

PERROTIN

Johan CRETEN

Collectible DRY,
WELCOME TO THE STRANGE

July 2024

DRY



SCHIAPARELLI BY JONATHAN LLENSE

JOHAN CRETEN BY ALFREDO PIOLA - JASMINE JESSICA DE PRETTO BY RAFFAELE CERULO
MOUSTAPHA FALL AND SEYDOU SARR BY SPYROS RENNT - PINO PASCALI
KARINA ZHARMU BY FILIP KOLUDROVIC - LA JETA

COLLECTIBLE DRY ISSUE 26 SUMMER 2024

THE ROOTS

UK £ 14 - ITA/ES € 15 - D/F € 25 - NL € 20 - CH CHF 26,90

DRY



KATLIN AAS AND DURAN LANTINK BY JONATHAN LLENSE

JOHAN CRETEN BY ALFREDO PIOLA - JASMINE JESSICA DE PRETTO BY RAFFAELE CERULO
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MOUSTAPHA FALL, SEYDOU SARR AND LOUIS VUITTON BY SPYROS RENNT

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HARLEY AND LORO PIANA BY YUXIANG & HUIMEI

JOHAN CRETEN BY ALFREDO PIOLA - JASMINE JESSICA DE PRETTO BY RAFFAELE CERULO
MOUSTAPHA FALL AND SEYDOU SARR BY SPYROS RENNT- PINO PASCALI
KATLIN AAS BY JONATHAN LLENSE - KARINA ZHARMU BY FILIP KOLUDROVIC - LA JETA

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AMINA SECK AND CHANEL BY MARCO PIETRACUPA

JOHAN CRÉTEN BY ALFREDO PIOLA - JASMINE JESSICA DE PRETTO BY RAFFAELE CERULO
MOUSTAPHA FALL AND SEYDOU SARR BY SPYROS RENNT - PINO PASCALI
KATLIN AAS BY JONATHAN LLENSE - KARINA ZHARMU BY FILIP KOLUDROVIC - LA JETA

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HOPLY

PART 1

WELCOME TO THE STRANGE

Image ALFREDO PIZOLA

Style MONICA PILLOSTO

Starring JOHAN CRETEN

Beige and metallic thread cashmere crewneck with yellow contrasted jacquard **DIOR MEN**
JOHAN CRETEN, *Les Glands (Les Preuves d'Amour)*, 2010. Bronze cast.





Wool-blend twill blouson jacket **VERSACE**. Sand wool pants **DRIES VAN NOTEN**. Derby shoes **BOTH PARIS**
 From left to right: JOHAN CRETEN, *Éloge de l'ombre - Nr 21*, 2022-2023 and *Éloge de l'ombre - Nr 18*, 2022-2023. Glazed stoneware, gold luster.





Double breasted wool summer jacket and flared tailored pants **LGN LOUIS GABRIEL NOUCHI**. Cashmere crewneck **DIOR MEN**. Leather boots **VERSACE**
JOHAN CRETEN, *Pedestal*. Glazed stoneware.





Wool-blend twill blouson jacket **VERSACE**
JOHAN CRETEN, *La Petite Chouette*, 2016. Bronze cast.

From left to right : JOHAN CRETEN, *La Cathédrale*, 1992-2000. Bronze cast.
De Dode Vlieg - La Mouche morte, 2022-2023. Resin.
The Collector, 2008-2009. Bronze cast.
De Sprinkhaan - La Sauterelle, 2023. Resin.
Double Muses et Méduses, 2005-2019. Resin.
Sans Titre, 1998-2023. Bronze cast.
Génie, 2009-2010. Bronze cast.



