Sculpture : 'Concentred Forms, A conversation with Johan Creten', by Michaël Amy, September 2013

Concentrated Forms

Exhibition view of "The Vivisector," 2013, Galerie Perrotin, Paris. (Left to right): *Fatigue*, 2012, glazed stoneware, 134 x 70 x 72 cm.; *The Vivisector*, 2012, glazed stoneware, 32.5 x 74.5 x 68.5 cm.; *The Father*, 2012, glazed stoneware, 33.8 x 70 x 65 cm.; and *The Nose*, 2012, glazed stoneware, 132.8 x 71 x 66.5 cm.

A Conversation with

Johan Creten

BY MICHAËL AMY

The Rock (detail), 2009–10. Bronze and gold, 263 x 72 x 72 cm.

This conversation took place in March of 2010 at Johan Creten's "Dark Continent" exhibition at Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin in Paris. Having made fundamental breakthroughs in the field of stoneware in terms of virtuosity, imagery, and scale, the Belgian artist, who refuses to sit still, is now displacing the boundaries of what is possible and acceptable in bronze sculpture. Steeped in the old masters and literature, Creten achieves mythical resonance in his treatment of nature, from energies to elements, from plant life to human life, and increasingly wild animals.

Creten has shown in numerous one-person and group exhibitions, including a large solo show last year at the Dhondt-Dhaenens Museum in Deurle, Belgium. But his work really comes to life when juxtaposed with pre-20th-century art and artifacts, as I recognized when I came across his unforgettable exhibition (2008) at the little known, but fascinating Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, in the Marais district.

Michaël Amy: *We are standing in front of a large female figure titled* The Rock *(2009–10).*
Johan Creten: It comes from my "Odore di Femmina" series, which I have been working on for more than 20 years. I named it *The Rock* because the figure is covered with flowers, or barnacles, like a rock in the sea. The sculpture also embodies the idea of the foundation of things. It is the rock you build on, the foundation of things to come.

It's like a reliquary. There is a secret space inside the statue where you can place a work of art or a gilded, anthropomorphic beehive whose 100,000 live bees can enter and exit the sculpture through holes in the breasts. I find those to be fertile ideas for sculpture. The beehive inside the cavity constitutes a form of primitive architecture. It is not for nothing that this shape appears in classical architecture, in Catholic churches, and in huts. The beehive stands for community. I gave it facial features. The good that is achieved through community is arrived at by way of communication—through the mouth, the eyes, and the gaze. All of these things interconnect within this piece. However, the collector is free to place the beehive elsewhere and to hide another object within the sculpture's cavity.

The Rock is also about pure beauty. You walk around it, and you see how it deconstructs and reconstructs itself before your eyes. When you enter the gallery, you see a monolithic block that becomes a figure, and then, suddenly, you discover the hidden door and the interior beehive covered in gold. And then you have the surface, the patinas. You can already feel how the sculpture will evolve through time. The patinas prepare it for

Left: *The Rock* (detail), 2009–10. Right: Exhibition view of "Dark Continent," 2010, with (left to right): ***I am a Good Horse on a Soft Brick***, 2004–08, bronze, 187 x 64 x 48 cm.; *The Rock*, 2009–10, bronze and gold, 263 x 72 x 72 cm.; and *Génie*, 2009–10, bronze, 212 x 69 x 48 cm.

its own history. You have places that have been polished, and then you find places with the same rich bluish-green of bronze that has been exposed to the elements over many years.

MA: *Did the same classical torso inspire all of the statues from the series?*

JC: They all go back to the Greek/Roman Venus type. I make different torsos depending on what I want to convey—young, old, voluptuous, or extremely classical. The source for *The Rock* lies in a tiny model that I made almost six years ago at the Manufacture de Sèvres.

My mother was a history teacher. My father told me, "You are an artist because of your mother; she held an art book in one hand while she breast-fed you." These classical sculptures are part of our culture. I must have seen my first Greek or Roman torso on a poster in history class, and then, when I was 11 or 12, a Belgian art dealer couple found me painting on the street and invited me to spend Wednesday afternoons at their house, which I did with my mother's permission. They had a huge collection of antiquities, and I developed a very intimate relationship with these historical objects. I now collect small Renaissance and Baroque bronzes.

