

**PRESSBOOK**

Johan CRETEN

*FORBES*

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## Belgian Artist Johan Creten Travels Globally To Popularize Clay And Bronze As Contemporary Art Forms

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Filled with double entendres and symbolism, a simple interpretation of Paris-based Belgian artist [Johan Creten](#)'s work is impossible; audiences must look below the surface to uncover hidden meanings about the story of man and the human condition. The pioneer in the revival of modern ceramics says, "To use beauty to talk about very serious subjects on a secondary level is very important to me. These hidden stories can be social, political or sexual, and these pieces open up slowly if you take the time to look at them from different angles." The tale of Creten's mysterious hybrid bestiary interwoven with plant life went on show at his exhibition *The Crossing* comprising an impressive 60 artworks – often with maritime references and ranging in price from €5,000 to €550,000 – which closed last month at the [Centre Régional de l'Art Contemporain \(CRAC\)](#) in Sète, a Mediterranean port in the south of France.

A former industrial fish cold storage locker, the vast space lent itself particularly well to his mammoth sculptures like the new *De Gier* vulture in resin and metal that greeted visitors upon entry, or *The Tempest* bird with tightly-folded wings and bowed head resembling an old, hollowed-out olive tree still standing and resisting despite the storms. The Villa Saint-Clair in Sète was in fact the site of his big break, invited there for an artist residency back in 1991 by French artist, curator and CRAC director Noëlle Tissier, who immediately recognized his talent, and now, 25 years later, continues to promote him. The successful sculptor has come full circle.



Photo Gerrit Schreurs

*Odore di Femmina – La Malcontenta*, 2015, colored glazed stoneware, 100 x 54 x 46 cm, unique piece



Photo Jacques Fournel

*The Crossing* exhibition at the CRAC in Sète; clockwise from top left: *Pliny's Sorrow*, 2011; *The Tempest* (resin), 2011; *Le Rêve de la Baronne*, 2011

The exhibition required two years to prepare as the pieces were sourced from 18 separate locations, and often take five, 10 or 15 years to create. “I don’t want to be pushed to make art for shows like a lot of artists,” Creten notes. “I do shows when my art is ready and when I feel the need to show, which means that I invest all my heart and energy into them.” A voyage through time, the retrospective traced his life’s work and his quest to make ceramics accepted as high art, ranging from his earliest sculptures to new pieces fresh from the oven.



Photo MPA  
*Why Does Strange Fruit Always Look So Sweet?*, 2014  
 gilded bronze, 305 x 114 x 102 cm, at the Jardin Exotique of Monaco within the framework of *The Nature of Clay* exhibition



Photo Claire Dorn  
*Orgy, 2013, glazed stoneware, unique piece*

There was the *La Bouche de l'Étonné* terracotta skull from 1991 that he bought back at a Christie's auction (as he insisted on including this piece from his first Sète show), *Clay Octos* in the image of dried stingrays with faces that sailors sold as devils of the sea to cabinet of curiosity enthusiasts, the six-meter-tall, 800-kg bronze *Massu III* totem and *The Black Pearl* immigrant head protruding from an open mussel shell contemplating birth, life and death. Many of the works had never left the atelier, such as *Bi-Boy-Black*, *Wasps*, *Wargames* and *Odore di Femmina – La Malcontenta*. Even entire series had never been seen before: *Draperings* resembling veils, *Glories* lacquered in pure gold referencing hope and the Holy Spirit, and *Columns* adorned with single or groups of birds set against a backdrop of Creten's own 16<sup>th</sup>-century Flemish tapestries.