

Johan Creten. God is a Stranger

9 Sep — 31 Oct 2015 at Galerie Perrotin in New York, United States



Johan Creten, "Fireworks - The Red Flares" (detail), 2014-2015, Gold luster on glazed stoneware, aluminium structure, 105 x 77 x 20 cm / 41 1/4 x 30 1/4 x 7 3/4 inches © Johan Creten / ADAGP, Paris & ARS, New York, 2015, Courtesy Galerie Perrotin

Estranged* Matter

Reflections on Johan Creten's exhibition "God is a Stranger" by Nicola Trezzi.

A creative dreamer, an undeniable seducer, and the ultimate outcast, through his practice Johan Creten essentially strives against progressivity in favor of a position that suggests dancing rather than marching, a position that embraces curves rather than straight lines. Challenging the pace of the reality in which we live, his artworks—whether monumental or minute, fragile or rough, straightforward or impenetrable—constitute a firm declaration against the traditional idea of dynamism, against the avant-garde, against the "new" for its own sake. Creten's response, which is dynamic but unconventionally so, consists of objects that are controversial in the etymological sense of the word—from the Latin *controversus*, meaning "turned in an opposite direction, disputed, and turned against." With this attitude Johan Creten has realized his unique desire to question modernism through various tools, weapons, incantations and incarnations. Trying to categorize his many tentacles, trying to count his (sculpted, casted, fired) armies of figures and forms against progress, five ideas might come to mind: "tactile experiences," "unconventional displays," "identity issues," "triggering memories" and "fearless virtuosity."

With a very strong sense of tactility, the art of Johan Creten seems to be made in order to be touched as much as to be seen. The skins of his works, their colors and even their tones are very important aspects of this quality. Pivotal to this achievement is the use of ceramic, a medium that was, until very recently, relegated mostly to outsiders—"too dirty, too proletarian, too popular, too feminine" writes the artist—and considered by the contemporary art language, the aforementioned "new," as obsolete. It is thanks to this language that Creten was able to develop his seminal body of work "Odore di Femmina," a series of torsos—some of which are featured in the New York show as well as flowery wall pieces of the "Fireworks" series—that are reminiscent of fragmented ancient Greek sculptures of Aphrodite. These fragile monoliths are covered by a myriad of handmade ceramic flowers, glazed and fired—linking beauty, sexuality and décor. Furthermore the possible danger of these sculptures, their details so sharp as to cut whoever touches them, brings another layer of meaning—a palpable marriage of beauty and violence. This tactile coefficient is also absolutely present in his bronze patinated sculptures—created using lost-wax casting, one of Creten's signature techniques alongside ceramic—such as the figures *God is a Stranger*, *Sad Woman* and *Bi-Boy*, all exhibited in the show. Bringing another dimension to this physical tension, Johan Creten plays with different skins and scales, conflating the human and the monumental, the delicate and the strong, the refined and the crude in the same space. These creatures are surrounded by sculptures from the "Glory" series shimmering on the walls.(1)

It is interesting to see how Johan Creten's sculptures animate the historical Upper East Side building that houses the New York space of Galerie Perrotin. Furthermore, it will be intriguing to compare this experience with the artist's previous exhibitions, especially those that generated new understandings between the old and the new, the contemporary and the historical. Needless to say, context plays a pivotal role in the work of Johan Creten. His sculptures have been shown in pristine white cube spaces but also in historical buildings such as the Musée du Louvre, the Musée National Eugène Delacroix, and the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature in Paris. This desire to break with linearity, to avoid any singular perception, to go beyond any equation, has been with him since the very beginning.

Epitomizing this desire is a 1991 solo exhibition at Brise-Lames in the French city of Sète(2). For this occasion the artist deliberately eschewed the traditional gallery space in order to exhibit his work in an abandoned prison outside in the sea, a large building with several cells, which was only accessible by boat, a former site for quarantine in which people were kept for 40 days. The seeds of this project—which flourished in many occasions and especially when he presented his work in the Yerebatan Cistern for the 5th Istanbul Biennial or in the garden of the Villa Medici in Rome—are a series of early performative works entitled "Kunstkamer" (1986-87). Performed while he was studying at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, these works—described by the artist as a response to Joseph Beuys and Franz West—consisted of a double action: during the day, his sculptures were shown at Galerie Meyer, a gallery specialized in tribal art from Oceania, and during the night the artist would carry them into the city of Paris. Through this action Creten turned his sculptures into magical antennae, or even "talismans," linking opposite positions—on one hand conceptualism and on the other superstition.

The main element of Johan Creten's iconic work *The Collector* (2008-2009), a beehive, is inspired by *Hope* from *The World of Seven Virtues* (c. 1560), an engraving by Dutch Renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder.(3) Reading between the lines, we can consider this act of appropriation as a symbol of his desire to keep his Flemish roots alive. Identity is, in fact, a very important factor in Creten's work. Legacy is another key word that places his work in relationship to the art of the Flanders but also to the practice of Marcel Broodthaers, whose humor, playful desire, and interest in the correlation between language and visual art deeply influenced Creten's *modus operandi*. "I am a Flemish sculptor even when I am laying on a beach in Miami" says the artist. This dada-like statement perfectly summarizes Creten's interest into possible links between art history and the mundane, between the theoretical and technical, between the place where he comes from—whatever that might mean—and the multifaceted global and possibly flattening reality characterizing today's artistic discourse. At the same time, it underlines Creten's necessity to stay independent, far from any direct associations, free to be mistaken, allergic to any possible reduction. One of the most interesting qualities of his work is the fact that it can often be misunderstood, taken for something else, not only conceptually but also visually; its aura resides somewhere between the revolutionary actions of Lucio Fontana and the sincere acts of a child working with clay for the first time. Within this realm, this continuous marriage of opposites, the works included in "God is a Stranger" become perfect canons, encapsulating the artist's decision to embrace history—the use of pedestals, the employment of the ceramic and bronze techniques, the use of gold luster—without dismissing his outcast position; his decision to play with the macho stereotype without giving up femininity; and a genuine love for beauty that doesn't deny the necessity of breaking the rules.