Off-white curly blended virgin wool cloth jacket with peak lapel and patch pockets, and large pants **DIOR MEN**
Boxy tank **THE FRANKIE SHOP**. Rust leather flip-flops **DRIES VAN NOTEN**



Pleated unstructured jacket and pants **HOMME PLISSÉ ISSEY MIYAKE**. Boxy tank **THE FRANKIE SHOP**. Rust leather flip-flops **DRIES VAN NOTEN**. Bracelet **VERSACE**
Hair **RICHARD BLANDEL**. Make Up **THOMAS LORENZ**. Style Coordinator **RAISHIND SINGH GILL**. Style Assistant **AMÉLIE MARION**. Johan Creten is represented by **GALERIE PERROTIN PARIS**



Wool-blend twill blouson jacket **VERSACE**. Sand wool pants **DRIES VAN NOTEN**. Derby shoes **BOTH PARIS**
JOHAN CRETEN, *The Price of Freedom*, 2015. Bronze cast.

THE PHANTOMS OF OPERA

JOHAN CRETEN in conversation with DAVID HERMAN
Image ALFREDO PIOLA

BEFORE HIS SOLO EXHIBITION AT PERROTIN GALLERY IN NEW YORK, “STRANGERS WELCOME,” RUNNING UNTIL THE END OF JULY 2024, JOHAN CRETEN WELCOMED US INTO HIS VOLCANO, THE SOLFATARA, AN IMMENSE ATELIER IN A STATE OF “FUSION” SHARED WITH FELLOW ARTIST JEAN-MICHEL OTHONIEL IN THE HEART OF MONTREUIL. THROUGH THE LENS OF PHOTOGRAPHER ALFREDO PIOLA, WE STAGED THIS MAESTRO OF CERAMIC AND BRONZE ART AMONG HIS ALLEGORICAL AND STRANGE CREATURES, IN THE MANNER OF A GRAND OPERA, A GENRE THAT HAS DEEPLY RESONATED WITH HIM SINCE CHILDHOOD. IT WAS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THIS ETERNALLY UPROOTED FLEMING TO TELL US ABOUT THE ROOTS OF HIS POWERFUL AND UNCONVENTIONAL VISION.

P.	COLLECTIBLE	THE ROOTS	PART 1
48	DRY No.026	ISSUE	HOLY

“When I put together an exhibition, I don’t receive any support from the state, museums, or galleries. I finance everything myself. ”

The dramatic scope of your works is often described as “lyrical.” We have read in your interviews about your attraction to opera from a young age. How has this genre influenced you?

Indeed, opera has been a part of my life since my earliest childhood. The emotional power that a voice can generate... My father often listened to it at home, and sometimes we attended concerts. One of the first records I bought was the Russian piece *Boris Godunov*, incomprehensible music yet so profoundly moving. I especially remember the Italian operas with Maria Callas: *Tosca*, *La Bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*. These touched upon the sacred realm, piercing my heart. Even though I didn’t understand the context, the language, the storyline, or the origin, they hit you right in the core.

During our photo session, we noted how accurately you adopted the attitude appropriate to each silhouette, immersing yourself in the character of each costume. How do staging and narration feature in your work?

At the time, I wanted to be a director. I even bought a very large book with summaries of all the librettos structured into small chapters, which I still have. It showed how to tell stories in a concentrated yet precise manner. I often tend to group my sculptures in the same space, to make them interact. In the exhibition *How to explain the Sculptures to an Influencer?* at Perrotin, I placed my works on a stage. Some interpreted it as a *Commedia dell’Arte* platform, others as an Internet platform. It’s quite

amusing to see how the same word takes on a dissimilar meaning from one world to another.

The monumentality of your works, as well as their pictorial quality reminiscent of grand landscapes, evoke the architectural dimension of opera sets.

I have always been drawn to decors for opera. Even today, I hope to have the pleasure of creating one someday. Initially, the choice to pursue art was influenced by my taste for architecture and, by extension, for set design. Then there is the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the “total work of art,” where the idea becomes a cohesive whole. This aligns with my sensitivity to the intersections of painting, music, and literature.

With this appetite for architecture and decor, why limit your practice to sculpture? It seems there is still more ground to cover...

