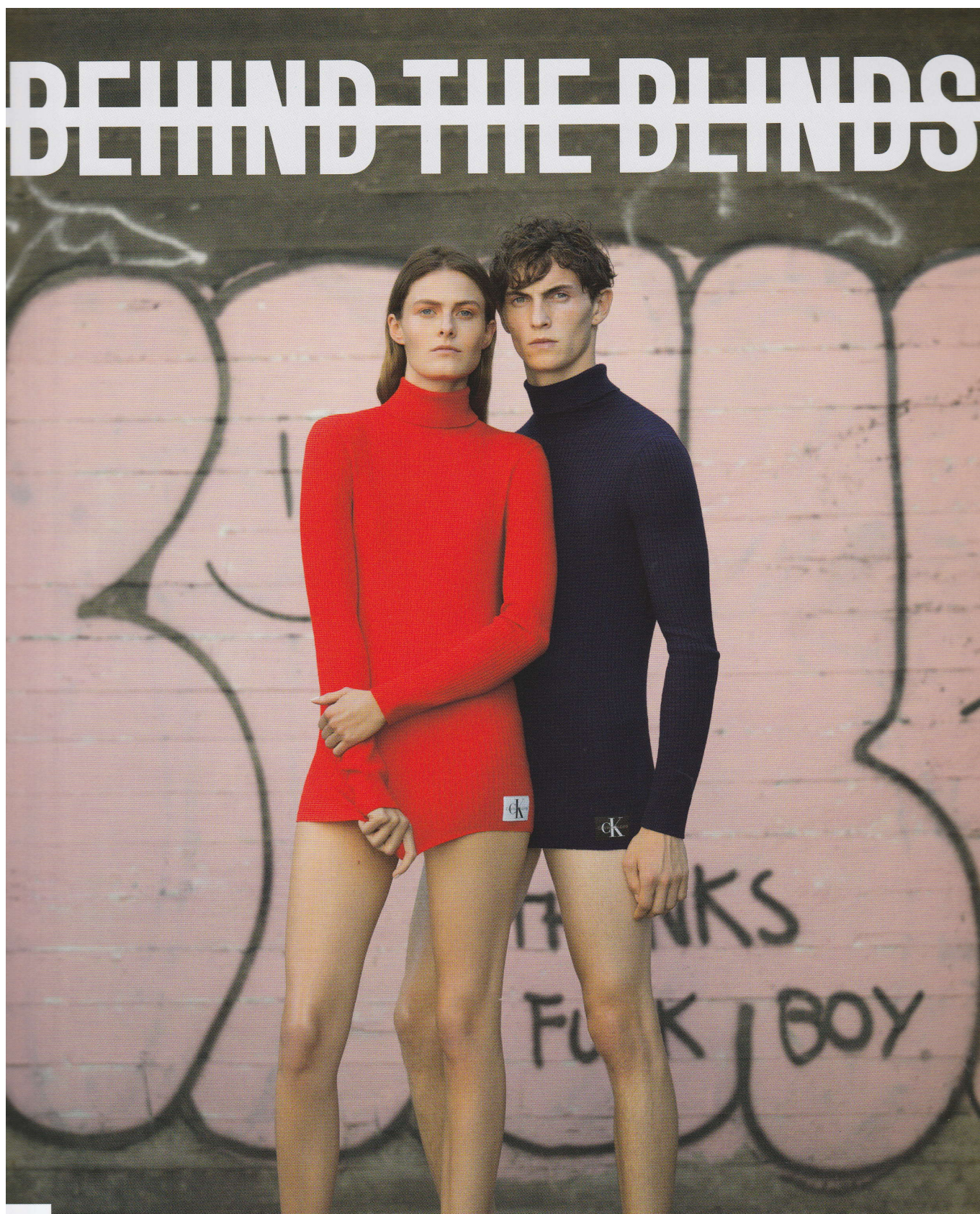


Behind the Blinds, Issue #5 : 'Morphing Night: The Preys of Johan Creten', by Rémy Russotto, Paris, May 2018.



