

Mystical White Images of Man

On the Work of Johan Tahon

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[ERIC BRACKE]

His hybrid plaster sculptures with human features now attract the attention of the international art scene, but until the mid-1990s they had to make do with the love their solitary creator gave them. In his tormented sculptures, Johan Tahon (Menen, 1965) links the sculpture of Rodin, Brancusi and Lehmbruck to the present day. He also keeps the mystical flame burning.

Between Michelangelo and Rodin

In spring 2012, two sculptures by Johan Tahon stood in the middle of the former, now tumbledown, Cordonnier stocking factory in Wetteren (East Flanders) as part of a group exhibition called *Aangeraakt/Touché*. The light that entered at an angle through the saw-tooth roof caressed the crumbly white skin of these plaster sculptures. The artist inspected the result with a half-smile on his face and then took an approving look at the puddle on the grimy floor and the knitting machines languishing a short distance away. Photos and paintings by other artists were also on display amongst this evidence of the miserable conditions the employees until recently had to work in.

With hindsight, it was no surprise that Johan Tahon enjoyed the sight: he cherishes disordered workshop spaces as biotopes for his works of art. It is not without reason that he calls his studio his greatest work. And his sculptures are not in the first place independent objects. This artist has the urge to let his sculptures communicate by making them relate to their surroundings, the space and the other objects to be found there. In the book *Johan Tahon, Observatorium* (Ludion, 2008), which the artist gave me as a gift there in Wetteren, Wim Van Mulders observed that 'Tahon's successful exhibitions are like a life-saving re-creation of the conditions in the studio'. The works belong there like weeds on a verge, just as fundamental and natural, but more puzzling.

Before the sculptures were installed in the old stocking factory, I had become acquainted with the artist's pragmatic attitude towards his work. Tahon's sculptures are often unstable, fragile constructions with heavy round heads – and sometimes two heads – or oversized arms that move the centre of grav-

Fin (2014), plaster and wood, 64 x 100 x 340 cm.
Exhibition: *Adorant* at Gerhard Hofland, Amsterdam, 2014.
Photo by Gert Jan van Rooij.



ity dangerously far from the middle of the base. This is why the transport firm had received instructions to handle the works with care. Yet the most imposing plaster sculpture still emerged from the lorry in pieces. But then Tahon and his assistant appeared with buckets of plaster and water and started putting the delicate pieces back together again. They seemed not to be bothered that the result was not entirely identical to the original work. This was not a technical reconstruction of a sculpture intended to stand the test of time, but a healing operation by which the sculpture was reanimated in its new surroundings.

While they were plastering away uninhibitedly, I was reminded of August Rodin. The expressive surface of Tahon's sculptures, with or without drying scar tissue, displays a kinship with Rodin's unpolished works. Furthermore, some of the French sculptor's works also lean backwards dangerously, such as the bronze statue of Honoré de Balzac, one version of which is at the Middelheim Open-Air Museum in Antwerp. Rodin abandoned the traditional, superficial imitation of nature and tried to give his sculptures a dynamic, vitalist tension that was intended to illuminate some of its essential qualities. To achieve this, he usually asked his models to keep moving. In Tahon's work we also see a comparable urge to penetrate to the heart of the human condition, but he takes an even more unconventional approach. Tahon uses plaster body parts that he finds standing or hanging here and there in his studio and intuitively makes a composition out of them. He tries, even more than Rodin, to evoke man's tormented and wavering nature by means of extreme tension in the form. The distortions of his hybrid plaster beings with their unmistakably human features and the sporadic influence of African art are above all an expression of the state of the artist's own soul. In a 1998 conversation Tahon said: 'What takes shape

Adorant I & II (2013-14),
glazed ceramic, 32 x 29 x 78 cm.
Exhibition: *Adorant* at Gerhard
Hoffland, Amsterdam, 2014.
Photo by Gert Jan van Rooij.



in my sculptures is the existential question. I don't like using the word existential, but I don't know how else to express it. My sculptures are a mirror-image; when I talk about them it's as if I'm talking about myself. It's all about doubts and fears that gnaw at me deep inside. At the same time, there is something universal about the sculptures because they express fundamental questions with which I think everybody struggles.'

At the same time he said of the unruly traces of the modelling of the sculptures, which is also so typical of Rodin: 'My sculptures are not finished. If they had a smooth finish I would experience them as a lie. I want to express vulnerability and fragility.' It was this unfinished state that led the curator Jan Hoet (1936-2014) to make comparisons with Michelangelo.

