

**JOHAN
CRETEN**

**NAKED
ROOTS/
NAAKTE
WORTELS**

INHOUD / CONTENTS

- 7 Voorwoord **Ontworteld & geworteld**
Algemeen directeur museum Beelden aan Zee, Jan Teeuwisse
- 9 Foreword **Uprooted & rooted**
General Director museum Beelden aan Zee, Jan Teeuwisse
- 10 **Een Nis in Klei**
Joost Bergman
- 22 **A Niche in Clay**
Joost Bergman
- 34 **Johan Creten *Naked Roots/Naakte Wortels***
Museum Beelden aan Zee, Den Haag
- 100 **Historical pieces *Naked Roots/Naakte Wortels***
Museum Beelden aan Zee, Den Haag
- 123 **The Works by Johan Creten *Naked Roots/Naakte Wortels***
Museum Beelden aan Zee, Den Haag
- 130 **Zaalplan/Floor plan**
Museum Beelden aan Zee, Den Haag
- 132 **Museum Beelden aan Zee**
- 133 **Joost Bergman**
- 134 Bedankingen/Acknowledgements
- 135 Colofon/Colophon

VOORWOORD ONTWORTELD & GEWORTELD

Beeldhouwers boetsen in klei of was. Wanneer het resultaat – het model – levensvatbaar is, wordt het gebakken in de oven of afgevormd in gips en daarna in brons gegoten, gehakt in steen of gesneden in hout. Althans, zo ging dat in de afgelopen 7000 jaar. Toen in het begin van de twintigste eeuw kunstenaars een fietszadel of urinoir tot sculptuur verklaarden, was het hek van de dam. Kant-en-klare objecten, van natuurlijke of kunstmatige aard, onedele materialen, assemblages, installaties, wandelingen en andere performances drongen voorgoed het terrein van de sculptuur binnen en rekten het begrip oneindig op. De stolling van millennia werd zo in enkele decennia elastisch.

De Belgische kunstenaar Johan Creten verliet dertig jaar geleden zijn land om als *Clay Gipsy* door de wereld te reizen. Als kunstenaar heeft hij vastgehouden aan het schone object, het langs ambachtelijke weg vervaardigde kunstvoorwerp. Die – wellicht – geruststellende constatering is verraderlijk, want onder de uiterlijke schijn van zijn oeuvre broeit en kolkt het. Niet voor niets omgeeft Creten zich in zijn dagelijkse omgeving met kunstwerken en artefacten uit alle windstroken en tijden, zoals de waanzinnige keizer Rudolf II rond 1600 zijn *Kunst- und Wunderkammer* in de burcht van Praag volstouwde. Creten voelde zich al vroeg aangetrokken tot het directe, spontane en polychrome karakter van keramiek en bovenal tot de rijke symboliek en de intrinsieke rijkdom van dit ‘arme’ materiaal. Het is niet toevallig dat hij in eerste instantie als schilder is opgeleid, want ook andere schilders – Paul Gauguin, Karel Appel, Lucio Fontana – boetseerden opzienbarende keramische sculpturen. Volgens de kunsthistorische canon zijn het per definitie schilders geweest die de moderne beeldhouwkunst een nieuwe wending gaven: Degas, Matisse, Picasso. Die theorie gaat weliswaar niet op voor Rodin, die – onomstreden – geldt als de vader van de moderne beeldhouwkunst. Rodin kwam regelrecht voort uit de praktijk van de bouwbeeldhouwkunst. Maillol, een andere grote vernieuwer en net als Rodin een *sculpteur profond*, koos pas op latere leeftijd voor de beeldhouwkunst. Daarvoor had hij zich – een kleine eeuw voordat Johan Creten daar aantrad – jarenlang bekwaamd als artisaan keramist in de ateliers van de Manufacture nationale de Sèvres. Overigens is het een eerbetoon aan het medium sculptuur dat schilders het driedimensionale terrein onweerstaanbaar vinden terwijl, omgekeerd, beeldhouwers zelden of nooit talen naar verf en linnen. Beeldhouwen is dan ook veel moeilijker dan schilderen.