Johan Creten

Paris, May 2018

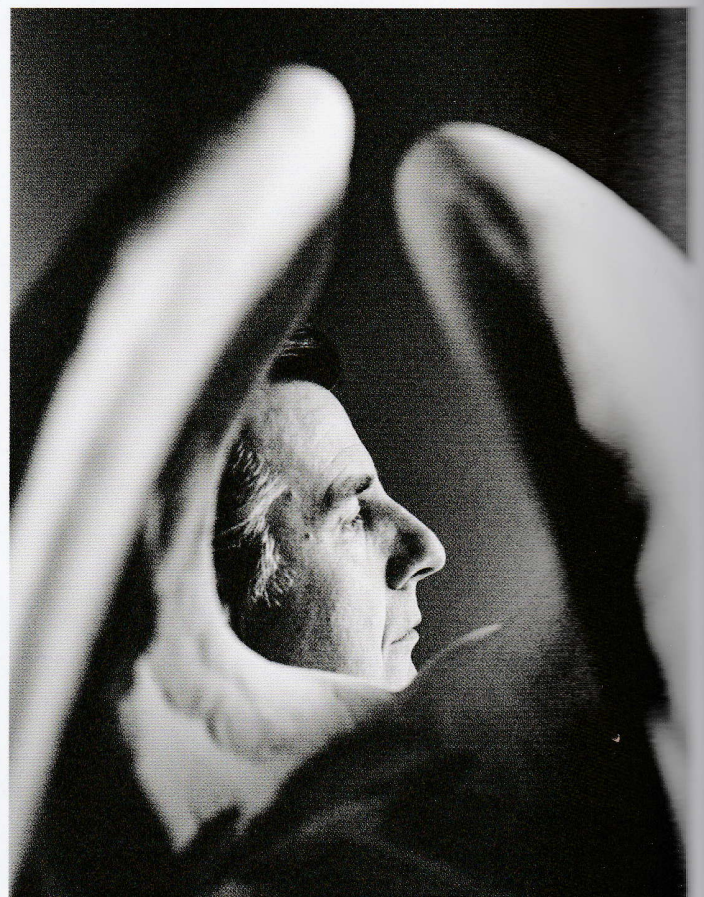
Interview by Rémy Russotto

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Morphing night: the preys of Johan Creten

Belgian artist Johan Creten brought ceramics into the sunlight of the contemporary art scene, exposing the millennial practice to raw light and excited eyes. His work explores a mysterious, possibly deadly wilderness, a psychedelic nature in the tradition of Thoreau. In addition to being confounding art pieces, they are lyrical love letters to a new world.

*Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

*In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?*

*And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?*

*What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!*

*When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?*

*Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?*

The Tyger by William Blake, 1794

RÉMY RUSSOTTO: About the creatures you bring to life: do they haunt you at night?
JOHAN CRETEN: Am I a haunted man? Do my sculptures come to greet me at night? I am haunted not by the sculptures themselves but by the people and subjects they depict. At one of my shows, friends played a game and positioned themselves next to my work. It was stunning to see how an owl looked like my notary, a crow looked like an old girlfriend... In a show at the Bass Museum in Miami, people

recognized a homeless drifter in one of the sculptures. The cleaning lady at the gallery cried in front of one of my veiled woman as she thought she saw her mother. I am not that much into animals but animals are the perfect vehicle to talk about you, them and me.

RR: What are you wearing now?

JC: It suddenly got cold in Paris so I took out an old velvet Etro evening jacket with small brown spots and my crazy punk boots with red and black leather stripes. Possibly a bit strange at 3 in the afternoon.

RR: Where are you?

JC: In my office in the Marais in Paris, taking care, with my assistants Maeva and Basille, of planning my upcoming show for the Museum Beelden aan Zee in The Hague, the Netherlands. Typing away on the computers. Working on a new book and answering your questions!

RR: Your work reminds me of the animals in William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, in particular the tiger in his famous tiger poem. There is something about how night penetrates light, how bodies are expandable, morphing into something they desire. Does this make sense to you?

JC: It does. The poem is beautiful and complex. It takes its time to open up and reveal itself. It takes its time to hand over a secret or two. I try to do the same with my work: take it slowly, take it easy, take your time.

RR: Do you feel a relation between your early work, when you integrated ceramic into your paintings, and Georges Braque who also brought external elements into painting, cubism becoming a means to morph vision into something else?

I am not haunted
by the creatures I create but
by the people they depict.

I read William S. Burroughs'
Naked Lunch as a child,
in secret. It made
me sick and horny.

JC: I am not sure if what I did was as "revolutionary" as what Picasso or Braque did at the start of cubism. What I do know is that many young artists have seen my early work in clay, pushing boundaries, and have used this for freeing their own work in clay. This stimulated the revival of the medium in contemporary art.

RR: What is the importance of the name you give to your objects?

JC: As you name a child, a title carries a weight, a burden, a destiny, a story, a hidden meaning, a future history. Some works cannot find a new home because their title acts as a spell. Some titles can almost create blockbusters: *Odore di Femmina* or *Why does Strange Fruit always look so sweet*. I love giving titles!

