyckere in the gallery's library, housed in one of the old farm's converted outbuildings, I ask if the absence of bodies marks a departure. She responds quickly: 'It's more a sort of evolution.'

In the case of *Courtyard Tales*, that evolution started with turning back in De Bruyckere's own history, to her *De Slaapzaal* (Dormitory) series from the late 1990s. In those works, she layered blankets several mattress-thicknesses deep on simple single beds, the fabric often carefully pierced with apertures that allow the viewer to see right down to the mattress beneath. She needed, she said, 'to translate this feeling again, this very intimate space of a bed' but at the same time to approach it differently, as someone who, with all the work between then and now, 'can't imagine making that kind of a work' again. 'The layers,' she says, 'are like the layers that we all have in our mind, which work like memories. And with memories, very often you forget, and all of a sudden something happens, and it brings you back in your history.' Once you take control of that, she continues, it becomes possible to say: 'Okay, now I can jump into this layer and take it, and start from older experience, and add something new.'



Courtyard Tales V (2018), Berlinde de Bruyckere. Photo: Mirjam Devriendt, courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; © Berlinde De Bruyckere

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With *Courtyard Tales*, that something new is, simultaneously, something old: the body. The blankets, as well as calling up her personal history as an artist, are a proxy for the bodies that so dominated her work after *De Slaapzaal*. Blankets, De Bruyckere notes, 'are the closest thing to your body, even closer than clothes. After a season, you throw clothes away, but the blanket on your bed stays there forever [...] [The bed is] the place where you make love, where you give birth, where you have children, where you die, even where you have the material you use to give first aid when there is an accident in the street.' It is important, therefore, that the blankets are objects that have absorbed such events. Sourced from charity and second-hand shops, all of De Bruyckere's blankets have, as she sees it, lived. 'Because of that,' she says, 'you feel the body even not seeing the body.'

That sense of the body's absent presence in lects the entire process behind the *Courtyard Tales*. Having become, in some sense, bodies, De Bruyckere's blankets also begin to age and suffer as bodies. The fabric that has made its way into the finished hangings has been systematically aged over the course of one to two years. Hung on frames in a courtyard of her studio in Ghent, sometimes partially buried, they have been bleached, rotted, and eaten away by sun, rain, and animals. Where in *De Slaapzaal* the blankets were pristine, and her inventions direct and controlled, the blankets in *Courtyard Tales* are altered by 'nature and time'. 'It's a really beautiful thing that happens,' she says, 'to put them outside [...] to create that feeling of a blanket that will fall apart, that will weaken', aging in different ways with each season, but in the end retaining its integrity.

Once cleaned, the aged fabrics were pinned to the wall, and layered up in a process that she likens to 'making a painting, much more than a sculpture': choosing which blankets will go over which, just as a painter might build up washes of colour. In the process, De Bruyckere explains, they became portraits, and once again called back to the Old Masters and the old martyrs. 'The moment I took the decision to nail the blankets on the wall, I immediately got the feeling of the nails in the cross, that you had nailed a body on the wall, even though it was just a rotten blanket.' Finally, 'the blanket became so vulnerable and fragile [that] it was showing the same weakness as a wounded body' – and by extension, similar forms of beauty.

De Bruyckere admits – and relishes – a tension here. While bodies, even in their absence, remain a central source of weight in her work, she says that she has had to go beyond them. When I ask her if she has moved on from her more literal explorations of bodily suffering, she thinks carefully before saying: 'Maybe. For the moment, I think so. The body at the moment is not big enough. [...] It can't translate the feelings or the ideas that I have in mind to talk about.' Things, she notes, have changed a lot in the last decade, to the point that the body alone is no longer 'the perfect tool to talk about pain'.

A crucial element of this is the current moment in modern politics. Faced with De Bruyckere's blanket 'portraits', it is hard to escape the refugee crisis and its most prominent images. When looking at the blankets aging on frames in her courtyard she was conscious that 'that was what I saw on television, of the camps in Calais, and all over the world'. While she resists the impulse to 'be an illustrator' of the crisis, as something direct and obvious, the camps form part of the motivation for her move beyond the body. Somatic suffering no longer covers the kinds of pain she sees the need to express: 'the wounds and marks they will have' as survivors are no longer physical, but a question of 'being unrooted', of having 'to fill up your life again and start with nothing [...] to leave your country'.