A joyful orchestration of historical references and yet a strong statement against nostalgia, Creten's sculptures are capable of triggering memories from different eras; they are full of archaism but at the same time they look completely futuristic, echoing the sensation of a science fiction novel. From Ancient Egyptian art—"Dark Continent," his 2010 solo exhibition at Galerie Perrotin—to Assyrian artifacts—*The Collector* (2008-2009); from the *Venus of Willendorf*—*La Grande Vague pour Palissy* (2006-11)—to Rapa Nui—all of his works create a double path, one leading to a forgotten past and another to an unimaginable future. Within this scope, his 2014 solo exhibition "The Storm" at the Middelheim Museum in Antwerp can be considered the manifesto of his love for what is ancient, archaic, art-factual, and definitively creative. Furthermore the aforementioned exhibition in Antwerp can be also considered the breaking point of a series of conceptual connections that the artist has carefully mastered in order to energize his works with the power of the history of humankind. *Pliny's Sorrow* (2011-2013), the monumental bronze sculpture of a hybrid eagle, and the centerpiece of this recent show, is now permanently installed in front of the Red Star Line Museum.(4) This work echoes the large bronze entitled *The Price of Freedom*—a focal piece in the New York show. In accordance with the artist's desire to generate contradictory interpretations, this sculpture can be seen as the symbol of power and strength, the heraldic animal of many empires; at the same time it can also be understood as a bird covered with oil(5)—fragile and vulnerable. In this piece, different ideologies—ecological and political, individual and multiple, evil and holy—come together.

Last but not least, it is not coincidental that while speaking about "God is a Stranger"—especially in relationship to *Massu II* (2014-2015), a four-meter-tall bronze column—the artist mentions Brancusi as one of his main 'guides'. Just like for Brancusi, Creten's works created for "God is a Stranger" reside in a limbo wherein the separation between past and present, between sculpture and pedestal, seems to have lost any meaning in favor of a state where all dichotomies are questioned and embraced simultaneously. As a matter of fact, in the Abbaye de Gellone⁽⁶⁾, another version of *Massu* rises peacefully in the religious silence of the abbey's cloister—an invitation to contemplate the mystery of life and god. With its primitive reminiscence, *Massu* symbolizes the relationship between humanity and nature—a tree, the first 'sculpture' of humankind. Its verticality becomes a metaphor of life and transcendence. At the same time its surface, full of thorns, relates to the importance of pain and sorrow in Christianity. Following these premises *Massu II* anchors the New York exhibition to these issues, becoming its central piece.

Through the aforementioned positions, the notion of virtuosity—described by the artist as a "dirty word"—comes as a natural factor within Creten's phantasmagoric (garden of) Eden. His impetuous creative force can only exist when it is balanced with an acrobatic use of techniques, materials and textures. In Creten's world the power of creativity is mastered via pure control and chaos becomes hyper-ordered. Things need to be reconsidered and recalibrated, avoiding all previous assumptions. Is God a stranger? Definitely not to Johan Creten.

- To estrange: "To remove from an accustomed place or set of associations."

Notes

¹[–] During Creten's stay at the Manufacture National de Sèvres (2004-2007), he started a series called "Les Vagues pour Palissy", which consists of triumphant images of energy, regeneration, the cycle of life, and the hopeful nature of creation. The series was a tribute to the renaissance ceramic master Bernard Palissy, which later developed into new wall sculptures titled "The Glories". Hand-shaped from clay, the secular is glorified and the secret is made secular, witnessing the collision of two distinct worlds. However, this does not give rise to chaos but harmony, with geometric perfection and uniform proportion giving viewers a scope into inner peace. The sculptures are embodiments of majestic splendor, images of bliss, prosperity and great happiness." See: "Johan Creten: Fireworks," exhibition text, Galerie Perrotin, Hong Kong, 2014.

² This site was made famous by *The Great Wave, Sète* (1856–59) an albumen silver print from glass negative developed by pioneer photographer Gustave Le Gray.

³ The beehive appears in several of his works, such as those included in the exhibition "Bêtes, Monstres et Bestioles" in 2012 at the Château de Tarascon – Musée imaginaire du Moyen Age in France as well as in *The Rock* (2009-10) and *Ambrosius* (2009).

⁴ The site of the Red Star Line Museum was where all the Belgian immigrants gathered before going to America during World War I.

⁵ Some of the most iconic images of the 1991 war in Kuwait were photographs of birds covered by the oil released on the shore of the Persian Gulf.

⁶ L'abbaye de Gellone is a Benedictine abbey founded in 804 AD in the South of France. Its cloister is now partially displayed at The Cloisters, an affiliation of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.