

Eric Croes: Playing with fire

Interview by Sarah Schug
Photographer Mireille Roobaert

The smell of coffee is in the air and soft music plays in the background as I enter the large, windowless studio that stretches out on the ground floor of this unassuming house in a residential street in Brussels' Etterbeek neighborhood. I am greeted by an excited wire-haired dachshund called Mammouth, named after the ancient creature because of its hair. The atelier, colorful and cosy but unmistakably the place of a hard worker, is where Belgian artist Eric Croes spends his days, religiously going to the studio just like others flock to the office.

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Sculptures from the exhibition 7 at Sorry We're Closed, inspired by the seven deadly sins, or capital vices.



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With his first solo show in the US and a successful stint at New York's Armory Show, last year was filled with highlights for Croes, whose career hasn't always been smooth sailing. Indeed, a couple of years ago, this all might have sounded like a distant dream. But at the age of 35, he decided to put all his eggs in one basket, and it has paid off, he tells me as he sips coffee from one of his own ceramic cups. "I said to myself, it's now or never. From one day to the next I gave up my job as an exhibition manager. I couldn't do it anymore. It drove me crazy to see artists having the chance to exhibit but still complaining all the time. I said to myself, I am no worse than them! At the same time, I had inherited a bit of money and knew I could survive for a little while without having to work. So I bought my first oven, turned my basement into a mini studio, and started working like a maniac." At the time of the first part of this interview, back in February, he was just preparing for 7, his second solo show at Brussels gallery Sorry We're Closed, which was scheduled to open on 21 March. Then the pandemic hit. Both the exhibition and this issue of the magazine were postponed. We met again, in a changed world, in late August, a week before the long-awaited rescheduled opening of 7, which would feature Croes's signature ceramic sculptures, always playful and often totemic in form, bursting, in typical manner, with a multitude of colors, meanings and stories.

SARAH SCHUG: This year has been challenging for everybody in different ways, to say the least. How did you arrive at the decision to defer the exhibition?

ERIC CROES: Back in March, we had already transported everything to the gallery and started unpacking. The plinths had been installed and the opening was announced for the 21st. We still believed

in it until a few days before. But then we came to realize there'd be a lockdown, and we dropped everything. We did consider installing everything anyway, so that it would be there just in case and ready for the reopening. But we understood it would take quite a while until that would be possible. Even now, the works are still in boxes in the gallery. I haven't seen my works in a long time. I'll only believe the exhibition is going through when I see it. It's like going on holiday - I only believe I'm actually going when I board the train. Tomorrow we're starting the build-up, and next week there'll be the opening. It'll be my last exhibition this year - there won't be anything else.

How do you feel about all that? What have the last months been like for you?

When everything was put on hold, I was frustrated, of course. I had been working on this project for a very long time. I really wanted to get the works out there and launch the accompanying book. With the outside world at a standstill, I went back to work right away. The pieces for the 7 show had left my studio, and I had room to work on something new again. Every day I'd come to the studio with my dog - he'd get his daily walk, and I could work. I did this every day for two months. I had time for things that I'm normally too busy for, like testing new colors. Although the atmosphere outside was very heavy, it was a very productive time in my studio.

The exhibition at Sorry We're Closed was probably not the only one that had to be postponed...

Exactly. I was supposed to exhibit at FRAC in Reims, for example. The show was moved an entire year, which made me rather sad. After a whole year, I will usually have moved on to something completely



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different. I am used to starting and finishing a project before moving on to the next one. That's not possible now. But I don't want to complain. I am very lucky. I am healthy, and thanks to the sales I made in Miami in December, I don't have to worry about the financial side of things. Plus, the gallery continued to sell works during the lockdown - a big part of the show already sold in advance.

In these unprecedented times, some people weren't capable of staying creative and productive. How did you do it?

I don't read the news. Even in normal times I only read very little. It makes me anxious. I will hear everyone talking about it anyway.

Did the corona crisis have an impact on your work?

Yes. I started doing sculptures covered in ex-votos, or lucky charms. Take this little gorgon, for example. It's something that the Greeks and Romans would install above their doors: a Medusa head was supposed to keep the enemies away. It was as if I was trying to protect myself from what was happening outside. I also made five stools inspired by a movie I watched during confinement, one of my very favorite films which I rewatch every year: The Ten Commandments from 1956. The set design is very kitsch and crazy, especially the interiors of the Egyptian apartments. It really fascinates me.

7, your exhibition at Sorry We're Closed, shows ceramic sculptures inspired by the seven deadly sins, or capital vices. What fascinated you about this concept? Did you grow up Catholic?

No, not at all. I have been intrigued by this topic since I was a teenager. It mainly appeared on my radar because there are a lot of artists who have used this theme in their work, such as Hieronymus Bosch

and Otto Dix. I find this list of sins quite funny. It's very outdated but also misunderstood, I think. The word 'capital' comes from the Latin 'caput', which means 'head'. So they're sins that we think of... because if they were actually capital, deadly sins, why wouldn't murder be mentioned? They're sins that are not so serious but can lead to the actual deadly sins.

Is this your usual way of working, to dive deep into a topic?