Indeed, I haven’t yet reached the end of the road... But time flies... Throughout these years, working with clay has primarily allowed me to create with limited funds. Becoming an architect requires a different economic structure. When I put together an exhibition, I don’t receive any support from the state, museums, or galleries. I finance everything myself. The exhibition with the Musée des Beaux-Arts d’Orléans, where a dozen of my sculptures are scattered throughout the city, cost me 1 million euros. So, many of these architectural dreams have been somewhat buried... Another reason is the time it takes to create my works. Thanks to *The Herring*, my 5-meter-high sculpture placed on the beach

of Beaufort for the Triennial, which will probably be swallowed by the sea one day, I achieved a dream, but it took over 10 years of work!

Does fashion inspire you with its ability to present its collections on a grand scale, almost substituting for grand opera?

Fashion, like art, is a mille-feuille. There are so many diverse environments and ways to express oneself. Without being nostalgic, I loved Karl Lagerfeld’s stagings, and then those by John Galliano, such as his extraordinary show for the Artisanal collection at Maison Margiela. Among current figures, I am drawn to the lyrical universe of Rick Owens, whose creations I hope to wear someday.

Is clay the most suitable medium for expressing your penchant for theatricality?

Could I have created these works with another material...? Did you see my performances in the Paris metro, echoing those of Joseph Beuys? They were extremely theatrical. It’s true that they had indeed a connection to clay since I moved around with my ceramic sculptures. I also had older drawings that depicted costumes. I considered using them in this context, but I didn’t dare to take the plunge. Would I have done it with something other than clay...? I don’t know.

What is the level of receptivity to this approach in contemporary art?

At the moment, I find nothing more depressing than contemporary art in terms of staging. When visiting galleries, one often ►

“However, at the moment, I am completely addicted to Instagram, and it is destroying me. I haven’t opened a book in months; I just look at images...”

encounters the same painting reproduced fifteen times, each canvas aligned at the same height under the same dull light, even though this doesn't prevent appreciating good painting. The rationalized, repetitive nature of these exhibitions ends up reducing art to the level of a product. On the contrary, I have always been intrigued by the work of Pierre Huyghe, whose exhibition at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice I am going to see. He has this ability to make his spaces come alive. The same goes for an artist like Jean-Michel Othoniel, who completely dramatized the architecture of the Petit Palais in 2021. Finally, in a much more minimalist theatricality, I would mention Robert Morris. If you saw the stack of books next to my bed right now. But more often than not, this aspect of your approach is taken away from you.

Isn’t the white cube format too unsuitable for your works?

Each time, I use it differently. On this matter, the gallerists Perrotin and Almine Rech have always trusted and supported me. For my recent exhibitions, I brought in curtains, had someone work on the lighting, and managed it all independently. However, there was a time when there was no place for me in a white cube! When I started working with ceramics in the 80s and 90s, this medium was still confined to the craft sphere and was a taboo subject for the contemporary art world. “Serious” institutions like the Musée d’Art Moderne and the City of Paris were mostly focused on minimalist and conceptual artists. Only places with a lot of history – a castle, the Renaissance rooms of the Louvre – were suitable for experimentation by hosting an artist like me. Today, it has become fashionable to invest in heritage sites, but 30 years ago, it was an act of resistance.

Even though you have mastered the white cube, your works continue to fully thrive in in-situ contexts. This is evident in the exhibition *Le Cœur qui déborde* at the Abbaye de Beaulieu en Rouergue.

Its title embodies the emotional intensity that emerges from the dialogue between the sculptures and the Cistercian architecture, set

amidst abundant surrounding nature. A book is planned to be released with Perrotin when the exhibition travels to New York. Another exhibition is taking place at the Domaine de la Garenne Lemot, near Nantes. It showcases my works in a 19th century manor inspired by the Villa Medici, from which the artist who built it had returned. A whole era... It remains true that in-situ allows for the telling of unusual stories and providing the public with new experiences of the works.

The dramaturgy of your works seems to oscillate between the tragic and the weirdness, as if Greek mythologies met Norse legends.

