

Forbes

Pioneer Of The Use Of Ceramics In Contemporary Art, Johan Creten Brings His Surreal Bestiary Home To Belgium

By Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle, July 1, 2022



Johan Creten's Bestiarium exhibition at Almine Rech gallery
PHOTO COURTESY OF ALMINE RECH

An innocent, sacrificial lamb led to the slaughter representing the weakness of the masses, a dead fly lying on its back like a recumbent statue on a tomb, a slow snail with the word “sloth” branded on its bulbous shell, a barely-breathing dog studded with barnacles and seaweed that appears to have risen from the dead after drowning, a wild boar trapped in a bloody mire or a pelican overcome by immeasurable melancholy. Johan Creten’s disturbing bestiary is never naturalistic but symbolic, with each flawed beast taking on human attributes like in the fables of Jean de La Fontaine or Aesop, in which anthropomorphic animals teach moral lessons. But Creten isn’t attempting to instruct us between right and wrong; he’s giving us the starting point for a fable that we ourselves are to formulate. Inviting us on a voyage into a fantastical universe, he plunges us into emotions ranging from desolation and abandonment to hope and reawakening.

Since the 1980s, when ceramics were considered taboo by the art world elite, the avant-garde Belgian-born, Paris-based artist has been turning wet clay into poetic, haunting and mysterious art imbued with a socio-political dimension. Elaborating innovative techniques, his nomadic work style has taken him to various ateliers in Monterrey, Miami, Sèvres, Nice, Rome or The Hague. Now following its world premiere in France at La Piscine museum in Roubaix last spring, his 17 new hybrid animal sculptures covered in multiple stunning glazes – where one false move in the kiln could force him to begin all over again – are on display in his exhibition “Bestiarium” at Almine Rech gallery in Brussels until July 30, 2022.

How did “C’est dans ma Nature”, a seminal piece dating back to 2001, inspire this exhibition?

That’s a social critical artwork I made 20 years ago during a very difficult political situation in the Paris suburbs. It’s a very complex piece that I made for a social housing project.

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We were going to repair damaged buildings by restoring them with ceramic bas-reliefs, but at the last minute, the city of Aulnay-sous-Bois got cold feet. I made a series of brick walls on wheels that could move, with the idea that symbolically walls can move. Is society closed or can borders move? And the theme of the artwork was insects, where the big question is what are you as an animal? Are you a flea, a wasp, a cricket, a butterfly? It's a kind of symbolic token that explains how you see your life. Are you a working bee or are you a scorpion? For my new show "Bestiarium", I've been making lots of animal sculptures where it's never about the animal, but about what the animal says about humans, a little bit like the French fairy tales of La Fontaine, where the animal is in fact a representation of human behavior.

"The Dead Fly" resembles a human...

Exactly, it looks so human. She's almost got women's legs, just two legs and not six, her face looks almost as if she's wearing a mask. The dead fly is a memento mori. It's the end of life, it's the idea of disease, but also the idea of fun. In French, you have "gisants" [tomb effigies], sculptures that you've got in religious buildings of people who are dead lying on top of their sarcophagus. Some are almost funny and some are rather naive, so they've got very different characters. For all my 17 animal sculptures, you could almost say that they are different visions of human existence.

Do each of your animal sculptures evoke a particular fable?

No, they're not illustrations. They could be the start of a fable you construct yourself. I didn't want to tell illustrative stories. I wanted to leave a lot of things open. The interpretation of these animals has to be open. You've got to feel them more than understand them as an analysis of a theme. You've got to let the emotions come over you when you look at them.

What new techniques did you use to create these animal sculptures?

Normally I work a lot with coils, but these new sculptures were first sculpted solid and then hollowed out. That was a very new way for me to work, like a sculptor who takes a block of something and then carves it. Also using WhatsApp, Zoom, screenshots and sending maquettes was new for me. It was very strange to work when we were separated by COVID-19. I had to try and keep the studio running, even when everybody was under lockdown. The guys at Struktuur 68 atelier in the Netherlands prepared the wet clay and then once I could travel there, I had a whole bunch of stuff ready for me to work on. I went to the Netherlands several times and each time I would work like crazy every day for a month and a half to finish the sculptures.

Tell me about the enamels you used.

In regard to the glazes, there's been a tremendous amount of experimentation. I am very happy with the way they turned out because I think the glazes on some pieces are really beautiful and they are all unique. These 17 sculptures are basically almost the only thing I did over the last three years. They are really one of kind, not part of a series that's reproduced. Each one has a different feeling to it.