RR: What's your relation to technology?

JC: I am a free man and I will take and use everything that may work for me. I am not afraid of the computer, of the 3D printer, the scan, the iPhone, Instagram, the net. The addiction is strong but the possibilities of the new world are infinite. At the same time this is only "cuisine", these are only tools.

RR: Do you enjoy the movies of Wes Anderson? I am asking because in your work, as in some of his movies, there is a sweet mix of tenderness, cruelty and magic.

JC: I do not know his work (shame)... my assistants do... I will look at some of his work on the train!

RR: Do you remember a children's book you liked, one your parents used to read to you or one you read by yourself before night?

JC: I read William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* as a child, in secret. It made me sick and horny. Maybe it explains the torture, the doubt, the guilt... My mother would read me the *Odyssey* and the *Troy War* and have me repeat the story. But there was this publication called *Genie en wereld* (*Genius and the world*) with which I was obsessed, one book would arrive every month: Alexander the Great, Picasso, Catherina the Great, Erasmus, black and white images, stories of power and destiny, of greatness and the notion of one's own place in a small provincial village in the middle of nowhere and the desire to flee, to run and to make another new life somewhere.

RR: When did you cry last?

JC: A few days ago, alone in my hotel room in Monaco after a few very intense days: there

was a documentary about *E.T.* on television and as soon as I heard the music of the scene with the bikes, and E.T. fleeing in the sky, tears started to run down my cheeks. That is the "magical" power of art, the power to move and touch, the power to penetrate deep-down a heart, in a fraction of a second. Call me a romantic if you wish!

RR: Where do you get your raw material from, your clay? Has its quality deteriorated in the past ten years?

JC: In any given place, I use what I find: terracotta in Italy, stoneware in Miami, black clay here, green clay there, white porcelain in Sèvres, rough clay in La Borne. Anything goes, I work with what I find. I love Picasso's sentence "when I do not have any red left I use green".

RR: Do you perceive yourself as having magical powers? Is magic important to you?

JC: As a child drawing and making objects that no other kid could make gave me power. It was a way to survive, a way to impose myself in the world. It turned into a kind of magic. Do I believe in magic? I think I do.

RR: Do you remember your dreams when you wake up in the morning?

JC: Yes, parts of them vividly. Or when I go to sleep sometimes I will remember where the dream of the same morning ended and I will pick up as if it was a soap on television.

RR: I feel that the accumulation of pieces, animals, creatures, and objects you create, is creating a story you are telling. Your sculptures are noisy: we can hear their voice.

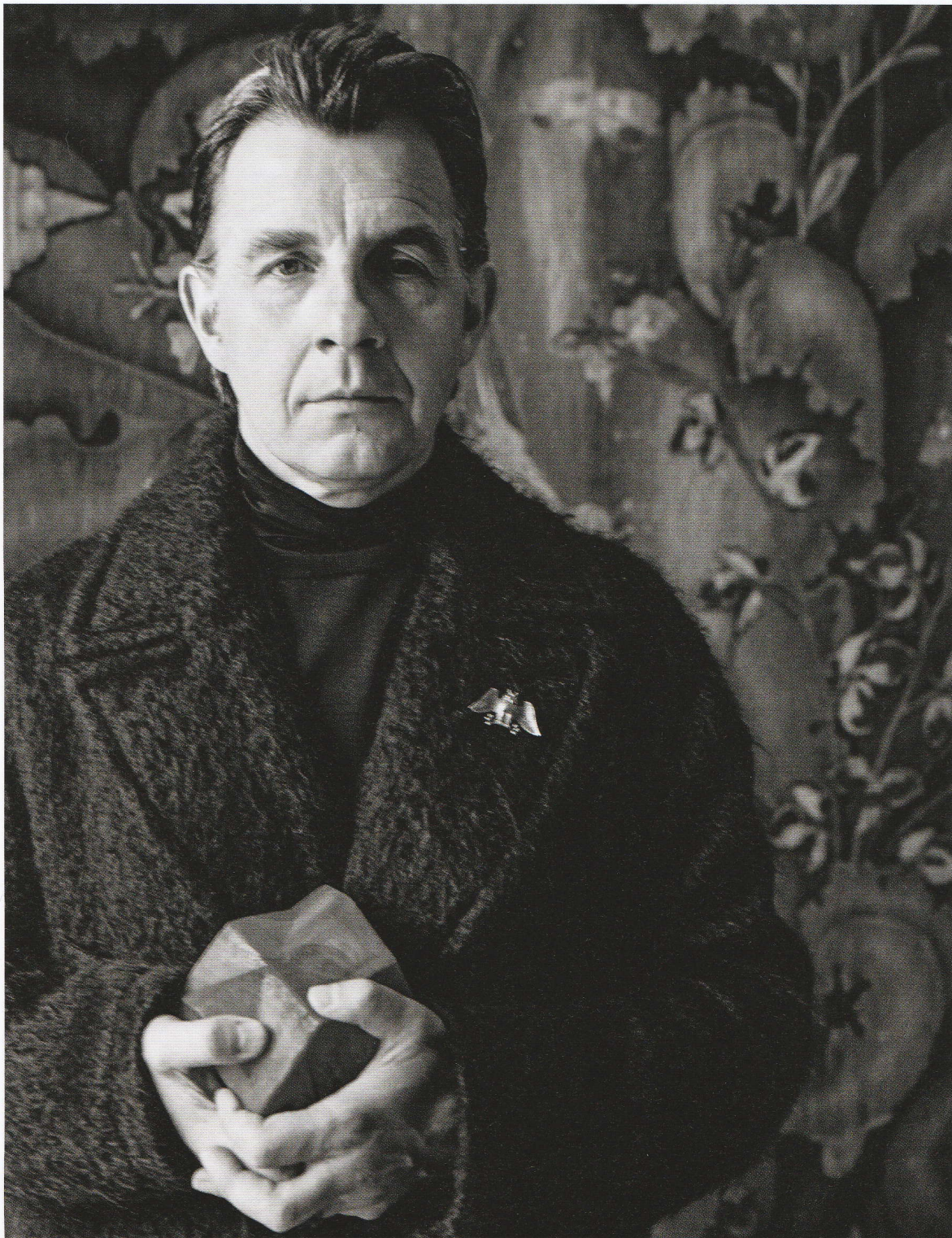
JC: Is it my voice? Am I a medium? A messenger? Or do objects have powers of their own? Do they own a voice? A lot of big questions that my early performances of *Kunstkamer* and *La Langue* did address.

