Belgian Artist Johan Creten Has Been Turning Clay Into Art For The Past 25 Years

Eagles, owls, roosters, rays, squids, squirrels, monkeys, butterflies, bees – Johan Creten’s world is populated by a veritable menagerie of mythical wild creatures. However, he’s not interested in imitating nature, producing a realistic representation of the animal kingdom, but in capturing the qualities with which they’re commonly associated and linking them to the central themes of his oeuvre – nature, the female form, human relationships, power, politics and spirituality – such as the monumental owls in The Vivisector that face one another in all their wisdom like an assembly of Egyptian gods ready to hand down judgment. Sometimes covered with a smooth, velvety glaze or alternating grainy parts and zones glistening with a metallic radiance or iridescence, sometimes giving rise to a multitude of
colors or conversely to monochromes, sometimes carved from a single block or composed of countless clustered elements, his clay sculptures show off different skins determined by the glazes used: opaque, transparent, translucent, soft, colored or plain.


Creten’s sculptures are veritable shape-shifters in terms of form, medium and meaning depending on the viewing angle, light or context in which they’re exhibited. Take for example his 4.5-meter-high bronze Pliny’s Sorrow that metamorphoses from an eagle to a cormorant and speaks of the complex relationship between power and vulnerability, hinting at ecological disaster; in an image that’s at once heroic and melancholic, the oil-soaked bird with outspread, broken wings dreams of a world devoid of oil spills. In La Communauté, anthropomorphic beehives illustrate his vision of a constructive, positive society that works together for the greater good with bees that enter and leave by the eyes and mouth, although when seen from a different angle, the insects seem to invade this utopian community and break up the established order. The Odore di Femmina series of female torsos covered in individually-crafted ceramic petals evoking human sexual organs simultaneously triggers feelings of attraction and repulsion. Never obvious, a simple interpretation is impossible; audiences must look below
the surface to uncover hidden meanings and complex metaphors for the story of man and the human condition.

Born in 1963 in Sint-Truiden, Belgium, to a middle-class family, Creten saw art as a way to escape from the narrow-mindedness of provincial life. From an early age, he had access to an incredible art collection, as for years he frequented the Leonards, an older couple that taught him about the antiques that filled their house. He recalls, “When I was a kid, it was clear I was an artist and an outsider in that community. I was a skinny, small boy who loved classical music, books and art, so at school I got beaten up until the moment I understood that I could make things. At one point, when a bully was going to hit me, I took this thing and I said, ‘Watch out or it is going to haunt you tonight in your dreams.’ And it worked. So art became a way to survive. It’s still a way to survive and to express myself. We have to deal with the changing art world and the way art is made today. So much of art has a superficial quality to it. Lots of things that you see in galleries, you don’t feel the person behind it. The most difficult thing today is how to survive and evolve in this art world without losing one’s integrity.”
In the 1980s, Creten studied painting at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent, but the non-conformist naturally gravitated to the school’s unpopular ceramics atelier (as Belgium at the time was enthralled by conceptual and minimal art), where he discovered clay, a damp, dirty, sensual and poor material that was looked down on in the fine art world, but that immediately spoke to him. “I didn’t know what clay was, what a glaze was, what a kiln was, but the moment I touched clay, I felt good and that there was a possibility to add something, to maybe explore something that hadn’t been explored in art at that moment,” he explains. “Clay is a very loaded material because it’s the earth we walk on. In a lot of cultures, it’s called Mother Earth. It’s a sacred material but, at the same time, it’s the poorest of materials. It’s basically human waste, so normally the people who work with clay are the dumbest and poorest people: laborers, farmers, road workers and potters. God took clay and
turned it into the first human being, and when you put this material through fire, it turns by magic into something very resistant and beautiful. For me, to play with clay is like playing with a sacred material.”

Paving the way for younger artists, perhaps Creten’s greatest achievement has been to elevate ceramics from the status of craft to the realm of fine art. He was among the first to have deliberately eliminated the boundaries between the disciplines of sculpture and ceramics, choosing instead to make a name as an artist instead of a ceramicist, and exhibiting in art galleries and museums. “In Europe, when I started as a young artist, ceramics in art was considered taboo,” he notes. “It was something for women or for applied arts, and you couldn’t make a sculpture using ceramics because that wasn’t done, so, for years, I was in a very difficult position because nobody wanted to show my work. From the beginning, I’ve always said, ‘I’m not a ceramicist – I don’t know anything about clay. I’m a sculptor.’ So I’ve always only accepted shows that were about sculpture. The fact that it was clay was something extra. But in the last 10 years, there’s been a lot of change: lots of young artists are now using ceramics.”