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Les Deux (2001), Berlinde de Bruyckere. Photo: Richard Max-Tremblay, © DHC/ART Fondation pour l'art contemporain

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It is something she has explored in more literal forms before – above all in the uprooted elm of *Kreupelhout* – and constitutes another layering within her own corpus. Here, however, there is a shift that gives De Bruyckere herself pause to think. Despite its fixation on suffering, De Bruyckere's work through the early 2000s made clear its art-historical affiliations with a faith in change for the good.

'All the years before,' she says, 'when I was talking about my work and about even the works dealing with pain and anger and fear, I was trying to use materials that were very fragile or beautiful, to put into them some hope or beauty. [...] I wanted to raise the goal that people could hope, even when they look at a wounded body or a wounded tree, or hanging horse, that there was something beautiful inside.' Looking at pieces like the horses of *Les Deux* (2001) or *We are all flesh* (2012) with this in mind people might 'start a dialogue or discussion with the work or each other, talking about feelings we don't have the words for'. Even within the bleakness of looking at death, De Bruyckere says, 'To give hope was one of my major wishes.'



Pietà (2007–08), Berlinde de Bruyckere. foto: Mirjam Devriendt, courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; © Berlinde De Bruyckere

Now, by contrast, in light of a political situation that seems, on many fronts, quite starkly desperate, she does not know if her work continues to offer such hope. It is, she says 'very confronting', to look at her own work and see for the first time, 'very little hope'. This is perhaps clearest in the *Anderlecht* trio. Moulded from stacks of hides, cured in salt at a tannery near her studio, the subtly coloured wax of the sculptures is all at once deathly grey, fleshly, and icily marmoreal. When I ask if the 'hides' form a contrast to the blankets in being caught in the middle of a process that tends towards usage, and even resurrection of a kind, she shakes her head. 'For me, they are arrested at that point. They look like they are frozen, or stitched on to each other, like they can't be removed.' The same fixity, De Bruyckere suggests, goes for all of us in the current political moment.

Crucial, too, is the journey that the skins have made in order to be arrested at this moment of stacking and curing: from living individuals to a single mass. 'The mass,' she says, 'is so heavy to carry, and to carry mentally. It's not just one death, it's an enormous amount of death.' This is something we are accustomed to accepting not just with animals, but with humans too. 'When you die in a war, you become an anonymous person, because so many people die during a war, but for your family, for your wife, you are still who you are. And now, putting all these layers on top of each other, for me, it becomes a metaphor for death and anonymity.'

She is surprised by the bleak fixity of the new works. 'Now when all these works are finished, and when they are hanging, it's the first time that I see it, so I also have to deal with it and to feel what will be the next stop.' Lack of hope, though, is not the same thing as lack of inspiration. Looking forward to her exhibition 'It almost seemed a lily' (Museum Hof van Busleyden, Mechelen, 15 December–12 May 2019) it is clear that the last two years have been a creatively productive time for her. The works for Mechelen return to the medieval and early modern Christian inspirations that ran through her figurative work, drawing on newly restored *horti conclusi* ('enclosed gardens') a form of devotional sculpture that she first encountered in Leuven in 2016. The *horti*, made in Mechelen, are astonishingly detailed objects of private worship from the early 16th century: sculptures of the Virgin Mary enclosed in cabinets overrun with miniature handmade flora and fauna, above all lilies. De Bruyckere says that their impact on her was instantaneous, 'so big that you immediately have the idea to translate it, and to create new work, and a new topic around that experience'. It was 'a whole world opening'.

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It almost seemed a lily IV (2017), Berlinde de Bruyckere. Photo: Mirjam Devriendt, courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; © Berlinde De Bruyckere

Inspiration from the *horti conclusi* gave her, she says, 'the courage' to work with the lily and with its symbolism in Christianity for the first time, and in doing so to experiment with enlargements of scale – something she has always previously avoided in her work. She is quick to note, though, that as she worked on the Mechelen sculptures concurrently with the *Courtyard Tales* and *Anderlecht* pieces, they partake of the same worry over the future, and the same sense of hopelessness. Where the *horti conclusi* hold out their miniature lilies as tokens of a more perfect world, hers, enlarged, cast in wax like the *Anderlecht* works, and hung limply over aging wallpaper in wooden frames, are 'the lily in decay', lilies 'at the moment when they're gone', and when there is 'no possibility of new life'.