Na Georges Minne, Johan Tahon, Oscar Jespers en Nick Ervinck is Johan Creten de vijfde Belgische kunstenaar die een solo krijgt in museum Beelden aan Zee. Cretens ontwikkeling en oriëntatie zijn te internationaal om hem nog langer binnen de Belgische grenzen gevangen te houden, maar bij die ontworteling is er toch iets dat hem verbindt met zijn land, hoe moeilijk dat fenomeen ook te duiden valt. België grossiert namelijk in kunstenaars

die niet alleen bijzonder talentvol zijn maar terzelfdertijd grote authenticiteit en originaliteit tentoonspreiden, die de Belgische cultuur maken tot een woelige binnenzee, bezaaid met eilandjes die niet met elkaar schijnen te communiceren. Voor bewoners uit Vinex-wijk Nederland blijft het niet-aangeharkte België het meest onbegrepen buitenland. Desalniettemin voelen wij ons met jaloezie aangetrokken, laven wij ons aan de zinnelijkheid van Wouters, het sinistere van Fabre, het ongerijmde van Magritte, de megalomanie van Panamarenko, de wereldbeschouwing van Hergé, de genoeglijke erotiek van Tytgat en de abstracte ironie van Cowboy Henk. Welke van die, en zovele andere, elementen een rol spelen in het veelzijdige en ontembare universum van Johan Creten, geworteld zoals dat is in een overvloed aan historische en hedendaagse referentiekaders, kunnen wij gaan ontwaren op deze eerste solotentoonstelling in een Nederlands museum van de internationaal geëerde kunstenaar Johan Creten.

Ik complimenteer gastconservator Joost Bergman voor de wijze waarop hij de handschoen heeft opgepakt en ik dank Johan Creten voor de fijne samenwerking.

Algemeen directeur museum Beelden aan Zee
Jan Teeuwisse

FOREWORD UPROOTED & ROOTED

Sculptors make models in clay or wax. When these are deemed viable, they are either fired in a kiln, cast in bronze using plaster moulds, carved in stone, or cut in wood. At least, that's how it was for over the last 7,000 years. But then came the early twentieth century, artists declared bicycle seats and urinals works of art, and all limits went out the door. Ready-made objects, either natural or artificial, non-noble materials, assemblages, installations, walks, and other performances all irrevocably worked their way into the world of sculpture, endlessly expanding its concept. Thus, what had been solid for millennia became elastic in a matter of decades.

Belgian artist Johan Creten left his country thirty years ago to travel the world as a 'Clay Gypsy'. He has always maintained his artistic focus on the beautiful object, the piece of art manufactured using craftsmanship. While this may sound comforting, it is actually deceptive, because beneath the surface of his oeuvre, things are brewing and churning. Not without reason, Creten fills his everyday environment with artworks and artefacts from all corners of the world and all time periods, in much the same way that insane Emperor Rudolf II filled up his *Kunst- und Wunderkammer* in his castle in Prague around 1600. From an early stage, Creten felt attracted by the direct, spontaneous, and polychrome character of ceramics and, especially, the abundant symbolism and intrinsic richness of this 'poor' material. The fact that he initially trained to be a painter will come as no surprise because other painters — Paul Gauguin, Karel Appel, Lucio Fontana — also modelled spectacular ceramic sculptures. Accepted wisdom in art history has painters leading modern sculptural art in a new direction: Degas, Matisse, Picasso. This theory, however, fails to account for Rodin, the uncontested father of modern sculptural art, who came straight from the world of architectural sculpture. Maillol, another great innovator and, like Rodin, a *sculpteur profond*, only chose sculpture at a later age. Before doing so — a little less than a century before Johan Creten showed up at its door — he honed his ceramic-craft skills in the workshops of the Manufacture nationale de Sèvres. It is actually a tribute to the medium of sculpture that painters find the three-dimensional realm irresistible while, conversely, sculptors seldom bother with paint and canvas. Sculpturing, you see, is much more difficult than painting.

After Georges Minne, Johan Tahon, Oscar Jespers, and Nick Ervinck, Johan Creten is the fifth Belgian artist to be afforded a solo show in the museum Beelden aan Zee. Creten's evolution and orientation are too international for him to remain a prisoner within Belgium's borders any longer, but this uprooting cannot prevent there being something tying him to his country, even if that something is hard to define exactly. Belgium, actually, wholesales artists that are not only exceptionally talented but at the same time also very authentic and original, turning Belgian

culture into a turbulent inland sea dotted with islands that apparently do not communicate among themselves. To Dutch residents of the carefully tended Vinex suburbs, unkempt Belgium remains the most misunderstood foreign country. Nevertheless, we feel a jealous attraction, refreshing ourselves with the sensuality of Wouters, the sinisterness of Fabre, the absurdness of Magritte, the megalomania of Panamarenko, the philosophy of life of Hergé, the pleasant eroticism of Tytgat, and the abstract irony of Cowboy Henk. Which of these — and many more — elements play a role in Johan Creten's diverse and indomitable universe, rooted as it is in a wealth of historical and contemporary frames of reference, is what we can now go and discover at this first-ever solo exhibition in a Dutch museum by internationally acclaimed artist Johan Creten.