MA: *Where did you live as a youth?*

JC: I lived in the tiny town of Tienen, in Belgium. It was a far-from-exciting place.

MA: *Tienen is known for its sugar industry. I should note that some of your works bring sugar sculpture to mind.*

JC: Absolutely. You could say that there is a link between my work and the craft of pastry chefs. In fact, a pastry chef at the Hôtel de Crillon, one of the finest hotels in Paris, saw my work at the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature and fell in love with it. He told me that he would create two desserts inspired by my work for the opening of this exhibition. So, the influence seems to be going both ways.

MA: *How long have you been working in bronze? How does it compare to clay?*

JC: On and off for the past 10 years, when funds permit. A 10-foot-tall bronze piece weighs a ton, and it also costs a ton. I love clay. It's direct, it's wet—it is sculpture one-on-one. With bronze, you always have to work with a group of people. And it comes with a complex gamut of patinas. Together with the artisans at the foundry, I worked for eight years just on different patinas and

Above and detail: *The Collectors*, 2008–09. Glazed stoneware, 3 elements, 200 x 60 x 85 cm. each.

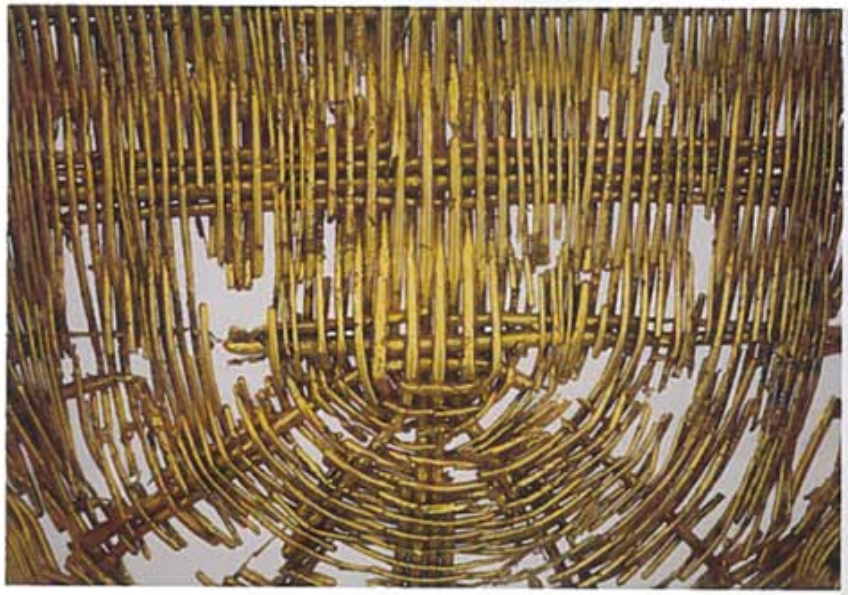
techniques. When it came to the torso covered with roses, foundries in the U.S., Germany, and France said that my work was far too complex to cast. I finally found a foundry close to Oudenaarde, near Ghent, where they could do this type of work. There is a lot of *trompe-l'oeil* in this exhibition. You don't really know which pieces are clay and which are bronze. The ambiguity is fun—visitors repeatedly mistake one for the other.

MA: *Do you have a team of people chasing the bronzes?*

JC: The chasing is delirious—very, very complex. I hand-model everything in wax in a tiny studio here in Paris. I then bring the work to the foundry, where we assemble the piece. The bronzes are produced according to the lost-wax technique. There is not a lot of chasing. I always tell the workers to keep everything as crisp and untouched as possible. We just take the runners away and chase so that you cannot see where they were situated, but the fingerprints must remain in place. You have to see me everywhere within the work. I polish some areas a little more so that light touches them differently and I obtain a silvery quality.

MA: *Has Surrealism influenced your development?*

JC: If you are thinking of the dream, the subconscious, the accident, the weirdness—then no, my work is almost opposite to Surrealist ways of thinking. My work is more concrete in a way. It is closer to the grotesque, which you find in Renaissance ornament, and to the stories of metamorphosis that you find in Renaissance art. But there are links between the Renaissance and Surrealism.



