

PRESSBOOK

Wim DELVOYE
Art Asia Pacific

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Restless Observer: Interview with Wim Delvoye



Portrait of **WIM DELVOYE** at his survey exhibition, presented by the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels, 2019. Photo by Odile Keromnes. Courtesy Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium.

Wim Delvoye dreams outrageously—some would say gratuitously—big. He lives and works out of a renovated castle in Belgium, with a medieval-esque moat surrounding him. He is known for his technically perfect, highly ambitious, and often controversial projects: the *Cloaca* machines, which scientifically transform the cuisine of the world's best chefs into manufactured feces; live pigs inked with drawings of Disney princesses and fashion logos, and hand-reared on Delvoye's farm in Beijing; and Rimowa suitcases intricately embossed with Persian motifs with the help of craftsmen in Iran's legendary Isfahan province. A neo-conceptualist at heart, Wim Delvoye combines philosophical ideas with an eye for new materials and impeccable craftsmanship, challenging existing infrastructures and hierarchies.

The Belgian artist's latest project is set to be his grandest yet: Delvoye is restoring four 18th-century Persian palaces in Kashan, a charming city with an ancient civilization in Isfahan. He currently has a team of craftspeople working on the restoration of the buildings—which were derelict when he bought them—with the intention of transforming them into a *kunsthalle* to show contemporary art both local and international.

Paul Laster caught up with the globetrotting artist at his survey show at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, in Brussels, to discuss his relationship with Iran.

What first took you to Iran?

I have a friend in Dubai who bought a house in Kashan, and when I heard the price I became interested. Kashan is so beautiful. I like the fact that the houses there are so historical. That's what's great about countries that haven't progressed; Kashan's been poor for more than a century now. Tehran must have been that beautiful too, but then they had the swinging '70s, when people renovated their homes. It has a kind of kitschy modernist architecture.

What's the first project that you did there, where you actually had something made in Iran?

For a long time I had wanted to incorporate metalwork into my activities. I was fascinated by this craft of hammering designs into brass, copper and silver, which is actually called driving—driving a design into metal. I had done all of the other things in metal—from casting and welding to laser cutting it. I'm a metal guy. I love metal, but I had never used this process of hammering, of driving into it. I had looked for studios when I had been in Istanbul and Morocco, but the best ones are in Isfahan. I went to see some craftsmen there and decided that I should use a soft metal. That led me to the aluminum car bodies, like the Maserati and Ferrari Testarossa, which I bought on the internet. I wanted a bought object, an *objet acheté*, not a replica. It's why I also bought the aluminum Rimowa suitcases and had them embossed with decorative motifs. Both objects are related to travel, to globalism. These works are also about speed, even though they took a lot of time to make.

In 2016, you were famously the first Western artist to mount a solo exhibition at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA) since the Iranian revolution. How did this come about?

There were already a few European artists that had exhibited there, but not in the whole

museum. When I first went there in 2013, the director of the museum asked me. A museum in China had asked, too, but I never heard from them again. I didn't take it seriously because I thought it was like what had happened in China. A year later the TMoCA director asked again, so I thought he must be serious and jumped on it. Then it was postponed, but I wanted to do it because it was such a challenge.



Installation view of **WIM DELVOYE**'s solo exhibition at Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 2016. Photo by Studio Delvoye. Copyright and courtesy the artist.

Did you have to self-censor your work for the show?

Yes, but I was self-censoring my work more than I needed to. TMoCA asked me to add the twisted Jesus sculptures, which surprised me. I decided to test them further and asked if they would show *Marble Floors*, which are made with pork cold cuts. They said since they are photographs, it's okay. But the Western press is always looking for a stick to beat them with. They wrote headlines that there were no tattooed pigs, which was very unfair. There were no tattooed pigs in my show at the Louvre in Paris also—they wouldn't show them there. So I did have to "halal-ize" my work, but less than expected in Tehran. I had to halal-ize it more for the Louvre.



WIM DELVOYE, *Marble Floor*, 2000, Cibachrome on aluminium, 110 × 198 cm. Photo by Studio Delvoye. Copyright and courtesy the artist.