Creten’s studio in northeast Paris overlooking the Ourcq canal, littered with his clay and bronze models and sculptures and ancient art objects, books and
furniture from places like Japan, Indonesia, India, Afghanistan, Belgium, England and Italy, is a sanctuary, where he goes to be alone and to get away from it all, to work silently with his thoughts; he rarely welcomes visitors. It may be small and impractical, but he loves watching the boats ply the waterway as if in Venice or Amsterdam – here you feel miles away from Paris. He asks me to take a seat on an artwork, *Les Amants, l’Oeil Argent*, an 80-kilogram patinated and polished bronze sculpture mounted on wheels, depicting intertwining animals, shaped like lovers.

Paris may be a base, but Creten has worked on the move for 25 years and continues to be a nomad (earning him the moniker of “clay gypsy”), moving from one atelier to another according to the invitations, artist residencies and exhibitions offered, each time adding to his knowledge as he explores new clays, glazes and types of firing without any preconceptions; his work absorbs the essence of each location, while he learns from the people he meets. He has worked in studios in Wisconsin, Florida, New York, Mexico, the Netherlands, Nice and the Villa Medici in Rome, staying anywhere from three months to three years. From 2004 to 2007, he took up residency at the Sèvres national porcelain factory near Paris, which was primordial in the development of his work and the affirmation of his approach “because if you’re at the coffee machine in the morning with the workers in a factory for a period of three years, then you can change things”. In all these places, he rediscovered and reused techniques that had fallen out of favor or materials forgotten for centuries like the glazes in Sèvres – the cleaning lady had led him to untouched boxes of glaze samples through a hole in the wall under the manufacture’s roof – and even invented new ones.
Creten’s exhibitions take a long time to produce. “My pieces are unique,” he states. “Each has my imprint, but it makes it a much smaller production, so if I have two or three shows a year, that’s already a lot. Many of my works are made over a period of several years, some almost 10 years, which in today’s world is a total no-no because you’ve got to be able to have a show in Singapore, Paris, Berlin, New York and Los Angeles at the same time, with 20 pieces each time. That’s an enormous amount of pieces that people have to produce. For me, that isn’t possible. I might be working on different series at the same time, so there may be 75 pieces being worked on in different locations, but some of them will be finished in five years, some of them will be finished next week. I think we’re turning into producers of shopping bags and that the touching of merchandising and art is very weird today. It’s impossible to make 100 masterpieces a year. If you make a few a year, that’s already incredible.”

Working by instinct and through trial and error rather than research, he believes in making his sculptures by hand, working directly with the material, at odds with the factory-style industrial-scale production of certain artists currently in vogue.

Making it a point to form his art himself so as to better exploit its potential so that each sculpture carries his fingerprints and each glazing is done with his own hands, Creten diligently follows the different stages of creation of each of his pieces. The majority of his ceramics are hand-
modeled, in different types of clay like low-fired terracotta, porcelain or high-fired stoneware. But what makes him stand out is that his works embrace “all the things that you shouldn’t do in ceramics”. His finished pieces incorporate all the imperfections – hairline cracks, fractures and deformations – that occur during the firing process. Being self-taught allowed him to “do forbidden things” considered sacrilege in terms of classical ceramics. His glazes crawl, shiver, blister, drip, scar and can be rough and messy. The result are sculptures that possess an undeniable physical presence as they inhabit the spaces in which they’re placed and demonstrate a great understanding of color, featuring skins like a painter would use paint.

Now after popularizing ceramics as an art form and always up for a challenge, Creten has turned his attention to bronze as a way to counter the current appetite for ceramics. Take for instance his ambitious solo exhibition of mainly bronzes using the lost wax technique, which took place last year at the Middelheim Museum sculpture park in Antwerp, Belgium. Bronze was fashionable until the 1980s when it became taboo, deemed too expensive, bourgeois, historical and physically and symbolically heavy. In recent years, it has been seeing a revival though, and Creten swears upon a foundry in Flanders, Belgium, that he scoured the world to find and wishes to keep anonymous, its artisans able to combine an ancestral
savoir-faire with state-of-the-art technology. In this way, he can continue to bring to life new additions to his modern-day menagerie.