ALMINE RECH

Johan Creten
Pliny's Sorrow

May 20 — Jul 23, 2011 | Brussels

VIDEO : http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnGkea8KnRA

The Almine Rech Gallery in Brussels is pleased to present a solo exhibition of monumental bronze sculptures by the Belgian artist Johan Creten.

PLINY'S SORROW is comprised of nine enigmatic bronzes, eight of which were specifically created for the exhibition. Creten, best known for virtuosic works in kiln-fired ceramics, particularly his flowering *Odore di Femmina* busts in terracotta, is also a master of lost-wax foundry casting in bronze, and this ambitious exhibition provides evidence of this on an unprecedented scale. Only one work, *Plantstok* (1989-2009), an anthropomorphic and primitive looking talisman in gilded bronze, is modestly sized. A replica of the artist's grandfather's planting stick, it is dwarfed by the other works — massive birds, exquisite Kunstkammer monsters, towering columns, a giant bench set between two flowering torsos — yet it too merits the term *monumental*.

The exhibition's title is borrowed from the largest work in the exhibition — an eagle-like bird, its giant wings stretched out and broken, its roughly hewn back hollowed out. The totemic monolith, at once heroic and melancholic, obliquely illustrates a passage from Pliny the Younger:

If having the pictures of the departed placed in our homes lightens sorrow, how much more those public representations of them which are not only memorials of their air and countenance, but of their glory and honour besides!

Creten's sculptures are neither monuments nor anti-monuments: the memorializing, restorative and triumphal power of *public* art, its ability to make us forget sorrow, remember loss and celebrate all that is glorious and grand, is at once destabilized and enriched. With each circling, readings abound, meanings proliferate. The eagle, a familiar figure in Creten's oeuvre, resonates with symbolic and political charge, and with pathos. Solid and imposing from the front, rising majestically on a classically turned base to a height of four and half meters and equally wide, yet seen from another angle, it is mere bulk, a fragile shell, abstracted and worn out.

The solid and the ephemeral, forged in massive, enduring bronze — this is Creten's most remarkable achievement.

The interplay takes several forms. In *La Mamma Morta*, a huge twisted column almost linking the gallery's floor to its vaulted ceiling is topped with a female torso. The reference to the Chénier opera points us in one direction, the death of patria or Motherland in another. Other columns bear exquisite sea monsters: a human-like medusa skin on one; a writhing, flamboyantly styled squid on another, its tentacles twisted in on each other. Another pedestal, *La Borne*, rises and twists through a potted history of Gothic and Baroque column design, before being supplanted by a blackened 19th century industrial smoke stack worthy of William's Blake's darkest and most satanic mills. In French, a borne is a boundary marker, while *La Borne* is a village in France known for its ceramics.

Through Creten's hybridized forms, the meanings, both private and public, collide and shimmer, marking borders not just in space but also in time, between landscape and history. This comes close to describing the overall effect that *Pliny's Sorrow* elicits from us as we navigate our way through it: you turn a corner and suddenly, what was hermetic and mysterious, opens onto a uncontrollable effusion of meaning, as references and registers drawn from natural history and art history pull us towards a shockingly new and profoundly human representation of the sublime.

Born in Sint-Truiden, Belgium in 1963, Johan Creten lives and works in Paris. In 2009 he was nominated for the Flemish Culture Prize. A Prix de Rome recipient in 1996, he has taught in the United States, Holland, Belgium and France, and his works are in public and private collections around the world. He exhibited at the Louvre in 2005 and the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature in 2008. His work will be included in the exhibition *Big Brother, l'artiste face aux tyrans* in Dinard, France, next summer.

This is his first exhibition at Almine Rech.