

Berlinde De Bruyckere, Joining Forces with Nature

Interview by Sarah Schug
Photographer Mirjam Devriendt

It's a busy time for Berlinde De Bruyckere, one of Belgium's most renowned artists. After solo exhibitions at Hauser & Wirth and Galleria Continua, she is now preparing a large-scale show at Turin's Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo as well as a group show in China, the result of a collaboration between Brussels contemporary art center Wiels and Tank Shanghai. Despite her considerable international success, de Bruyckere still lives and works in her hometown Ghent, where she occupies, together with her artist husband, a massive studio in a former school.

"I AM THIS TYPE OF ARTIST WHO WILL NEVER MAKE IRONIC WORKS. MY WORKS DEAL WITH FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS THAT I - AND A LOT OF OTHERS - ASK THEMSELVES."

Berlinde De Bruyckere in her studio in Ghent, which she bought together with her artist husband at the tender age of 23.



Since the beginning of her career, she has been exploring fundamental questions touching upon universal themes such as life, death, suffering, and hope with a clear but tender eye. While de Bruyckere's haunting works have always revealed a fascination for organic materials ranging from wax to animal skins, she has recently been moving even closer to nature, consciously setting a counterpoint to today's fast-paced world.

SARAH SCHUG: When did you decide to be an artist and why?

BERLINDE DE BRUYCKERE: I'm not sure it was a choice. Already as a child I was very busy with drawing and creating things on my own, without knowing that artists or art schools existed. It was a natural evolution. When we went to museums when I was at school, I was fascinated by art history. In my family there were no artists or art books, so everything had to come from myself.

Most of your works are sculptures. Why do you choose this medium to express yourself?

I don't see myself as a pure sculptor. I also feel like a painter. A lot of my works have surfaces made out of colored wax, which I apply with brushes, layer after layer. It's a lot like painting, except the result is not flat. I like that with sculptures and installations you can work in a site-specific way. I like my works to be related to places. I don't just want to make something in my studio

and then move it somewhere else. There should be a dialogue between the space and the work.

As was the case in your recent show at Galleria Continua?

Exactly. I was really touched by the gallery's so-called apartment space, five empty rooms whose walls still show remains of wallpaper and paint, making it look almost like a fresco. In a way, it tells the stories of the people who have lived there in the past. I wanted to connect with that and have a dialogue with each single room. My starting point was the basic necessities you need in your home: a bed, a table, a cupboard...

You also have an exhibition coming up at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin...

Yes, it's the most important solo show I've ever done in a foundation. It's more like 60 by 20 meters. There, it will be all about my salted skins project, which I am now exploring for the first time on a large scale. The idea goes back to a visit to a skin salting workshop in Brussels. When I saw this enormous amount of animal skins, I immediately felt this strong connection with war and death. They were all lying on top of each other, reminding me of a mass grave. Skin is something very symbolic and touching: one moment it contains and protects a living animal, and then, in the blink of an eye, it's without any value. I wanted to translate this enormous fee-

ling of loss into a physical experience. That's why the installation in Turin will be quite monumental, visitors can walk into it and be surrounded by it.

Where do you find inspiration?

There are no rules. Very often it happens accidentally. Take my work for the Venice Biennale, for example: the idea for 'Cripplewood' was set into motion when I was on holiday in France. I noticed a hole at a spot where there had once been a tree, and then spotted the uprooted tree lying in a field. It was an emotional moment, and it is this strong feeling of uprootedness that I wanted to translate into my work. Nature in general is a big inspiration for me. Over recent years, nature has become a partner in my working process. This is especially the case when it comes to my blanket pieces: I leave the blankets outside in my courtyard where I put them on the ground and hang them on tree branches, and then let nature do the work. I inspect them regularly and sometimes turn them. Some I will leave out for a couple of months; others over a year.

What do blankets represent for you?

Blankets stand for shelter and comfort, for intimacy and protection. After the process they undergo in my courtyard, they are partly rotten, stained and shredded. For me, these deteriorated blankets represent a failed society. Things are falling apart, and we're not able to fulfill what we promised.



Above: Penthesilea © Mirjam Devriendt.
Below : Anderlecht, 2018 wax, bronze, iron, epoxy H 103 x 163 x 137 cm © Mirjam Devriendt Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.





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The courtyard you mention, is it part of your studio?

Yes. It's a former school. I lived there with my husband and children for 25 years. I still have my studio there, but we now live in the city center. I think it was very wise to draw this line between my private and professional life. I have numerous assistants, and it got too crowded there. I work with assistants three days a week. The rest of the time I spend alone in the studio. The rest of the time I spend alone. I need time to reflect. The days with my team are very technical and physical, and I can't work like that every day. When I've been working on a sculpture for two days straight, I need to take a day to look at it, free my mind, and think of the next step. My production is not that high but everything is made here, by us.

You've had a lot of international success and exhibitions all over the world – why have you stayed in Ghent?

Mainly because of the studio. With my husband (who is also an artist), we bought the building when we were only 23 years old. It was really important to us to have big, permanent studios, which we didn't have to leave after a couple of months. I also feel quite attached to Ghent and especially my neighborhood. I travel a lot and

it's nice to have this base. It's located near the harbor, and it's a good place to get an idea of what's going on in the world. When I was growing up, the harbor workers lived here, and then it became one of the city's first immigrant neighborhoods. It's quite poor but also beautiful, because people take care of each other. It's where I grew up and I feel like I belong here.

You will be participating in a group exhibition in China later this year, together with a number of other Belgian artists. What are you planning to show?

The show's theme deals with elements from everyday life and how they relate to someone's inner world. That's why I chose the piece 'Embalmed Twins'. It's again connected to trees, which have become an important subject matter in my work. Two years ago I noticed two trees which were slowly falling down together while their branches were growing more and more intertwined. In the end, they collapsed together, like twins. I had them transported to my studio, and all of a sudden I had this huge piece of nature in front of me, full of dirt and rocks and insects. I see them as a sort of relic, in the same way the religious statues will be taken out of the shrine and carried around during the

processions of the Holy week in San Sebastian. The artwork creates the illusion that the trunks can be paraded during a ceremony.

In your work you repeatedly deal with heavy topics such as mortality and suffering. What are you trying to evoke?

My themes are heavy, yes, but in my mind there is always a certain duality. Even death and suffering include moments of beauty and hope, which I try to reveal through the use of delicate materials, such as fragile wax. Death is also a moment of tranquility and rest. We're currently living in a fast-moving world where any kind of information is available to us within seconds, and I think we need to try to protect ourselves from this a little bit. I hope that my installations inspire visitors to stop and sit back and reflect. I am this type of artist who will never make ironic works. My works deal with fundamental questions that I - and a lot of others - ask themselves. I want to create a dialogue about a taboo. Death is still a topic that many people like to avoid. Those who walk out and don't want to look at my work probably also tend to look away from these kind of issues in their private lives. There is no in-between - either you understand my works or you don't.