Father

Johan Tahon was still very young when he became acquainted with the work of Auguste Rodin, Wilhelm Lehmbruck, Constantin Brancusi and Alberto Giacometti, four sculptors who have clearly influenced him. Yet artistic aspirations were not encouraged in the Tahon household. His forefathers were rugged fishermen from Northern France, but his father had climbed the social ladder and became a headmaster in Menen, where Johan was born. While he was growing up, the young and uncertain Tahon was burdened by his father's alcoholism. At the age of fifteen he started making sculptures, which he saw as gifts to himself. He later gave an indication of the personal significance of these pieces: 'They have an almost ritual significance in my everyday life, like totems and masks among primitive tribes.'

He sought refuge at the drawing school in Menen, more specifically in the sculpture workshop in the cellar of that dignified mansion. For this lonely, over-sensitive adolescent it was a magical place with a 'spiritual atmosphere' where the drawings of Rodin and Brancusi made a deep impression on him. Under the inspiring guidance of his teacher, he forgot the rest of the world while shaping clay.

There, in the cellar in Menen, where no daylight penetrated, Tahon learned to love traditional sculpture and has remained true to it to this day. On this subject, he said, in the book *Fragmenten, Johan Tahon in gesprek met Bart De Baere* (Art Box, 1997): 'To me sculpture is the only art form where a certain completeness is required, both physical and psychological. It takes you over completely, because you truly practise sculpture with your whole body. Dragging materials, working with weight, going almost to physical extremes. And psychologically and philosophically too. In fact a human can't give any more than that. That is why I find sculpture more interesting than other art forms.'

The first sculptures Tahon made were of modest proportions. In an open-hearted interview for the weekly magazine *Humo*, Tahon confirmed that the premature death of his alcoholic father, who would have preferred to see his son become an engineer, also signalled a turning point in his sculpture. 'I mourned, and tried to cope with his death, and I noticed that my sculptures had suddenly become completely different: they outgrew me, they became more monumental. All at once my relationship with my sculptures was like a child to its father. As if I had created father-figures, but not deliberately. Those sculptures were also reminiscent of images of ancestors, and one could even imagine they had a religious import – they became proto-sculptures.'

Grigory (Balm) (2012),
glazed ceramic, 47 x 47 x 95 cm.
Photo by Kari Decock.



Jan Hoet



Mediaan (2009), bronze,
H 5 m At Central Com-
mission for Statistics in
Heerlen, The Netherlands.
Photo by Judy Saget - van
Aken.

For a long time the artist continued plodding along in his studio, living out the romantic cliché of the poor artist who lives only for his art. These were meagre years in which he clung to his sculptures like loved ones and read the writings of Carl Gustav Jung, the founder of analytical psychology. During that time he also knocked together a bronze-casting installation in his garden. He got up at night to maintain the temperature of the furnace. It was there, worn out by a lack of sleep, that he cast his first bronze sculptures: 'It was precisely at such moments that I almost physically experienced the link, a sense of solidarity across the centuries, with such Renaissance artists as Donatello.'

It was meeting the museum director and curator Jan Hoet that was decisive in the international development of his career. Tahon recalls this meeting in his studio in late 1995 as if it were yesterday: 'It was ice cold, and it was just as freezing inside my studio as outside. Jan was extremely enthusiastic and very much impressed by my huge sculptures in plaster. We drank red wine that was too cold. ... A few months later I was invited to take part in an exhibition, *The Red Gate*.'

This exhibition was held in 1996 in the new depot next to the future Museum of Contemporary Art (SMAK) in Ghent, which was only to open three years later. Tahon's participation in *The Red Gate* brought him out of his isolation. All at once the art press in Flanders became aware of his existence and gradually he made a name for himself in the Netherlands, where Queen Beatrix revealed that she was an admirer, and in the rest of Europe too.

Partly thanks to Jan Hoet, Tahon was subsequently able to exhibit his work at international galleries and leading museums. Ten years later he had an exhibition in Istanbul. Getting to know this historical place, a crossroads between Oriental and Western culture, was a revelation to him and led to new technical developments in his oeuvre.