Yes. I choose a subject, and then I do a lot of research. I like finding out about all these stories and everything you come across when exploring a certain topic. In the process, I add a lot of details and aspects to my works that I encounter on the way. For this project I am working with a notebook that I have been filling for two years. I always have several notebooks that I nurture in parallel: one notebook per project.

Each of your sculptures represents one of the seven sins and includes a multitude of details. Does every element have a story?

I wanted the sins to become personalities, avatars. I had come across this animated TV show, a bit like Pokemon, which revolved around the story of the Yokaï, Japanese demons who influence people's lives. The show was awful but I found the idea intriguing. You see people fighting, with the Yokaï above their heads, making them argue with each other. I started reading about it and realized it's a concept that has existed for 2,000 years. I bought quite a few books on the topic. I also read a lot about the language of flowers, which you can see pop up in the sculptures as well. I learned that there is a symbolic meaning attached to every flower. It comes from a tradition of the Ottomans, who used flower bouquets to send military messages. It's something very precise and full of codes.

You're particularly known for your sculptures in totem form, and from time to time they are exhibited outdoors. Is this where they belong?

I don't mind if they stand outside or inside. What I like is when people live with my pieces, when they use them. You can put a candle on top, or a plant, let moss grow on it... I love it when people let them come alive a bit - at least that's what I do at home.

You started out with painting, originally. What made you change to ceramics?

I painted for almost 20 years. I took painting classes as a teenager, then studied sculpture at La Cambre, and after I graduated I continued to paint, mainly large-format watercolors. But I didn't find the forms I was looking for. There came a point at which I stopped everything.

You wanted to give up art entirely?

Yes. I wasn't convinced anymore. To make art at all, to participate in exhibitions... I had done some group exhibitions but without much conviction. Then I took up ceramics again, which I had already dabbled in as a teenager at the local youth centre. I started attending a ceramics evening course at the school in my neighborhood.

Did you realize straight away that you wanted to use this technique for your artistic practice?

Not at all. All I wanted was to clear my head. And then it turned out to be my thing and I became this monomaniac! It was definitely a significant turning point for me. After a while, during the first year, I started to feel that this was something I had been looking for. The colors, how you can't really be precise... You can't meticulously choose and control everything, there is a moment where you have to let go. It's something I never managed when painting. I worked in a very policed way. I just couldn't let go, but in ceramics I found that, and I needed it.

Ceramics and textile are currently making quite a revival - why do you think that is?

There's definitely a trend. I think there have been so many prints, and pieces which were produced in an almost industrial way, that people now feel the need to hold on to something made by hand, which is made just for them. I feel that people want to be a bit more conscious about what they buy, and yearn for something more tangible and down-to-earth.

How do you navigate the at times tricky relationship between art and crafts?

I am always flirting with it: the utilitarian aspect and contemporary art. The connection doesn't bother me at all. I know I am making art. What is very important is the way you present it. I only show my work in galleries, not in shops or hotels. This is my way of making sure it's understood in the way I want it to be understood.

Was it difficult to learn the technique? What are the challenges of the material?

Having studied sculpture, modelling came easy. The hardest part is the glazing. It takes a lot of time and many tests to achieve something rich and precise, and to get the result you want. When the piece comes out of the oven, it's never exactly the way you imagined it. It drips, the color changes... It was a very long investigation. What's so interesting about glazing is that the basic recipe can be infinitely changed. Every time I make a glazing I discover something new. I find it magical. All these works that go through fire, through an oven, they have a magical component. It's a transformation that almost feels mystical.

When did you know you wanted to be an artist? How did you discover art for yourself?

I already wanted to be an artist when I was four years old. I never thought about anything else. It was always clear. As a child I saw my father's mother paint: she made these small Claude Monet replicas, and it completely fascinated me. I also remember seeing a TV show about Leonardo Da Vinci, which made quite an impression on me. As a kid I had this image of an artist in a beret, on a horse, on the edge of a mountain... When I was six, my mom found a drawing class for me and it made me the happiest child.

You're quite active on Instagram. Do you find it beneficial to your work?

It's a great way to test-run my work. I do that a lot, actually. It reassures me when I post a glimpse of a sculpture and get a reaction, lots of likes coming in and people sending you messages. When you've spent three weeks all alone in your studio, doubting yourself, then this is a good feeling. It was especially helpful during confinement. But I never let anything get outside the studio walls that I am not 100% sure about. That's also why I never work at the last minute. I always want to have enough time so that even when I think I'm done I still have time to change or improve something.

Looking ahead, how do you feel about the future? How do you see the pandemic changing the art world?

I feel both optimistic and pessimistic. Maybe masks will stay with us forever? I don't know. What worries me is the art fairs. If they don't restart one day, then a lot of things will need to change, because they have become such a big factor for selling art over the years and galleries depend on them. But I don't think the art market will crumble. I think it will all work out somehow. With the rise of the art fairs, people have been frequenting galleries less and less - maybe this trend will be reversed? I definitely don't have the impression that everything will be different, as some people thought or hoped. I don't see anybody wanting to slow down. One thing is for sure: it's not the same when you look at art online. You can't see the sizes, the textures. Exhibitions and art remain something physical.



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