Yet De Bruyckere herself is not without hope; there remains a core of possibility in her work. Recalling being sent to boarding school at five years old – an experience still visible in her interest in dormitories, blankets, and comfort – she says that loneliness is something she is always aware of, but not afraid of. 'I learned to deal with that. The loneliness was always there [...] I was there on my own, and the way to escape from that loneliness was to make your own drawings and create your own world.' Not everyone can do that, but perhaps enough of those who are uprooted in the current crisis do, so that something positive will come of it. 'We have now this mix with all these cultures, and I'm sure that it will reach us and feed us. And that's the future, so we don't have to be afraid of that.'

'Berlinde de Bruyckere: Stages and Tales' is at [Hauser & Wirth Somerset](#), Bruton, until 1 January 2019. 'It almost seemed a lily' is at [Museum Hof van Busleyden](#), Mechelen, from 15 December–12 May 2019.

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Berlinde De Bruyckere - No Life Lost
The Brooklyn Rail, 16 April 2016
Sarah Goffstein

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ArtSeen

BERLINDE DE BRUYCKERE *No Life Lost*

APR 2016

By Sarah Goffstein



Berlinde De Bruyckere, *to Zurbaran* (2015), 2015. Horse skin, fabric, wood, iron, epoxy. 46 × 63 × 50 inches. Photo: Mirjam Devriendt. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.

On View

Hauser & Wirth (18th Street)

January 28 – April 2, 2016
New York

The dim, dramatic lighting and presentation of morbid subject matter in Berlinde De Bruyckere's recent exhibition at Hauser & Wirth, *No Life Lost*, actually transform the space into somewhere between a tomb and immersive theater event. Taxidermy horses and skins occupy the first gallery, and an enormous transfigured tree sculpture from De Bruyckere's exhibition at the 2013 Venice

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Berlinde De Bruyckere - No Life Lost

The Brooklyn Rail, 16 April 2016

Sarah Goffstein

Biennale is installed in the cavernous back room. Conveying destruction with slippery historical references ranging from the biblical to World Wars I and II, the works in the show grapple with pain, beauty, and mortality.

Despite Maurizio Cattelan and Damien Hirst's strong and prankish claims to the domain of equine taxidermies, the histrionics of De Bruyckere's two-horse installation entitled *No Life Lost II* (2015) immediately command attention. Two thoroughbreds are stacked on their sides within a vintage natural-history display cabinet that is barely large enough to contain them. Their legs, necks, and hunched backs seemingly push open the glass doors. They are arrested in motion, as if piled on top of each other by an explosion. Their otherwise handsome and robust bodies seem to kick and writhe, while also revealing broken bones and neglect. This sense of movement and realism gives them a disconcerting cinematic quality, materializing a sense of history in arrested motion.

The same aesthetic migrates to a blindfolded foal with legs bound on a wooden table to the right. Entitled *to Zurbarán* (2015), the lighting and composition mirrors the beauty of the Spanish master's *Lamb of God* (1635 – 1640) while surpassing it in grit. Here the infant horse functions as a sacrificial lamb in an existential world. It is not clear for whom the foal has suffered, although it clearly embodies some sort of collective destruction. This is reinforced by the proximity of seventeen enormous skins hanging in three solemn rows from meat hooks anchored to the high ceiling. The hides are raw, gristled, and mostly inside out with bits of fat and connective tissue clinging in wax-coated folds. Like columns of a defeated army, the power of those hides rests in the suggestion of what a full-fledged equestrian brigade of that number would command in life. Although they also evoke the image of a slaughterhouse, the systemic destruction involved gives memory to the lives lost in gas chambers during the Holocaust.

Around the corner, *Kreupelhout – Cripplewood, 2012 – 2013* (2013) instantly turns the theatricality of the exhibition into catharsis. Cut sections of giant knotted elm loom sideways like the hulk of a recumbent body. Smooth, barren tree limbs shoot out in a tangled heap. Alien in their combined animal, human, and arboreal qualities, they are bound together by soiled pillows that serve as improvised bandages. Here we experience the uncanny, because the wounded and bodily quality of the installation is clearly connected to the equine motifs in the previous gallery. It is remarkable—and entirely intentional on the part of the artist—that a tree resonates with so much human suffering. In her published writings within the Biennale exhibition catalogue, De Bruyckere expressed her intention of creating a work inspired by the patron saint of Venice, Saint Sebastian. Like this saint, who was martyred by arrows, the reddened and waxen bark elicits compassion.

