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2014.12.08 Mon, by Christopher Moore

Johan Creten interview

Johan Creten "Fireworks"

Galerie Perrotin Hong Kong (17/F, 50 Connaught Road Central) **Oct 2—Nov 15, 2014**

Johan Creten (b. 1963) is a Belgian sculptor. In the 1980s, Creten revived use of ceramics as a primary medium in contemporary art, followed by prominent German artist, Thomas Schütte. Johan Creten lives and works in Paris.

This interview took place on the occasion of the artist's recent solo show in Hong Kong. It began with Johan taking me on a Skype tour of the exhibition. A more permanent movie about Johan Creten can be seen here on [You Tube](#).

Chris Moore: I want to have your lapel brooch. Is it a cicada?

Johan Creten: Yes! I have to work out if it is a lucky symbol in China.

CM: How familiar are you with Hong Kong and China?

JC: I have been before to Hong Kong and China, but the amazing thing is, with Hong Kong, each time I come, I don't recognize the city from my previous visits. It's changed so much. It's such an incredible situation. And it is funny that my show is called "Fireworks" because of China and the link with fireworks, but also looking down in the street from here, "fireworks" takes on a very different kind of meaning.





Johan Creten, “Glory 8”, gold luster on yellow glazed stoneware, aluminium, 100 x 75 x 18 cm, 2013 (© Creten / ADAGP, Paris & Sack, Seoul, 2014; image courtesy Galerie Perrotin)

CM: There are a number of different ways to approach your work. On one side it bears reference to structures built by animals, whether bees or coral, or the way mussels accrete on objects in the sea—complex animal societies at a microscopic level—but it is also drawn to anthropomorphism.

JC: The thing is, everybody gets his or her access to my work through a different door. You say I react to this as something coming from nature. Yesterday someone said, “I see a Viking helmet!” So one person will come from nature and another will come from culture, at the outset.

[At this point Johan paused and sighed.]

JC: As an artist, it is SO difficult! You don’t want to say too much. Today, artists talk too much. You also have to let things speak for themselves. It’s true—if they look like natural organisms first and then you think about society in a second approach, then you’re on a right track, if that makes any sense...you don’t hear me anymore?

CM: No, I can hear you perfectly!

JC: You can hear but you're asleep!

[At this point, CM is laughing]

CM: No, no, I'm listening!

[CM is not laughing anymore because Johan sounds serious]

JC: If you look at this piece, for instance ["Glory 8"], and you look at it structurally, you would say this is something maybe from nature; but if you would, look at the building across the street and the way the street and the road [interact]. Today that road is empty, but normally it is filled with cars that are bumper to bumper; you look at that building, and the building has these weird structures—these lines—and you go back to the show [returning to "Glory 8"], and you see this! Okay, you could also talk about nature but you can see it also has something to do with the energy of the city, the energy of who we are.

CM: Well, the city is also an organism.

JC: This is called "La Gloire" and glory is also something religious. I have never looked at a cell. I have never looked at something from nature as a scientist. I make a lot of things from birds and animals but I haven't looked at an animal in years. The animals [in the works] are there because they talk about you and me.



Johan Creten, "Odore di Femmina, Hong Kong beauty" (detail), gold luster on red glazed stoneware, 161.5 x 93 x 93 cm (with pedestal), 2014 (Photo: Joyce Yung; © Creten / ADAGP, Paris; Sack, Seoul, 2014; image courtesy Galerie Perrotin)

CM: Another work in the exhibition is "Odore di Femmina".

JC: I have been working on these torsos since the late '80s. And in the '80s that was kind of taboo. In the late '80s when I started in Belgium and then in France, you couldn't work with ceramics [and be taken seriously as an artist]. You were immediately taken off the list of people [whose work was] worthy of being looked at.

CM: There's still very few artists working with ceramics.

JC: If you go to a trendy gallery in Hong Kong, at this moment, you'll see some. You'll see somebody like Sterling Ruby.

You'll see lots of artists even in Germany turning to the material. But when I started, there was almost no one. Afterwards there was Thomas Schütte, whose work has been linked to mine a couple of times. But the idea [at the time] was that serious artists don't work with their hands; they work with their brains. You don't touch the dirt; you don't touch the wet, dirty material that is clay. So the "Odore di Femmina" series came out of a link between the earth and then, at some point I heard Don Giovanni (1). At a point when he is alone, he suddenly sniffs and says "Odore di Femmina"—which is not the perfume—much more complex than the aroma— it is the *scnt*. It's also blood. It's also menstruation. It's also seduction but it's also decay. It's birth but it's also lots of other things. And I have made a lot of works that have dealt with what makes *them* different from *us*, including this series. And there are two examples in the show. One is black and makes the link to *La Mer* and *La Mère*—in French, the sea and the mother. They also look like mussels and, I think even in Germany—I'm Flemish, Belgian [between France and Germany], you're in art, so you know it also stands for the female sexual organ.

CM: As in Botticelli's "Venus" [1486].

JC: Yes, exactly. So, again, I think I'm saying way too much!

[No you're not, thinks CM, behind a slightly-too-loud chuckle, needing to distract JC again].

CM: The sculptures are of course fired, though.

JC: Well this reinforces the idea that they are "untouchable." The idea is that they look so fragile that people don't know how to open my sculptures. And the funny thing is, each time the sculptures are installed, people cut themselves. So these flowers that look untouchable are at the same time extremely sharp—they will cut you. So *La Mer*—mother earth...but again, we are explaining much too much.

