

Wim Delvoye

Interview by Sarah Schug
Photographer Mireille Roobaert

Even before you enter Wim Delvoye's studio in Ghent, his signature mix of historical art references and pop culture greet you: a cheeky nameplate with a spoof version of the Walt Disney logo - the Belgian artist shares the same initials - sits on an intricate Gothic-style gate. The playful combination of highbrow and popular culture, the profane and the sacred is a continuous thread in his wide-ranging oeuvre.

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Gothic style plays a big role in the oeuvre of Belgian artist Wim Delvoye; here pictured at the Gothic-inspired entrance gate of his Ghent studio.





Above : XXXXXXXX
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Born in the small Flemish town of Wervik, Delvoe is one of Belgium's most prominent artists. Works like 'Cloaca', an installation replicating the digestive system to produce real faeces, or his stainless steel sculptures rethinking dump trucks as Gothic cathedrals have been shown extensively, not only in his home country but around the world. Earlier this year, the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels dedicated a substantial solo show to the artist, a fascinating overview of his career so far and his biggest exhibition to date. In spite of the fact that he commutes between Belgium and Brighton, with one foot in each country, Delvoe's Ghent studio buzzes with activity (he employs numerous assistants) and is a veritable treasure trove for art enthusiasts. Large storage boxes stand next to the artist's famous twisted crucifixes and Indonesian colonial-style woodcarvings he bought at auction. On his desk early original sketches of Notre-Dame by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc are sprawled out, which Delvoe shares with a child-like enthusiasm. We met the artist to talk about his potential involvement in the restoration of Notre-Dame in Paris, his plans for an art center in Iran, and his rather complicated relationship with his homeland.

SARAH SCHUG: At your recent exhibition in Brussels, you showed pieces from a new series for the first time: digitally carved marble reliefs depicting scenes from computer games. What was the idea behind it?

WIM DELVOYE: I find today's computer games extremely fascinating. It's a whole new ball game. Millions and millions of young people around the world cannot be wrong! I myself play games such as 'Doom'. For this series, I chose scenes from the most iconic games: 'Fortnite' and 'Counterstrike'. The subject has been on my mind for a long time: 10 years ago I made classical paintings of these scenes, but it didn't seem quite right. The difference between the computer screen and the canvas wasn't striking enough.

Why did you choose to work with marble instead?

I didn't want to use color. I wanted to work with white while avoiding the cleanness of metal and the spectacular colors of stone. Carrera marble was perfect: it has just the right amount of cloudiness. It also has symbolic power – Michelangelo worked with the same marble, from the same region. I have been studying reliefs for a long time and went to see them in museums all over the world. But this is a different kind of challenge. We had to find the right tool to transform a 3D image with an endless number of colors and lines into a colorless relief without losing the vast amount of detail. It's a very cold work; there is no interference by human hands, which is the whole point. It's also a play with chance, because we really do play these

games before we choose the right image, and the displayed statistics are real. I like to blend different worlds, in this case a modern subject matter with an ancient material.

Do you think computer games are also works of art?

Somehow, yes. They are alive, which you can't say about a lot of art these days. It is extremely impressive to watch these gamers play. When you see how rapidly computer games are developing, I get the impression that art is lagging behind. Look at the paintings of today: do they truly tell you something about 2019? Do they really embody the spirit of today?

Do you constantly try to stay up-to-date with today's innovations?

It's not an obligation, I just love doing it. Sometimes I'm actually ahead of technology, and I have to wait until the right tools come along to realize my ideas. I was already sampling images before Google existed; I just had to go to a bookshop to search for them. It's so much easier now. Never before has there been so much innovation when it comes to materials and how to shape them. For example, the invention of electricity meant a revolution in the way tattooing was done. You can do so much these days; there are no excuses anymore. One of my secrets is that I employ very young people, who always keep me up-to-date.

After the recent fire at the Notre-Dame in Paris, an icon of the Gothic period, your name was one of the first to be mentioned in the context of its reconstruction. Are you working on a proposal?

I have been collecting everything to do with this building for more than fifteen years. All others putting their names in the hat are opportunists. I am genuinely interested in Gothic and don't do it for the media attention. I went to Rouen just a week ago to visit the cathedral there, which is stunning. Technically you cannot apply anywhere yet because there hasn't been an official open call.

Some people would like to see the cathedral restored exactly as it was, others favor a new take on the building. What's your opinion?

When Eugène Viollet-le-Duc was chosen to restore Notre-Dame in the 19th century, he went beyond restoring the building to its previous state. It was during the industrial revolution, a time when people felt very confident. I think the fact that today the majority seems to root for an exact restoration is proof of a lack of confidence in our own skills.



Delvoe's studio is a veritable treasure trove for art enthusiasts, filled with his own artworks as well as numerous gems he has acquired over the years.

**Why are you so fascinated by the Gothic period?
Your work contains numerous Gothic references ...**

I just find it amazingly beautiful. The crusades were just over, and all of a sudden this incredible style emerged. It wasn't just interesting visually, but also in terms of engineering, how they managed to build enormous constructions, very high buildings, yet creating the typical Gothic shapes that are very much in touch with plants and nature. I think Gothic is not just a period, it is a mentality. A lot of things can be Gothic, from pop music to novels. I hope I can contribute to carrying on its legacy. So far, I only have pergolas to my name. One day I would love to create an entire building, maybe as a commission by a private person. But in Belgium you need all sorts of permits. I'm not even allowed to do it in my own garden.

Are you referring to the sculpture park you wanted to build around your property in Melle?

Yes. It's a piece of land with a couple of old houses, including one that looks a bit like a castle. They are surrounded by a gigantic garden of several hectares as well as two moats. It's the perfect location for my sculptures, especially as the moats would protect them from theft. But I simply cannot get permission to do it. Like the Notre-Dame example actually, it shows how incapable we Europeans have become. We cannot even take care of our own past anymore. We are no longer organizers who get things done.

Is that why you are planning to carry out the project in Iran?

Exactly. I feel welcome there. People are not confrontational. In Belgium, they look for problems and penalize you. The project has taken a new shape now, because the landscape and fauna in Iran are completely different. The new

location is in the desert, with an extreme climate and very dry ground that is difficult to work with. Everything has to be adapted and more of the pieces will be placed indoors. But my architects are enthusiastic. It will be a museum-like complex with a little restaurant and a hotel. Of course we also have to take the local culture into account: for instance, the toilets can't face towards Mecca.

Iran is a country where cultural creation is often subjected to governmental censorship. How do you deal with this and what is your impression of the local art scene?

Interestingly enough, a lot of Iranian art is political, and the artists are masters at voicing criticism in a very subtle way. The art scene in Iran is very much alive and extremely well informed. For example, there is currently an exhibition about contemporary Iranian art in Paris, and although only a few of them manage to travel to France, every Iranian artist knows exactly what is happening. It's a much-discussed subject. Everyone goes to the local galleries to read the exhibition catalogue. It reminds me of Europe before the arrival of the Internet. Today, you can learn about everything in a few seconds, and there is no peer group anymore.

You seem to have a difficult relationship with your home country...

I cannot blame my parents for me being born Belgian, but I am always a bit embarrassed when people ask me where I'm from. These days, it seems as if the strange, drawn-out Belgian conflict between North and South, Flanders and Wallonia is taking place in other countries. You could call it the Belgification of the world: just look at Spain or Scotland. Besides, not even 10% of the numbers in my phone are Belgian...



'La danse' by Raoul Larche twisted by Wim Delvoe.
First, the artist 3D-scanned the original statue, before submitting it to digital changes and finally casting it in bronze with utmost respect for the tradition.
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