Finally, upon returning to the main gallery, the work that at first seems incongruous is the series of almost identical watercolor paintings in *Met Tere Huid 2015 – 2016* (translation: With Delicate Skin) (2016). What first reads as vulvas also formally corresponds with the flayed skin symmetrically draped across a rusty, early 20th-century industrial tower in the adjacent *Penthesilea II 2014 – 2015* (2015). With so much masculine imagery related to horses, war, martyred male saints, and industry, the injection of O'Keefe-like essentialism adds a layer of complication. Because this is the only moment in which the work is unsurprising, it attracts attention last and therefore only politely asks the viewer whether they ought to reconsider femininity as a leading motif within the exhibition.

While this show thwarts easy interpretation in favor of complex layers of embodied content, it is among De Bruyckere's finest work. Rendering the original forms of horses, skins, and trees while

Berlinde De Bruyckere - No Life Lost
The Brooklyn Rail, 16 April 2016
Sarah Goffstein

maintaining a sense of fidelity to their original nature lends them a somnolent realism that oddly condenses suffering from early-20th-century wars into the bodies of non-human protagonists. Giving physical form to something as temporal as history and loss, De Bruyckere's sculptures possess a profound gravitas. They are like lightening rods of conscience to remind us of the collateral cost of violent large-scale political conflict. In this way De Bruyckere's exhibition should haunt us with urgency, because tremendous suffering of this kind continues around the world.

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Correspondences: An Interview with Berlinde De Bruyckere
Art in America, 2 July 2013
Faye Hirsch

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Correspondences: An Interview with Berlinde De Bruyckere

By Faye Hirsch

July 2, 2013 4:04pm



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“Cripplewood is not dead wood,” writes [J.M. Coetzee](#) (<https://www.artnews.com/t/j-m-coetzee/>) in the text for the book accompanying [Berlinde De Bruyckere](#) (<https://www.artnews.com/t/berlinde-de-bruyckere/>)’s installation *Cripplewood-Kreupelhout* at the 55th [Venice](#)

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Biennale (<https://www.artnews.com/t/venice-biennale/>) (through Nov. 24). “Cripplewood . . . is alive. Like all trees, the cripplewood tree aspires toward the sun, but something in its genes, some bad inheritance, some poison, twists its bones.” In her installation, De Bruyckere, based in Ghent, has re-created a fallen tree in a fleshlike encaustic veined with red, as if animated by blood. Placed within the hushed, darkened space, illuminated by a skylight covered in tattered fabric, and itself tied up and patched in places with cloth resembling bandages, the tree resembles a wounded being slowly recovering its vitality.

In fact, the South African writer and the Belgian artist (b. 1964), who has had numerous solo exhibitions in Europe since the 1980s but very few in the States, cooperated in the project. Having long admired his novels, and feeling a profound affinity with their themes, De Bruyckere invited Coetzee to be the curator for her Biennale project. Their moving correspondence, ranging in subject from cripplewood to St. Sebastian (patron saint of plague victims and a constant character in Venetian painting) and Bernini’s *Apollo and Daphne* (in which the nymph is shown transforming into a tree), is included in the book, along with a newly published story by Coetzee, “The Old Woman and the Cats.” While the connections are not direct, there are similarities between De Bruyckere’s fragile yet powerful tree and the old woman in Coetzee’s tale, whose son arrives at her home in rural Spain to find her confronting mortality in ways that are inscrutable to him.

De Bruyckere met with A.i.A. inside the Belgian pavilion during the opening days of the Biennale and discussed trees, her relationship with Coetzee and the value of talking about art that doesn’t yet exist.

FAYE HIRSCH This is something of a departure for you.

BERLINDE DE BRUYCKERE It’s a change in that I’ve never done such a big sculpture before. But all the topics I have addressed in my previous work are in this one.

HIRSCH Tell us about this work.