Turkey

In Istanbul Tahon was captivated by the renowned Iznik ceramics, and also by the ancient Sufi writings and rituals. In recent years he has spent longer periods in Iznik, a small town just outside Istanbul, where he also has a studio. The book *Observatorium* contains a section of photos that Stephan Vanfleteren took in Iznik at Tahon's request. In the most important centre of ceramics in the Islamic world, Tahon experiments by trial and error with the age-old techniques and with his kiln. What is unique about the ceramics of Iznik is that quartz is mixed into the clay. Quartz is said to have a beneficial, healing and sound-proofing effect.

Tahon initially made mostly small sculptures, often of children's heads with a white glazed surface. Later he also experimented with ceramic tiles that he fired himself. 2010 saw the inauguration of the renovated '*Palais de Belgique*', the present Belgian Consulate General in Istanbul, whose entrance hall now boasts a mosaic by Johan Tahon. It is a narrative work inspired by Willy Spillebeen's historical novel *Busbeke, of De Thuiskomst* (Davidsfonds, 2000). The book recounts the life of the sixteenth-century Flemish humanist known as Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, who was an ambassador at the Ottoman court. His native village of Busbeke (Busbecq) is close to Tahon's own native town of Menen.

Ich (2000), clay, plastic and insulation foam,
25 x 20 x 40 cm.
Photo by Bruno Cornil.



Most recently Tahon has been trying to create life-size sculptures using ceramic techniques. A foretaste of this was shown at the Istanbul Biennale in autumn 2011. This large sculpture was set up at the entrance to the Tiled Kiosk, a fifteenth-century pavilion with historical earthenware just outside the walls of the Topkapi Palace. Tahon also placed his own work amongst the antique Iznik and Sejuk ceramics, the first time anything like this had been done at the museum. In the meantime he has achieved major status as an artist in Istanbul. Turkish art magazines, newspapers and television channels regularly report on his work. He also attracted attention with a solo exhibition in the ancient Byzantine church near the Topkapi Palace during *Istanbul 2010 – European Capital of Culture*.

White is always nice

His experiments in Turkey have of course also had an effect on the oeuvre that takes shape in his studios in Flanders and the work we see there. At the exhibition in the old stocking factory in Wetteren two years ago, he installed a glazed white child's head in a cellar that stank of fuel oil and whose lights flickered on and off. The glaze looked as if it were dripping off the head, and the eyes seemed blind. This had a particularly odd and almost painful effect. The smothered emotion of this silent, gleaming sculpture had obvious associations with the choking present-day dramas of child abuse.

Yet the evolution in Tahon's oeuvre remains rather limited. For the sake of completeness it has to be said that he also briefly experimented with polyester. The choice of this material was more a matter of chance, when he had to transport works by plane and they had to be as light as possible. But regardless of the technique and material, the artist wrestles in all his work with the same great restlessness and emotions that had previously also occupied the great sculptors of early modern art. And whatever form his figures take, the one thing that always recurs is the human face. And the radiant white.

Map of the Universe (2009) and First Perseus (2008),
plaster, H 234 cm & 110 x 95 x 290 cm.

Exhibition: *Hemisphere* at Hagia Irene (Topkapi Palace), Istanbul, Turkey, 2010.



Tahon also remains an artist with a pronounced predilection for mysticism, so his interest in Sufism, which one could call Islam's mysticism, is no coincidence. During our conversation at the old Cordonnier factory in Wetteren he also admitted that the text the artists at the exhibition had been given by way of inspiration, called *Aangeraakt/Touché*, had definitely appealed to him. It made a connection between a line from *The Internationale*, the song of the socialist struggle, the Dutch version of which was written by Henriette Roland Horst in 1900, and the word 'touched', referring to a sensual experience of the overwhelming divine love that has featured in mystical literature from Augustine to Hadewych.

White, which symbolises light, fits well with the mystical nature of Tahon's sculptures. In *Observatorium*, Wim Van Mulders wrote: 'White is the wispy sigh of materiality as it dissolves into a reanimated dream. Tahon's white shows a higher state of being because it is the lightest breath of matter. A white sculpture primarily displays oblivion and solitude.' Tahon is known not only for his penchant for mysticism, but also his aversion to strategic career planning. 'A lot of artists nowadays are concerned above all with strategy: they work out rationally how they can achieve one success after another, as in sport. That's something I have never spent my time on,' he claims. I believe him. ■

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Translated by Gregory Ball

Semen (2010), plaster and glazed ceramic,
53 x 50 x 221 cm. Exhibition: *Der Traum des
Bildhauers* at Gerhard Marcks Haus, Bremen,
Germany, 2010. Photo by Rüdiger Lubricht.

