

**PRESSBOOK**

Johan CRETEN

*Prestige*

*March 2017*



# Animal Instincts

A pioneer in the revival of modern ceramics, JOHAN CRETEN travels the world popularising clay and bronze works as contemporary art.

Y-JEAN MUN-DELSALLE meets the Paris-based Belgian artist



**B**irds, butterflies, bees, rays, squids, squirrels, monkeys – Johan Creten's world is populated by a menagerie of wild, sometimes-hybrid creatures. However, he's not interested in producing realistic representations of them, but in capturing their qualities and linking them to the central themes of his oeuvre: nature, the female form, human relationships, power, politics and spirituality.

Creten's clay sculptures – exemplified by works such as *The Vivisector*, owls that face one another in wisdom, like an assembly of Egyptian gods ready to hand down judgment – reveal different skins, determined by the glazes used, that crawl, shiver, blister, drip, scar and can be rough and messy – “forbidden things” in classical ceramics.

His works are shape-shifters in terms of form, medium and meaning depending on the viewing angle, light or context. Take

## PROFILE

for example his 4.5-metre-tall bronze *Pliny's Sorrow* that metamorphoses from an eagle to a cormorant, and speaks of the complex relationship between power and vulnerability; or the *Odore di Femmina* series of female torsos covered in individually crafted ceramic petals evoking human sexual organs that simultaneously trigger feelings of attraction and repulsion.

Both the visual double entendres and symbolism that pervade these works make simple interpretation of them impossible; audiences must look below the surface to uncover hidden meanings about the story of man and the human condition. "To use beauty to talk about very serious subjects on a secondary level is very important to me," Creten says. "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, continues in his latest exhibition, *The Crossing*, comprising an impressive 60 works, often with maritime references and ranging in price from €5,000 to €550,000. The show runs until April 17 at Centre Régional d'Art Contemporain (CRAC) in Sète, a French Mediterranean port. The vast exhibition space, a former industrial fish cold-storage locker, lends itself particularly well to Creten's mammoth sculptures, such as the brand-new *De Gier* vulture in resin and metal that greets visitors upon entry, or *The Tempest* bird with tightly folded wings and bowed head that resembles an old, hollowed-out olive tree still standing defiantly despite the storms.

The sculptor has come full circle. Villa Saint-Clair in Sète was in fact the site of Creten's big break, when he was invited there for an artist residency in 1991 by French artist, curator and CRAC director Noëlle Tissier, who immediately recognised his talent and now, 25 years later, continues to promote him.

The retrospective, whose exhibits took up to 15 years to create and were sourced from 18 locations, required two years to prepare. "I don't want to be pushed to make art for shows like a lot of artists," Creten says. "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."

*The Crossing* traces Creten's life's work and his quest to have ceramics accepted as high art, ranging from his earliest sculptures to new pieces fresh from the oven. There's *La Bouche de l'Étonné*, a 1991 terracotta skull that he reacquired at a Christie's auction (he insisted on including this piece from his first Sète show); *Clay Octos*, an image hinting at the dried stingrays with faces that sailors sold as devils of the sea to cabinet-of-curiosities enthusiasts; the six-metre-tall,



BIG GLORY AT HONG KONG INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

800kg bronze *Massu III* totem; and *The Black Pearl* immigrant head protruding from an open mussel shell, a work contemplating birth, life and death. Many of the works have never left the atelier, such as *Bi-Boy-Black*, *Wasps*, *Wargames* and *Odore di Femmina – La Malcontenta*. There are entire series that have 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 16th-century Flemish tapestries.

Born in 1963 in Sint-Truiden, Belgium, to a middle-class family. Creten saw art as a way to escape from the narrow-mindedness of provincial life. In the 1980s he studied painting at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent, but as a non-conformist gravitated to the school's unpopular ceramics atelier (Belgium at the time was enthralled by conceptual and minimal art), where he discovered clay – a damp, dirty, sensual and poor material that was looked down on in the fine-art world, but that immediately spoke to him. "Clay is a very loaded material because it's the earth we walk on," Creten says. "In a lot of cultures, it's called Mother Earth. It's sacred but at the same time it's the poorest of materials. It's basically human waste, so normally the people who work with clay are the dumbest and poorest: labourers, farmers, road workers and potters. God took clay and turned it into the first human being, and when you put this material through fire, it turns by magic into something very resistant and beautiful."

Paving the way for younger artists, perhaps Creten's greatest achievements have been to elevate ceramics from the status of craft to that of fine art, and to bring bronze back into fashion over the past decade. He was among the first to eliminate the boundaries between sculpture and ceramics, choosing instead to make a name as an artist instead of a ceramicist, and exhibiting in art galleries and museums.

"In Europe, when I started as a young



ODORE DE FEMMINA - LA MALCONTENTA

artist, ceramics in art was considered taboo," he says. "It was something for women or for applied arts, and you couldn't make a sculpture using ceramics because that wasn't done, so for years I was in a very difficult position, because nobody wanted to show my work. I've always only accepted shows that were about sculpture; the fact that it was clay was something extra. But in the last 10 years, there's been a lot of change: lots of young artists are now using ceramics. I love the idea that I'm bringing ceramics to Asia because it has been bringing ceramics to Europe for centuries."

Creten has certainly been bringing his work to Hong Kong of late. His 2014 *Fireworks* solo show at Galerie Perrotin in Hong Kong, which featured sculptures made from fired clay that speak to the explosions inside each of us and in society at large, took place as pro-democracy

protesters occupied the city and visitors had to traverse the barricades to see his exhibition. At Art Basel in Hong Kong this month, the gallery is presenting pieces from his *Glory* series. On permanent display are his works *Big Glory* at Hong Kong International Airport and *Gold Torso* at The Peninsula Hong Kong – both in Chanel boutiques. "The Chanel connection is through the architect Peter Marino, who's a fan and collector of my work," Creten explains. "He says that not everybody can go to museums, but when I show at a shop I can reach a lot of people."

Currently working on a massive fountain project entitled *De Vleermuis* to be unveiled in 2018 in Bolsward, the Netherlands, as well as two other public sculptures, Creten is also in talks concerning the acquisition of his monumental bronze works for private and public spaces in Korea.