Did you exhibit Love Letter I (1998–99)—an imaginary letter from Mohamed to a Belgian woman, Caroline, scripted in Arabic with potato peels?

No, but I had actually made that piece way before September 11 or any fascination with Arab culture. I made it as a commission for the Parliament Building in Brussels in the late-1990s. There were so many Muslims living in Belgium that weren't being taken into account. I originally submitted this installation of very objective photography, with just shapes on a white background, that was accepted by the jury. When it was hanging there, I said "you can also read this as a love letter in Arabic"—which caused it to no longer be welcomed. As long as it was meaningless it was good, but as soon as the politicians heard that it could be read in Arabic they rejected it. That was my first engagement with the mainstream media. It was in all of the newspapers, but it's really a local story. People in Belgium know it, but not in the wider art world.

You didn't just buy an apartment or a house, but several palaces in Kashan—why?

I've never bought a house or an apartment. I just bought these beautiful ruins in Kashan before I even went there, through a proxy. I was attracted to their geometry, to their color. They're extremely beautiful. But I was also, very early on, going to China and when

I was very young I went to Moscow and Prague, when they were just opening up internationally. I like the excitement of these closed places opening up to the rest of the world. I like to be a part of it.

Could you tell us more about the palaces—how do they look, what period are they from?

They're 18th-century Isfahan style. It's a typical style. Isfahan used to be the capital city of Persia in the 16th and 17th centuries. I have four beautiful palaces, but it's actually eight lots. In order to connect them I had to also acquire a lot of cheap little side properties. I recomposed them like they probably used to be. I like to be a neighbor of myself.

We've been digging under the courtyards to make modern spaces and we had to do some restoration to connect them, but we're going to do the majority of the restoration when we have a bit more security. We're not ready to buy windows yet.



Bani Kazemi, **WIM DELVOYE's** palace in Kashan. Photo by Studio Delvoye. Copyright and courtesy the artist.

Are you working with local craftsmen on the restorations?

Yes, I have a lot of people working on it. Many people can now send their children to school. I also gave jobs to Afghan refugees. There are so many more refugees in Iran than there are in Belgium, which is already a lot.

What's it going to be in the end?

It will be a little museum, just a little art center. Kashan has the quality to be something like Venice. When I showed at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection I read Peggy's diary and discovered that she went to Venice because she couldn't afford Paris. Venice wasn't as expensive; it wasn't such a big deal when she started her museum there.



Hosseini, **WIM DELVOYE**'s palace in Kashan. Photo by Studio Delvoye. Copyright and courtesy the artist.

What's your prediction for the future of Kashan, which has a great cultural past?

It's not just Kashan that has a great cultural past. You have Shiraz; you have Kerman; you have Isfahan; you have Rasht; you have amazing cities in Iran with very beautiful people. It's a very diverse society. The people from Rasht look completely different from the people from Shiraz, and they have a different mentality. There are so many layers and aspects to Iran. You can't say they are all bad people or all good people. The government must be doing something right to still be in power.

I hear that you regularly collect works by Iranian artists.

Yes, there are a couple that I buy often. There is one artist—I'm not going to say his name because I'm still collecting his work—where a couple of years ago I inquired about his new work and it had become much more expensive than I had previously paid for it. I asked the gallery assistant, who I didn't know, why it had become so much costlier, and she said it's gone up in price because an important Belgian artist has been buying his work. Of course, that was me!

There are two kinds of Iranian artists. You have the ones that are very clever because they went to art school in Paris or London and know how to be successful in the Western art world. And then you have another group of artists that studied in Iran, remained there and are a bit more authentic. They are the ones that I collect. They're not as clever, but they're really interesting. They're different from us.

Have the economic sanctions impacted the arts community?

No, I think it makes the artists more interesting. They've had sanctions for years. It makes them more creative than the Saudis. The Saudis have to import everything, even aspirin. The Western world is doing Iran a great favor because they've learned how to make everything.

Will you stay in Iran?

I'm not sure. I'd actually like to spend more time in New York or Los Angeles and just see what happens with these buildings. I know that I don't want to stay in Belgium. I'm longing for other countries. I've been this way all of my life.