ALMINE RECH

Johan Creten
Bestiarium

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“The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which.” 1

Belgian sculptor Johan Creten has created a series of seventeen animals in enameled glazed stoneware in this personal, tragic, and clever Bestiarium - previously shown at the Musée de la Piscine in Roubaix alongside a set of ceramic bas-reliefs mounted on ten moving panels. In 2001, Johan Creten made *C’est dans ma nature (It’s in my nature)* a project that renovated the facades of the housing projects in the city of Aulnay-Sous- Bois. In this project, collaborating with students from the local art school as well as high school students, he imagined a series of sixty-one bas-reliefs in sculpted sandstone with human and animal designs. Depicting mainly insects — bees, wasps, flies, butterflies, dragonflies, grasshoppers, or beetles — he created an expressive group of artworks inspired by nature that was also an allegory of human relationships in a world adrift. From the Parisian suburbs to northern France, all these artworks relate the devastation of these former industrial centers and their social decline, the result of neoliberal globalization and the post-industrial market economy. The six bases of movable ceramic that accompany them evoke circus forms where the seated man becomes a tamed animal, suggesting that we are only powerless elements in a larger group that is beyond our understanding.

The title *C’est dans ma nature* comes from a fable in which a scorpion asks a frog to take him across the river. At first frightened by his venomous stinger, the frog finally agrees, but, in the middle of the river, the scorpion fatally stings him, and they both drown. When the frog asks the scorpion why he did this, the latter replies: “It’s in my nature.” This allegory ironically questions the human or animal character especially in terms of uncontrollable, toxic, and harmful behavior, asking who can be considered an ally and who may be a traitor deceiving us. The importance of animal fables is distilled throughout the artist’s practice, particularly in references to the Fables of Jean de la Fontaine or those of the Indian author Bidpay, who wrote the Panchatantra, a collection of tales and animal fables written in Sanskrit in the sixth century. The false naivety shown by the artist here, which is at the heart of his work, indicates that the animality that he summons in fact echoes the simple humans we are, stuck in our human condition. As the animal condition can reflect our own, many artists and writers have depicted themselves as animals, silent and awkward. From Kafka’s Gregor Samsa, who is transformed into a cockroach and serves as a metaphor for humans oppressed by capitalism and alienated by work, family, and their own identity, to Baudelaire’s albatross, a stand-in for the poet, whose “giant wings prevent him from walking,” 2 what would these beasts say if they could talk? What would they tell us of their doubts and anxieties?

The seventeen animals that Johan Creten has sculpted in clay, enameled, and then baked in fire seem condemned to endure their flawed essence: the boar is dirty, the fly annoying, and the snail lazily crawls along. Some of these animals, such as the dog or the pelican, appear withdrawn, with their heads down, unaware of the world around them. The toxic beaver keeps just its head out of the water, and the pink flamingo struggles to lift its neck, while the hedgehog sheds black tears surrounded by its food, or perhaps its excrement. The almost human fly lies on its back with its feet in the air. It seems dead or simply asleep, unless it's actually giving birth. The themes of death and contamination are frequently evoked here, in the form of spots and splashes that are reflected in the colors of the enamel, with their bases having absorbed other tones and shimmering hues. In this way, the hedgehog’s brown acorns have infected the bright yellow of the stand, the black paws of the hare break down into a rainbow on the turquoise base, and the snail's drool drips green

onto the purple ground. Ultimately, it's the animals' vulnerability that touches us most deeply, at the exact moment when they reveal their weaknesses. Some of them float, like the beaver, while others sob like the hedgehog, who imagines himself invincible and rolls up into a ball although his quills are hardly anything more than a simple pattern. Others seem exhausted, such as the flamingo or the dog with its curved back. Their formal presence also evokes hills, cliffs, grottoes, and streams — the weariness of the world and its nostalgia seem to be expressed here, as embodied by the dead, worm-eaten dog, covered with algae and moss.

The viewer could almost forget the great skill with which Johan Creten, a sculptor in love with earth and fire, models in clay and handles the enamel of his organic and living artworks. The deep meanings of his series reside precisely in the variety of gleaming tones of enamel that he uses, and this is indeed what makes each of these pieces unique and singular. Yet, although amazed by this technical brilliance, we will remember only the aura of these monumental beasts and the soul of these animal fables, where humor, melancholy, and cruelty are intertwined in a wild tango.

— Martha Kirszenbaum, curator and writer.

1 George Orwell, Animal Farm, London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2015.
2 Charles Baudelaire, "L'Albatros" in Les Fleurs du Mal, Paris: NRF / Poésie Gallimard, 2005.