Right and detail: ***The Cradle (De Bakermat)***, **2009–10. Bronze, 245 x 70 x 90 cm.**

Take this mushroom shape (*Génie*, 2009–10), which is much more concrete than a Surrealist image. The form resembles a mooring bollard to which boats are fastened. We call these *bittes d'amarrage* in French—a term that works on different levels. [*Bite*, pronounced the same way, is "cock" in French, and mooring oneself to one would amount to a colorful way of referring to a wide variety of sexual acts.] The form also refers to fake mushrooms found in the popular garden, which references back to the earth, the male sex, the male force, the strength of the earth, so these shapes are very straightforward and direct, and here, they are linked to a flowery shape, which is the opposite. One is solid and dark and defined, while the other is in movement and changing. The title could mean artistic inspiration or the "genie trapped in a bottle"—you rub the sculpture to make your dreams, your passions, come true.

I am surprised by the extent to which people are shocked by these phallic shapes. They are so stunned that they are afraid to attach words to them. At the same time, they love these shapes, because they are beautiful. Some people say that this is *la voûte celeste*—the dome of heaven. So, if you have a shape that is the dome of heaven, and you have the earth, if you juxtapose the base with the sky, out of the earthy, massive base comes something more female, airy, fragmented, splintered, flowery—a cultural shape. On a basic level, it is brutal force in opposition to fragile, almost untouchable elements. In all of these sculptures, you have a mixture of interconnected stories. It's a *bitte d'amarrage* to tie your boat to, it's a primitive mushroom, it's an Indian lingam, but it is also a healing sculpture.

I recently found some drawings that I made in 1994 when I was at le Puy-en-Velay in the Auvergne, where there are prehistoric stones called *les pierres froides*. These "cold stones" were taken into churches where people would lie on top of them, or touch them, because they could heal. *Génie* has something prehistoric, religious, and primal to it; and that is also part of the story. My narratives and my forms may take years to materialize—like the small clay model that, six years later, became the gigantic sculpture *The Rock*. The same shape appears in *I am a Good Horse on a Soft Brick* (2004–08), but the patina and finish are completely different. Here, the female figure is older, and the sculpture has a worn, battered kind of finish. It mixes the phallic shape and the female shape, thereby becoming the ideal idol. At the Bass Museum in Miami, we put her next to a medieval Madonna. You can feel the kneading of the fingers. I love how a surface consisting exclusively of imprints of one's fingers becomes like Tahitian and '70s hairdos, and it all intermingles. From every angle, she's got a different story to tell.

MA: *Are there birds in* I am a Good Horse*?*

JC: Yes. They look like a necklace of trophies or amulets. Here, when a young boy has his pants open, we say: "Watch out! Birdie is going to fly." In traditional Dutch painting, when there is a birdcage or a bird, you know that the scene has some kind of erotic overtone. So, the bird also stands for the male. She wears her trophies.

A Dutch Garden, 2009. Glazed stoneware, 81 x 65 x 20 cm.

