ALMINE RECH

Johan Creten
Jouer avec le Feu

Mar 23, 2024 — Mar 15, 2026 | Musée des Beaux-Arts d'Orléans, France

For his second exhibition of monumental sculptures, the Musée des Beaux-Arts d'Orléans invites internationally renowned sculptor Johan Creten to take over the public space and the museum.

The exhibition ***Johan Creten. Jouer avec le Feu***, the largest exhibition ever devoted to the Belgian artist, brings together 120 works (including eleven in the public space) and is divided into two fold, highlighting Creten's artistic evolution by entering his creative process for the first time, starting with the sculptures on display in the city, which visitors can discover at the museum through drawings, preparatory studies and variants. An artist working on multiple media, from ceramics to bronze, Johan Creten brings together forty years of production, writing the genesis of his work.

This captivating immersion offers an in-depth exploration of his work, revealing decades of inspiration and creation through his iconic works and new pieces. It also allows the public to get to the heart of the artist's work by taking fold in his reflections. After a first playful approach in the public space, they are invited to discover the long process of elaboration of the forms and the underlying themes: school violence, racism, intolerance, social emergencies.

The visitor's first encounter with Johan Creten's work takes place in the public space, where the artist takes over the streets of Orléans until summer 2025, with ten monumental bronze sculptures installed in squares, courtyards, parks and in front of the majestic cathedral. Alongside famous works such as the great *Chauve-souris*, already presented in Rome at the Villa Medici, and in Paris in front of the Petit Palais, the exhibition unveils brand-new fonts created for the show, such as *La Grande Sauterelle* and *La Mouche Morte*, whose imposing presence initiates an artistic dialogue imbued with ecological discourse. The exhibition contributes to the democratization of access to original works of art through « hors les murs ».

The museum's four graphic arts cabinets provide an insight into Johan Creten's creative process, bringing together unpublished drawings and preparatory studies in clay or bronze.

These 73 drawings, which are all avenues explored by Johan Creten, are compared with the preparatory studies, enabling us to follow the work carried out from the 1980s to the present day. For the first time, the artist is opening up his drawing boxes to reveal his long research on paper, which sometimes preceded the production of his most famous works, *La Chauve-souris, La Mouche morte* and *Les Gloires*, by several decades. They are accompanied by objects, models and studies in ceramics and bronze that reveal the deep roots of the artist's main sculptures, offering a unique visual record of his artistic development that has hitherto received little attention in exhibitions devoted to him. A group of ceramic sculptures completes this exploration, as you move through the collections in dialogue with the works in the museum. In such works the themes explored - physical and social violence, intolerance and racism - reflect the deep-rooted violence that permeated the artist's childhood, and are reborn in cathartic form in works such as *Odore di Femmina, Les Femmes sans ombres* and *Les Coqs*.

The Orléans MBA is inviting the internationally-renowned sculptor Johan Creten to take over the public space in an off-site exhibition, which continues in the museum to explore the long development of his monumental sculptures. From the ceramics he pioneered in contemporary sculpture in the early 1980s, to the bronze he began using in the 2000s, the museum brings together forty years of Johan Creten's work.

For the first time, the Belgian artist is opening up his sketchbooks to reveal the poetic and committed universe from which his sculptures spring. Drawing has long been the intimate, cathartic and secret part of his work, in which his bruises appear, but which constitutes an integral part of his artistic practice.

Cabinet Gaspard de Bizemont

This cabinet is devoted to two of Johan Creten's most famous sculptures, ***La Mouche Morte*** and ***La Sauterelle***, two monumental casts of which are on display in the Auguste de Saint-Hilaire garden and the Louis Pasteur park respectively. The two motifs appeared in 1996 in Rome, during his stay at the Villa Medici, first in an exploration of the fly, a symbol of decomposition, as in Dutch still lifes, then fighting with grasshoppers, in a metaphor for life and death. In Miami, in 2001, the grasshopper is transformed into a praying mantis, before the two insects evolve into separate subjects.

La Sauterelle (2022) embodies the vigour of youth, the spirited artist taking up James Joyce's idea in his *A portrait of the artist as a young man*. *La Mouche Morte* (2022) plays on the ambivalence of the term 'death'. From the first studies of *Gisants* to *La Mouche Morte*, the question arises of the 'death' that inhabits him. Is it deprived of life or simply crushed by fatigue? As is so often the case with Johan Creten, the two sculptures bring together the masculinity of this suggestively shaped grasshopper with the femininity of a fly with a protruding belly, built like Florentine architecture.

Cabinet Paul Fourché

This cabinet looks at the place of **writing** in Johan Creten's work, as a poetic motif and, more broadly, as a central element of the artistic project. Firstly, the titles guide the understanding of the works, which spontaneously slide towards a political and social vision. Then the inscriptions, sometimes taboo, give another dimension to the drawings, sometimes transforming them into pamphlets, sometimes into demands. The literary and musical references, right down to the poems engraved on the sculptures, recall the relationship between Johan and his dyslexic son, who found in books, their words and images, a refuge to create another world for himself. Some of the drawings are an assembly of words, inviting the viewer to create a poem.

Words take Creten back to a primitive quest that, from the outset, sought to tame signs in order to assert a commitment and explore the edges. In 1988, he used the beginnings of computer technology to draw pictures using bars and arrows, already suggesting the role of the machine in the creative process, which is confirmed today with artificial intelligence and the use of Instagram.

Cabinet Eudoxe Marcille

This third cabinet takes us back to the artist's practice, which agglomerates shapes and colours like **magma**, revealing the organic dimension of Creten's drawings. The images impose themselves, the technique adapts and the sculpture results from this long maturation of intertwining forms.

Here we find the preparatory studies for several works exhibited in the city. The studies for *La Mamma Morta* (roundabout behind the museum) show the artist's first idea of placing this suffering body on a man's body, before replacing it screw shaped base evoking the cycle of life. The studies for *Femmes sans ombre* (an installation exhibited on the 1st floor) express the genetic nature of drawing, which, by materialising an idea, gives birth to forms whose polysemy is constructed in an instinctive gesture before being delivered to the fire. *Les Colonnes Révolutionnaires - La Source* or *Les Lapins*, the large ceramic sculpture in the niche, sheds light on this process, which begins with sober thoughts traced in blue pencil.

Cabinet Gaudier-Brezska

Sensuality, sexuality and eroticism permeate Johan Creten's universe, as **proofs and trials of love** that create a physical and sensitive tension between the work and the viewer, as in *Vulve de roses - Odore di Femmina de Sèvres*, or, more directly, as a subject that opens up social issues in *Les Coqs* or *Les Cocks* (on this floor).

This cabinet reflects this relationship with sensuality, suggested in the silhouette of *The Herring*, which can be seen at several stages in its development. Creten's creative process involves making small studies in terracotta that he keeps in his pocket, sometimes for months at a time, forging a tactile link with the form that he will develop into a monumental work. In this room, the complexity of human desire is broken down into so many themes and techniques. *Les Glands (Les Preuves d'Amour)* embodies the ambiguity inherent in Johan Creten's work.