



DESIGN

IDEAS AND INSPIRATION FROM THOSE IN THE KNOW

THE ART OF CLAY

Johan Creten is known as the man who broke the boundaries separating contemporary art and clay sculpting. For the past 30 years, the Paris-based Flemish artist has been breaking all the rules with his poetic sculptures, that encourage viewers to delve below the surface to discover their hidden meanings.

“The romantic thing about clay is it’s very direct,” Johan explains. “It is wet and malleable and you can put all your emotions in there.” ▶

“Working with clay is therapeutic and soothing; it makes you calm down. I love the lushness of the material. Then I like the idea also of colour, the glaze, the crystals, the shininess. It's so different from painting, plastics or computers,” he enthuses.

A pioneer in the use of ceramics in contemporary art, he has been transforming clay into a noble art form for the last three decades, while tackling the serious issues of our time, like war, racism, immigration, politics, capitalism, power, human relationships and spirituality through deeply thought-provoking works.

Point of the medium

Creating beauty is his way of unveiling the harshness of the world around him and being able to confront the problems facing humanity without losing hope. Having always broken the rules, his clay sculptures reveal different skins, determined by the glazes used, which crawl, shiver, blister, drip, scar and can be rough and messy – “forbidden things” in classical ceramics.

Once considered unthinkable, the joy of colour and translucency is evident in Johan's clay works. Take for example his golden, yellow, orange and black glazed stoneware *Klein Torso* – part of his series of female torsos covered in individually-crafted ceramic petals





1. Opening of the Naked Roots exhibition.

2. Johan spends much of his time at the Struktuur 68 ceramic atelier in the Netherlands.

3. Klein Torso sculpture.

4. Why does Strange Fruit always look so Sweet? Created in 2002, from patinated bronze that is partially gilded.

evoking female sexual organs or a bed of mussels that are fragile yet razor-sharp and simultaneously trigger feelings of attraction and repulsion.

There is also the imposing, haunting and rather sexual *En Attendant les Egyptiens* (Waiting for the Egyptians) with its reds, greens and yellows; the *Big Glory-La Trinité* in orange glazed stoneware with gold lustre, a triptych with religious connotations that resembles a sea urchin skeleton; or the yellow, orange and green *The Boy from the 8 Gods* family of muses that recall antique sculptures or sacred figures.

The preliminary stoneware studies of the *Vleermuisfontein* bat-shaped bronze fountain in front of Broerekerk Church in Bolsward, The Netherlands, as part of a project that saw 11 contemporary artists each create a fountain for different cities in the northern Dutch province of Friesland, showcase bases in yellow, orange and red that are reflected on the underside of the bat wings.

Show Surprises

These pieces were recently exhibited at Museum Beelden

aan Zee in The Hague in Creten's first solo show in a Dutch museum that was perhaps his most personal ever. Naked Roots offered glimpses into his universe, as he selected for the first time nine ancient objects from his private art collection that had inspired his own work directly or indirectly to display with over 40 of his early or new ceramic, bronze and resin sculptures, thereby demonstrating the influence of historical art on contemporary art.

The art nomad

Working in nomadic fashion, often as an artist-in-residence, going from one studio to another to hone his craft, Johan has resided in various cities such as Amsterdam, Rome, Nice, Sèvres, Sète, Monterrey (Mexico), Arizona, Wisconsin, Oakland and Miami – always working with the local clays and glazes. But perhaps where he feels most at home is at the Struktuur 68 ceramic atelier in The Hague that he visits almost monthly, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2018 and has a long tradition of working with artists, including





5. Partially completed artworks in Johan's atelier.

6. De Vleermuis resin sculpture at the Beelden aan Zee museum, The Hague.

the European avant-garde CoBrA artist collective.

Located inside a narrow brick building with a stepped gable on a residential street, there are four small rooms littered with countless artworks and thousands of colour sample tiles. Here, artisans with decades of experience craft plaster moulds and continue to work with their hands and rudimentary wooden tools to sculpt and shape clay before firing it in the oven and applying coloured glazes, perpetuating centuries-old techniques.

"I feel like I'm commuting between Paris and Den Haag," Johan discloses. "I love coming here because I can be alone and concentrate on my work in a very different way from when I'm in Paris, which is always too hectic. That's something I love also of working in a studio that's not at home."

Start to ceramic

Born in 1963 in Sint-Truiden, Belgium, to a middle-class family, Johan saw art as a way to escape from the narrowmindedness of provincial life. In the 1980s, he studied painting at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent, but as a non-conformist gravitated to the school's unpopular ceramics atelier (Belgium at the time was enthralled by conceptual and minimal art), where he discovered clay – a damp, dirty, sensual and poor material that was looked down on in the fine art world, but that immediately spoke to him.

"Clay is a very loaded material because it's the earth we walk on," he says. "In a lot of cultures, it's called Mother Earth. It's sacred but at the same time it's the poorest of materials. It's basically human waste, so normally





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the people who work with clay are the dumbest and poorest: labourers, farmers, road workers and potters. God took clay and turned it into the first human being, and when you put this material through fire, it turns by magic into something very resistant and beautiful.”

Leader of the pack

Paving the way for younger artists, perhaps Johan’s greatest achievements have been to elevate ceramics from the status of craft to that of fine art, and to bring bronze back into fashion over the past decade. He was among the first to eliminate the boundaries between sculpture and ceramics, choosing instead to make a name as an artist instead of a ceramicist, and exhibiting in

art galleries and museums.

“In Europe, when I started as a young artist, ceramics in art was considered taboo,” he recalls, “It was something for women or for applied arts, and you couldn’t make a sculpture using ceramics because that wasn’t done, so for years I was in a very difficult position, because nobody wanted to show my work. I’ve always only accepted shows that were about sculpture; the fact that it was clay was something extra. But in the last 10 years, there’s been a lot of change: lots of young artists are now using ceramics.”

After all this time working with clay, has Johan’s relationship with the material evolved? He replies, “I’m now at the point where I’m still asking myself too many questions in the

7. Grande Vague pour Palissy sculpture.

8. De Hanen-Les coqs sculpture, made from glazed terracotta.



morning. Clay has not become evident; nothing is easy, it still is open. Maybe I’ve become afraid a little bit because you have to continue to try and push the boundaries. It would be too easy just to do the same thing over and over again, such as my successful *Odore di Femmina* series. I would have a fantastic career just making this piece because it’s everything that the art world wants: it wants a brand, something recognisable. But I’m not interested in that. For instance, my portrait of a veiled woman, *Aus dem Serail*, is also talking about femininity and the place of women in society – it asks lots of new questions. Our duty as artists is also to deal with the world and to translate it into artworks that can help people better understand why we’re here. I know that today that’s a very difficult position because a lot of the art produced is joyful and colourful, where the idea is to make something pleasing to the eye and that works on Instagram. I don’t make pamphlets; I don’t make work that’s so in your face that it becomes unbearable to look at. My pieces are beautiful because beauty helps us to look at something that otherwise we wouldn’t even dare look at. My work is a reflection of the world around us without aggressiveness or disrespect for other opinions, but it still is a vision of the world we live in.” ■