If you want an idea of all the building blocks that shaped me, you have to go back to the time when my mother made me read *The Trojan War*. While peeling potatoes, she would say, “Tell me a chapter!” Once we finished, we would move on to *The Odyssey*. But what I loved most were the fairy tales: German, Russian... Behind their great beauty, there was often a form of cruelty, with people being cut into pieces. I am from another generation, and my experience of the tragic also comes from television. I remember, as a child, secretly watching a series of horrific programs: one about World War II with its hangings, assassinations, concentration camps, and another about the Vietnam War with images of burned children and women under napalm. It became interesting when a director like Francis Ford Coppola created a link in his film *Apocalypse Now* between Vietnam and opera... On weekends, we were allowed to watch grand Hollywood shows with Fred Astaire. But this more positive theatricality is not the one I chose. Last night, I watched a film on *Macbeth* (a 90s version), which is much crueler, in the same vein as Italian verismo, tragic, extremely sad stories that always end in screams – Munch-style “screams...” – or suicide.

You mainly talk about programs meant for adults. Didn’t you watch any children’s shows?

Your questions are bringing back memories I haven’t thought about for a very long time...

In the 60s, a 10-minute series called *De Fabeltjeskrant* (The Fables Newspaper) was broadcast every evening on Belgian TV: even though my *bestiaire* owes a lot to *La Fontaine’s Fables*, there is indeed a resonance between my sculptures and these animal puppets that took on human roles, addressing political and social themes such as racism, hatred, but also morality.

This brings us to discuss your geographical origins, your hometown of Sint-Truiden in Flanders, at the heart of the flamboyant late Gothic style...

Sint-Truiden, I was only born there. My parents quickly moved to Tienen and then to Hougaerde, about thirty kilometers away, but such a distance at the time was equivalent to changing countries! I am indeed from Flanders, yet from an early age, I had this idea of *Naked Roots*, with the desire to be constantly uprooted. This was certainly due to my sexuality, which was taboo at the time, especially in a Catholic context. Being gay remains challenging even today. I wanted to be continually on the move. It became a way of life, hence the *Gypsy Clay* period during which I traveled from residency to residency: a Fleming in Miami, Wisconsin, Rome, with a base in Paris. I then developed this feeling of being an “outsider” to others, an observer of the world, of myself, of the tragic. All this to say that my view of the absolute cruelty of life, compounded by being mistreated at school, resulted in my great difficulty in communicating. And it was theatricality that allowed me to become myself, by putting myself in the front line! It’s interesting because no one has ever written about it. Apart from classical music and opera, these connections to weave between my work and these life journeys, and then all this TV series culture.

Have your travels to the other side of the globe enabled you to broaden your narratives to other mythologies?

Although I took advantage of these international stays to explore new techniques and local materials, books have remained my ultimate medium for extensive travel. I can’t fall

Wool-blend twill blouson jacket **VERSACE**. Sand wool pants **DRIES VAN NOTEN**. Derby shoes **BOTH PARIS**
JOHAN CRETEN, Le Grand Hypocrite, 2022-2023. Painted resin.





“My animal sculptures are now integrated into the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, they belong there!”

asleep without books next to my bed. However, at the moment, I am completely addicted to Instagram, and it is destroying me. I haven't opened a book in months; I just look at images... Of course, it helps me; it's a wonderful way to get my work known. But as for storytelling, it can be compared to the poetry of William Burroughs or a Dada collage: “you cut a book into pieces, put it in an umbrella, and you get words out of it.” The only story being told is that of the machine driving you to consume. After two hours of scrolling, I buy an antique from a guy in Milwaukee, and a teenager buys a new pair of shoes... How can you create memories from a narrative that is so disjointed? What foundations will the younger generation rely on to build their reference points?

With such a universe that is both figurative and abstract, introspective, and allegorical with references to myths and literature, and this relentless pursuit of an ideal of Beauty, all of this resonates with a movement rarely discussed in writings about you: Symbolism.

It's obvious! It's a very Belgian movement. It shows that there's more than just Surrealism in Belgium. Besides, I hate Surrealism. Symbolism reminds me of Khnopff. Do you know the Belgian painter Fernand Khnopff? He was my great idol. At the Beaux-Arts, I painted in a suit and tie with velvet coats. There is a ritual aspect to Symbolism. Khnopff displayed his works in a house he had built himself, where everything was created, including the clothes, the frames, and the lighting; it was all part of a whole. It must be said that he came from a very wealthy family..