MA: *Is she a magician or shaman?*
JC: You tell me. I think she is a kind of saint, but saint, shaman, and magician are all very close. That's why people are afraid of artists, to this very day—because an artist combines all of these elements. The artist does the thing that you are not supposed to do, which is to create a human figure from clay, which only the divine can do. We are talking about sculpture that heals, that has a kind of shamanistic power to influence people, to move people, to touch people.
MA: *Your work is often sexually loaded, even when your subject matter that is not figurative. The glazes convey a kind of moistness; there are swirling, voluptuous movements.*
JC: Yes, but it is never in your face, or rarely so. The images that you mention are more in your head than in the object. These could just be beautiful plants, or coral, or the movements of an octopus. But you see something very erotic and dark. It is never as simple as that.
MA: *You are also an* animalier.
JC: Indeed, these three ceramic statues of squirrels sitting on their hind legs (*The Collectors*, 2008–09) were made at the European Ceramic Work Centre, in 's-Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands. They stand two meters high, which is tall for a single piece of stoneware. Each squirrel carries something in its paws. These sculptures are about gathering, collecting, holding on to something for the future—they are about passing something on to the next generation. You don't take a nut away from a squirrel, and you don't take a thing away from a nutty collector. I tried to convey something almost sacred. These squirrels have, as some viewers have observed, an Egyptian-like frontality, and here again, the sculpture reveals itself as you walk around it, at the level of the glaze, the colors, and the textures. The little drips are gifts from the firing. I have worked with clay for over 20 years now and know that glazes run, but then you obtain these unexpected effects. When you look carefully, you see wet areas playing off dry areas, and rough areas playing off slick ones.
MA: *Color plays an important role in your sculpture, even in the bronzes with their varied patinas.*
JC: I love color in sculpture. It was taboo for a long time, and certainly for my generation, which was brought up on minimal and conceptual art. Today, there is much greater liberty. I always loved clay because of the mystery of color. I use color as a painter—which is why moving from glazed earthenware to bronze was difficult for me, and why I had to find something akin to painting in the patinas. I trained as a painter, not as a sculptor or ceramicist. The references carried in the glazes are about painting. I work in three dimensions, and then superimpose all the pleasure of painting on top. What more can one ask?
MA: *Where did you study?*
JC: I studied painting at the art academy in Ghent. I then went to the Beaux-Arts in Paris where I worked with Georges Jeanclos, who is a very traditional sculptor working in clay.
MA: *Was that your first encounter with clay?*
JC: No. In Ghent, there was an almost-deserted clay studio downstairs that I took over. The studio was run by Carmen Dionyse, the first woman in Belgium to produce art ceramics. She helped me a great deal. She would come over once a week, and she never talked about technique or meaning; instead, she instilled an almost religious faith in work, hard labor, and determination. I wanted to incorporate clay forms into my paintings. When I was younger, I made objects that were closer to set designs. I wanted to make opera and theater sets. Clay was a great medium for that. It was only later, when I came to Paris in 1986, that I started using it for independent sculpture. I was producing root-like shapes. I would show them at Galerie Meyer, and at night, I stood in the subway or on Place Pigalle and confronted people with my clay sculpture. I was interested in seeing if my work

Exhibition view of "The Vivisector," 2013, with (left to right): *Fortuna Grande—G*, 2012, glazed stoneware, 130 x 75 x 65 cm.; *Fortuna Grande—M*, 2012, glazed stoneware, 110 x 70 x 65 cm.; and *Fortuna Grande—P*, 2012, glazed stoneware, 85 x 60 x 60 cm.

could survive outside of the white box. All of the art I liked was shown inside white cubes. My test is that the work should be able to stand on its own at the flea market. It has to be able to tell the whole story from the inside, and not as a result of being placed in a gallery.

MA: The Cradle (De Bakermat) *is quite a different type of work.*

JC: You recognize the *bitte d'amarrage* form, with what looks like a dog basket on top of it—except that it is not. As a child, I was intrigued by the expression *de bakermat van de beschaving*—the cradle of humanity. Where did that expression come from? I finally discovered in Brueghel that *de bakermat* is a big basket in which the mother would sit after giving birth and cradle the child. That is the cradle of humanity. I took Brueghel's engraving (*La cuisine maigre*, 1563) and had a copy made of that cradle in wicker. Then I went to the foundry and said that I wanted a perfect facsimile of it to be made in bronze—except that I wanted it to be a little worn so that one could see through it. I wanted it to embody the idea of lightness. I love this basket shape because it incorporates so many archetypes. It's a face; it's the sunset; it's a cross; it's a skull. It's almost a sacred object. At the back, there is a hook, because a woman would have 10 to 15 children, and between births, the object would hang on the wall. This cradle was an integral part of life, used in every social class. I find its chapel-like form very, very beautiful.

MA: *Did you say chapel-like?*

JC: Yes, in the Belgian countryside, you find small chapels built by the side of the road, in which not even a single person can fit. What fascinates me is that in this sculpture you have a male shape below and a cultural shape above—the female shape, civilization concentrated in one object. But we are not out to explain things. When you make a sculpture, there is also a part that you do not need to explain. Things are there that have to speak directly to the person looking at the work.

MA: *This sculpture also constitutes an almost miraculous feat of engineering.*

JC: That's true of all the sculptures in this exhibition. Here, you have 250 kilograms balanced on a single point, and the whole consists of one single piece of bronze. I love the idea of craftsmanship—of the *objet d'art* in which all the arts are concentrated in one thing.

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