RR: Did you watch the last season of *Twin Peaks*?

JC: No, I did not. But I did see the first series, and *Fire walk with me* is the title of one of my early pieces.

RR: Do you enjoy the art of Léon Spilliaert, the twists and turns he created?

JC: I love his work, the woman with wild hair in the storm, the lonely beach, the stumpy trees, the dark colors, the "gaze and the staring" in the mirror. I have tried for years to own one of his works but no luck yet. By the way, I also love Fernand Edmond Jean Marie Khnopff. (...)

[illegible]





*Pants and jacket Dior Homme by Kris Van Assche
Shirt Ann Demeulemeester
Boots Calvin Klein Jeans
Brooch from Johan's personal jewelry collection*

**Do I believe in magic?
I guess I do.**

RR: Is the idea of Paradise, a closed garden in which Adam and Eve run around the tree in full innocence, important to you?

JC: Raised as a Catholic, the idea of mortal sin is strong. The idea of something lost forever is something heavy to carry... is creation, the staging of shows, attempts to simulate "paradise lost". Maybe. I need to think about this.

RR: Do you drink wine? Anything in particular you like?

JC: Until I was 22 or 23, I had not drunk a drop of alcohol. No beer, no wine (except maybe wine in church for communion). This was a way to assert myself, emphasize my difference with the boozing boys in the village. To not drink was a form of rebellion. My French art-dealer, Anthony Meyer, years later, told me that there was beauty and joy in a glass of wine and not sin only. I still remember today that first glass of Château Talbot he offered me. I do drink champagne and sometimes a whiskey-coke when the night gets warm.

RR: Any author you enjoy in particular?

JC: I love Bruce Chatwin. But today the closest I get to literature is a pile of auction catalogues next to my bed.

RR: What about the ice melting and how climate change is modifying Earth, forcing it to morph into something new. Are your creatures and work mirroring these changes?

JC: Transformation has always been central. When I did my show at the Louvre I showed my work next to Bernard Palissy, the renaissance master. My interpretation of his work is about the idea that nothing stays put, everything transforms and changes.

RR: Who are the artists that count most to you?

JC: Jean Michel Othoniel, Philippe Guston, Joseph Beuys, Francesco Fanelli, the anonymous master or the hardworking craftsman, the woman that wove the Navaho Blanket I used to sleep under, the Egyptian glassblower that formed a small monkey 3,500 years ago, still sitting next to my bed (it survived and whispers in my ear).

RR: I read you are into photography as well. What type of photographs do you take?

JC: They are not focused. I shake and tremble but, on Instagram, they work.

RR: Are you in love?

JC: I am. ♦