Symbolism, in its depictions of archaic landscapes, exuded a form of timelessness that is also found in your choice of ceramics and the visceral connection to our origins (earth, fire), while cultivating a vision of the future...

This is precisely what frightens me about Symbolism; we see how it ended... Between the world of yesterday and that of tomorrow, there is the cataclysm. Recently, I was with some young people who laughed at me because I used Chat

GPT every day. We are indeed at the beginning of something, a real change...

In terms of transformation, how do you experience Nature's changes?

I don't know anything about Nature. As far as my animal sculptures are concerned, they are more related with *La Fontaine's Fables*... I haven't set foot in a garden in a year. Khnopff never goes out into his garden. And if he does, he goes out at night. Symbolists go out at night... One of the most profound experiences of Nature I have ever felt was in Arizona: the vast open spaces, the blooming cacti. That is something I could return to.

Yet you place yourself within the heritage of the Renaissance ceramic artist Bernard Palissy, whose favorite subject was Nature.

It is his Humanist thought, his radical commitment behind his art that interests me. That of the metamorphoses of Nature, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*! And then, his experimental work on ceramics, his reinvention of glazing...

With Symbolism, we also return to the question of “total art...” The collapse of boundaries between art and life, from the Nabis who intertwined art and decoration to the later Art Nouveau style. Yet, you harbor a form of aversion for decorative arts...

I have no aversion to decorative arts, quite the opposite! I am even surrounded by decorative works in my collections. Except that my objects are imbued with meaning. In ceramics from the Native Americans of North America, there is a dose of spirituality. This is not the case with an ashtray from a luxury brand. Belgian Art Nouveau is something that has greatly influenced me. What I refuse is to be confined to the ghetto of craftsmanship and decoration. My animal sculptures are now part of the collections of the Musée d'Art Moderne; they are in their rightful place! My small glazed stoneware *Points d'observation* are positioned in the Dufy room of this museum, and it works.

“Total art” also demands a more collaborative approach, provoking

encounters that can broaden your horizons both artistically and in terms of resources...

Indeed, the projects I have done with Peter Marino have given me a certain freedom. Some encounters have been revealing. With an art critic and writer like Colin Lemoine, we're moving forward... Besides, I love publishing; it's a form of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The same goes for video. With this 7-minute film made remotely during the health crisis with Gerrit Schreurs from archives of my exhibition *La Quarantaine* (Sète, 1991), we touched on something... It's a subject I should delve into more often. However, collaborations can become complicated, as was the case at the *Holland Festival* with 4 choreographers, 4 composers, and myself as a visual artist. You have to learn to compromise... And for an artist who lives solely from their work and does not want to become a business manager, it represents a real mental burden. I prefer to limit myself to the small teams with whom I create my pieces, here in Montreuil with my assistant Ruben Alarcon Renton, and those at the Struktuur68 workshop in The Hague.

Today, you welcome us to the Solfatara, this large studio in Montreuil shared with Jean-Michel Othoniel. What does this place symbolize for you? Is such a space conducive to future collaborative projects?

The *Solfatara* is a volcano located near Naples, which we visited with Jean-Michel a long time ago. With its sulphuric smells — if not of “suffering...” — and its mystical aura, it has been a significant pilgrimage destination since antiquity, one reason being the priestesses who foretold the future. Later, in the 18th and 19th centuries, it was on the *Grand Tour* route, the initiatory journeys through ancient Italy taken by artists, but also thinkers, collectors, from Goethe to Alexandre Dumas. We thought this mythical place was a beautiful metaphor for the name of our space. Firstly, for the “material in fusion” aspect of the volcano that we both explore, glass for Jean-Michel (with his use of sulphur, by the way) and clay for me. Secondly, because it can accommodate artists, accompanied by historians, patrons, etc. We are strongly considering developing it with a collective or collaborative logic. ♣