DE BRUYCKERE You enter the space and see an enormous tree. I’ve worked with trees before, but on a much smaller scale, and always in vitrines. I bought old vitrines and used the same encaustic technique. I start from the dead tree and make a mold. We begin with that negative, a silicone mold, and in that we paint the encaustic in many layers, with epoxy and iron at the center to make it stronger. Only when you take the wax out of the mold can you see the resulting surface. Then you put all the parts together.

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HIRSCH Do you pigment the wax?

DE BRUYCKERE Yes, and then paint it layer after layer—as many as 20 layers altogether.

HIRSCH The pink here and there gives it the feeling of flesh.

DE BRUYCKERE Yes. I use the same palette here as in the human bodies. So it looks really human. That is a subject of much of my other work, and in fact you can look at the tree as a huge, wounded body. It's as if it needs to be taken care of—as if nurses came by and bandaged it.

HIRSCH Did you search around for this tree?

DE BRUYCKERE I fell in love with this tree when I spotted it for the first time two years ago. It was lying in a field in France, and it was so strong. I just saw it from afar at first, and was not able to get close to it, but on a walk I figured out how to come closer and thought, “Wow, it's a sculpture on its own.”

HIRSCH It was waiting for you.

DE BRUYCKERE It was. But it was in France, and I was not able to see exactly how to bring it to Belgium. I thought, “Okay, I need a project to bring the tree to Belgium.” It's an enormous expense, and what would one do without a project—just store it? So when I got the invitation to Venice I thought, “Okay. Now it's time to bring the tree to Belgium.”

HIRSCH Is it all one tree?

DE BRUYCKERE No, just the trunk. The branches were made from other trees that I found in my neighborhood in Ghent. The installation in Venice took place over time. We began in January, building the walls and the floor, then we brought the big tree in three parts and the roots in three parts, and placed them in the space. The door was not wide enough otherwise. And that was the most important decision—how to place the big tree in the space, because we would not be able to move it after that. Then we brought some branches just to feel how far we could go. We made the decisions one by one, here.

HIRSCH Were you seeking the quality of a mausoleum? Because the pavilion feels like one.

DE BRUYCKERE I think it's nice that it feels like this, because it makes the piece feel more fragile. On the other hand, a mausoleum is about death. Today there is no sun, but normally the light from above caresses the tree and it gives the body new life.

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HIRSCH The fabric on the skylight is distressed.

DE BRUYCKERE Yes—we destroyed the fabric to give it many holes, which are very important, because when there is light it's as if there are stars. The fabric was to be similar to textiles that have been destroyed over hundreds of years because of being exposed to too much light.

HIRSCH So in your concept, time has already passed.

DE BRUYCKERE Yes.

HIRSCH Could you speak a bit about your relationship with J.M. Coetzee? Did you know him before this project?

DE BRUYCKERE I knew him before, ever since I worked on another project with him. That was my first experience with someone who gives me so much energy and power, and so many ideas. It felt natural to ask him to be the curator, because I believe a curator should feed you, not just talk about the work. This work did not exist until I installed it here—it was only a prediction. There was nothing to see. It was useless to bring Coetzee to Belgium, because only part of the piece was in my studio, and part here. The most important thing was for me to write him to talk about the work in words, not images. I forced myself to use words to explore the content of this work. It was very beautiful the way it happened. I had never done it like that before. Normally as an artist you begin by working in the studio, and only at the end do you talk about it—in the museum, in press releases and so on. This time I had to translate it before it even existed.

HIRSCH Was that helpful to you?

DE BRUYCKERE Yes, very helpful.

HIRSCH So you had read all his books. That sense of a humanity that's just holding on—that's something that you share.

DE BRUYCKERE I like very much the way that he deals with human beings. The personages and characters in his books, they are always very fragile. I like very much his descriptions of the characters. It's like he's taking you by the hand and leading you somewhere. At one moment you see the beautiful side of this person, and at the next he is showing you the animal side. It's very familiar. We all have the beast in ourselves; we only have to control it.

Berlinde De Bruyckere's *Kreupelhout-Cripplewood* is at the Belgian Pavilion in the Giardini, at the 55th Venice Biennale. The curator is J.M. Coetzee, the deputy curator Philippe Van Cauteren and the commissioner Joke Schauvliege, Flemish Minister for Environment, Nature and Culture.

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