

Subdued Beauty

A Retrospective of Berlinde De Bruyckere's Work

In recent years the work of the Flemish artist Berlinde De Bruyckere (Ghent, 1964) has mainly been on show in international museums and collections. Nevertheless De Bruyckere has remained popular in Belgium. In 2010 she received the Flemish Culture Prize for Visual Arts and she represented Belgium at the Venice Biennale in 2013. But the last solo exhibition De Bruyckere had in her country of origin dates from more than a decade ago. Around that time *The Low Countries* published a portrait of De Bruyckere: 'Innocence Can Be Hell' (2002).¹ Twelve years later the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art (S.M.A.K.) organised the first ever retrospective of De Bruyckere in her hometown Ghent. A slightly different version of *Sculptures and Drawings 2000-2014* travelled to the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague (28 February – 31 May) and to Kunsthau Bregenz in Austria (18 April-5 July) in 2015. The exhibition is accompanied by a hefty monograph.²

Sculptures and Drawings 2000-2014 begins with De Bruyckere's contribution to the Venice Biennale. The monumental work she created for the Belgian pavilion *Kreupelhout – Cripplewood* (2012-2013) serves both as the exhibition's starting point and its key theme. It was inspired by the city of Venice, the figure of Saint Sebastian and De Bruyckere's interactions with the author John Coetzee, who – incidentally – provided the artwork's title. *Kreupelhout – Cripplewood* shows the remains of a giant elm that lies fallen, bruised and battered on the floor of the museum. Its branches are bandaged. Coloured wax 'bark' peels off it.

This sculpture perfectly encapsulates all of De Bruyckere's themes, motives and sources of inspiration: metamorphosis, duality, the body (human, animal, plant and everything in between), skin (ditto), wounds, fragility which is also strength, defence, melancholy... De Bruyckere, however, never lapses into pessimism or fatalism; her works are of a sublime and subdued beauty.



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Trees have always inspired Berlinde De Bruyckere. *Sculptures and Drawings 2000-2014* shows, for instance, an older series of drawings of bleeding trees. It is particularly interesting to see these drawings next to De Bruyckere's more recent work. Every one of her art works inspires another.

Besides *Kreupelhout – Cripplewood* and the drawings, De Bruyckere shows entangled wax stems and branches in a pair of display cases (019 and 028, 2007). The two display cases are from a Southern French museum where they were originally used to exhibit pottery. Their patina shows traces of the past, of vulnerability. De Bruyckere does not use these cases simply to hold her sculptures; they are an integral part of the artwork. Their doors remain open. The cases do not offer protection. Case, tree and visitor engage in open dialogue.

It is a small step from trees to antlers. The enormous branches on their heads get many a deer into trouble; antlers can be physically impairing (becoming entangled with other deers' antlers during fights) or attract the attention of hunters. De Bruyckere presents antlers as fragile, hurting bodies of flesh and blood, and attaches them to the walls with heavy meat hooks. The most impressive of antlers, *Actaeon* (2012, which not surprisingly refers to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), lies on what appears to be an altar or a stake. Again De Bruyckere consciously chooses duality

here: antlers are, of course, not flammable, but the new wax skin on the other hand is extremely sensitive to fire.

The material on which the antlers rest wasn't randomly chosen either. The wood and snippets of newspapers and wallpaper all originate from the artist's home. These are traces of an unknown past. Besides the sculptures, the exhibition also includes drawings of human bodies that grow antlers – or are these antlers growing humans?

For Berlinde De Bruyckere models are never simply bodies. This is clear from the titles she bestows on her work: not Mary Magdalene, but *Hanne* (2003), or from the reference she makes to the Portuguese dancer Romeu Runa in her drawing *Romeu my deer* (2010-2011). De Bruyckere approaches her models and sources of inspiration with much respect and she often integrates their personal histories into her work.

She created *The Wound* (2011-2012), for example, after she had seen a series of portraits in Istanbul of Muslim women who show scars on their bodies, apparently without emotion. Their tumours were displayed on separate pictures, exhibited on tables and neatly kept in glass bowls. De Bruyckere's *The Wound* series shows wounds that are at the same time female repro-

ductive organs, symbols of female strength and new life. Horse tackle loosely frames the wounds, referring in turn to the taming of the horse and, simultaneously, its immense natural strength.

Sculptures and Drawings 2000-2014 does not fail to present De Bruyckere's famous horse sculptures. *Lost I* (2006) is exhibited together with two *Schmerzensmannen* (2009), as a counterweight for, firstly, the suffering and entangled human figures in the exhibition and, secondly, the supportive branches and trunks in the display cases *019* and *028* (2007).

The exhibition *Sculptures and Drawings 2000-2014* is clearly not the end point in Berlinde De Bruyckere's oeuvre. It is more of a temporary resting place, a status quaestionis that interconnects the artist's past, present and future.

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Translated by Stefanie van Gemert

1 Mark Ruyters, 'Innocence Can Be Hell. The Art of Berlinde De Bruyckere', in: *The Low Countries* 10, 2002, pp. 225-229.

2 Angela Mengoni, Emmanuel Alloa, Gary Carrion-Murayari, Caroline Lamarche, J.M. Coetzee & Philippe Van Cauteren, *Berlinde De Bruyckere*, Mercatorfonds, 2014. Available in English.