CM: It reminds me a great deal of radical French feminism from the 1970s and 1980s, with texts by, for instance, Luce Irigaray—who was actually born in Belgium—have these texts informed your work?

JC: I'm a sculptor—you know, they always say, "Stupid like a sculptor". I'm not into theory. One of the first people to write what was a fantastic text was Rosa Martinez, who did the biennale in Istanbul (2), and she included a couple of these works in the biennale, and for sure there are these links...but that's your job, that's not my job, as an artist. It's true that in my first shows, there were some pieces with roosters. How do you say "rooster" in German?

CM: Der hahn. [The French is "Coq"]

JC: There were two roosters sitting one on top of the other. People bought the sculpture and only months later did they come to see me, brutally shocked because they only understood when they had the sculpture at their house that there were *two* roosters sitting on top of each other. Because there are some things people don't see; under the idea of beauty, you can have a lot of things accepted that are, if you put them in words, very controversial—some quote-unquote "political" thing. So to get back to your feminist thing, there might be something funny or feminine or gay.



Installation view (Photo: Joyce Yung; © Creten / ADAGP, Paris; Sack, Seoul, 2014; image courtesy Galerie Perrotin)

CM: The obvious correspondence to draw with this exhibition is the connection to classical Chinese culture regarding porcelain, which heavily affected European culture, whether via Sèvres in France, Meissen in Germany or Wedgwood in England—firstly learning from China the processes of creating porcelain and then how to industrialize them. In China, there

wasn't the same distinction or hierarchy between a beautiful cup and the finest designs made on Song Dynasty imperial porcelain or funeral animals that would be placed with people in their graves. So there are these connections with China but also, thinking in terms of "Odore di Femmina" and of Hong Kong—which literally means "Fragrant Harbor"—how did these connections—classical Chinese history and the connections between Europe—influence the show?

JC: I am not interested in ceramics. *I hate ceramics.* I have never had the training as a ceramicist. I have no idea how to make a firing. Each time instinct makes me do certain things and it works but I am not interested in ceramics *as ceramics.*

CM: No, I meant on the artistic side—

JC: These sculptural references that you make to the history of art and the history of ceramics, they are part of how you look at these things. What I mean is, I collect Renaissance and Baroque bronzes. I look at these things and I find so many links in these small sculptures—history, politics, to local economics, to beauty—here it's the same thing. If you have old Chinese ceramics at home, that's another key to my work, and that's part of it but never a conscious, premeditated thing.

CM: I don't want to reveal and uncover every last detail of the works.

JC: For instance, in this show I was going to show ceramic paintings [some were shown at FIAC this year], which are made of ceramic slabs that crack during the firing. The clay is torn and worn and fissures [erupt] in the transparent glazes that go back to several Chinese historical lead glazes. So there are a lot more references to Chinese culture in them, as you describe it. And finally, I decided that for the show in Hong Kong I had to have something much purer.

CM: I would like to finish with a discussion of the independent life of an artwork, once it is out in the world. Even the most erudite, clinical, abstract, conceptual works—no matter how brutal they are—end up being decoration, in some sort of context.

JC: The thing is that in '86, '87, I made several performances where I took [my] ceramic sculptures which were shown during the day at a gallery in Paris, and each evening when the gallery closed, I took a sculpture, took it in my arms, and went through the city of Paris, and sit in front of the Moulin Rouge or in the subway. The idea was very simple. What I hope is that with my pieces, wherever you leave them, out of the context of the galleries Perrotin or Almine Rech or Gagosian or a museum, you bring them to a flea-market in Hong Kong or Berlin, I hope that these things have enough power inside of themselves to be strong enough to survive even outside of any possible art context. I was a young student, still at art school. This was the period of minimal art, the period of conceptual art. And I love [the work of Félix] González-Torres. I love the minimalists. I have an enormous esteem for them. At the same time, with a Renaissance bronze there is another relationship to the object and it has all the power [it needs] inside it. With my work, okay, if they go to somebody's house, they can end up as decoration. There is not much you can do about that. My hope is that with my work they end up with people a little bit like myself, people with a lot of books, with a lot of other objects, and they will handle the objects in a different way.



Johan Creten, "Fireworks—The clearing" (detail), mat and shiny gold luster on majolica glazed stoneware, 100 x 75 x 21 cm, 2013 (Photo: Joyce Yung; © Creten / ADAGP, Paris; Sack, Seoul, 2014; image courtesy Galerie Perrotin)

What I am going for is that the thing itself [the artwork] is like a person, and I can leave him alone in the subway, and he'll survive. With a lot of minimal art, that is not something you can do. With a lot of art that is made today, that is not

something you can do. If you have an Eskimo mask with three feathers—you know those masks that Breton loved with just a piece of wood with three feathers?—even 70 years later, there's always somebody who is enough in love with the *thing*, who will say, "I will care for this." Maybe it's the same for Donald Judd—a piece of plywood or something—there will be someone enough in love with the thing to respect it, to care for it and to behold it. At the same time, I try to put in enough of my own world, my own emotions—it's almost too pompous to say I put my heart and soul in there—but that is still what I believe. You make something and hopefully it is strong enough to survive this society at large, as it is today.

Notes

1. *Don Giovanni*, an opera by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, premiered on October 29, 1787 at the Teatro di Praga, now called the Estates theatre.
2. Rosa Martinez, Artistic Director of "On Life, Beauty, Translations and Other Difficulties", 5th International Istanbul Biennial, 1997, Istanbul (Turkey).