My compliments to guest conservator Joost Bergman for the way in which he has picked up the gauntlet, and my thanks to Johan Creten for the excellent cooperation.

General Director museum Beelden aan Zee
Jan Teeuwisse

A NICHE IN CLAY

Joost BERGMAN

‘FLEMISH ARTIST CARVES A NICHE IN CLAY’ proclaimed *The New York Times* in a 2013 headline.¹ Johan Creten had succeeded in taking ceramics out of the artisanal sphere, thereby earning the distinction of being placed at the forefront of contemporary art by the newspaper’s critic. This is a development that has been long in the making. Indeed, as long ago as the eighties Creten started using ceramics in a highly original fashion, producing works with a conceptual base that has meanwhile also inspired a younger generation of artists. To him, clay is no longer the stepchild but, rather, a serious material with endless new artistic possibilities. Nor is it his only medium. He also uses other techniques and materials. Referring to artists such as Philip Guston (1913–1980) and Sigmar Polke (1941–2010) he said: ‘I am free. I can tell my story in many different ways. Sometimes very figurative and narrative, sometimes abstract, or sometimes a monumental piece with next to it a jewel or a costume for a theatrical production’. Creten has more than one string to his bow; there is no such thing as a typical ‘Creten sculpture’. Notions like ‘postmodern’ or ‘eclectic’ do not adequately describe his work, either; it is too diverse for that, and often also too personal.²

Creten studied painting at the Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten in Ghent, where he took the then rebellious decision to work with ceramics. He went on to study sculpture at the École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts in Paris. In 1991 he became a resident at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. After that, he lived like an artistic nomad, mostly as an artist in residence. ‘I wanted to be free, and I couldn’t do that in Belgium, so I travelled from one experience or possibility to the next. I stayed in each place a minimum three months, a maximum three years. Each time I would work with the local clay and glazes that I found. Each time this would add something to my knowledge, and also to my story.’³

From 1996–1997 he worked at the Villa Medici as a laureate of the French Prix de Rome. In 1997 he participated in the 5th International Istanbul Biennial and in 1998 he moved to Mexico. Arizona came next, in 2000, to be followed by Oakland in 2001; in both cities he lectured at the local art academies. From 2001 to 2003, he worked in Miami by invitation. ‘When I think that Robert Miller, whose gallery exhibited the works of Louise Bourgeois, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Lucian Freud, called me up when I was living in Rome and told me, “I’ve seen pictures of your work here in New York; come on over and I’ll give you an exhibition”, to then give me a solo show in the Bass Museum in Miami years later, and when I went to his home I was shown into a room where my pieces sat right next to those by all of the previously mentioned artists as well as Jackson Pollock, Polke, and others, I can only say: “Not bad at all, Johan”.’⁴

From 2004 onwards, he spent a whole three years at the world-famous French Manufacture nationale de Sèvres porcelain factory, living and working there. This led to his participation in the 2005 *Contrepoint 2* group exhibition in the Louvre, where he was the first living Belgian exhibitor. His work was shown along with that of sixteenth-century artist Bernard Palissy (1510–1590), a great contributor to the cause of ceramics who is much admired by Creten.

In addition to all of the above, Creten also participated in countless big and small solo and group exhibitions, such as *Féminin-Masculin* in the Centre Pompidou in 1995 and *De Storm* in the garden of the Middelheim Museum in Antwerp in 2014. One year later, he was part of *Vormidable: Hedendaagse Vlaamse Beeldhouwkunst* in the museum Beelden aan Zee. In 2016–2017 the CRAC (Musée régional d’art contemporain Occitanie/Pyrénées-Méditerranée) asked him for *La Traversée/The Crossing* which brought him back to the town of Sète in the South of France, where he had stayed previously. After years of travelling the world, Creten is now based in Paris. He has been working for a long time with Galerie Perrotin, which has branches in Paris as well as New York, Shanghai, Tokyo, Seoul, and Hong Kong, and with Galerie Almine Rech in Brussels. Through it all, he has remained loyal to his first-ever gallery, Transit in Mechelen, Belgium.

His exhibitions in historical locations or in the middle of a museum collection offer him a chance to tell different stories, to show other perspectives. His first big exhibition, for

(fig.1) Johan Creten
Study, Rome, 1996
Acrylic and watercolor on paper
65 x 50 cm

(fig.2) Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)
Tree Roots, Auvers-sur-Oise, July 1890
Oil on canvas
50.3 x 100.1 cm

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam,
The Netherlands

(fig.3) Johan Creten
Le Grand Vivisecteur, 2016
Bronze casting, lost-wax technique,
patinated
325 x 160 x 130 cm
Permanent installation, St Rumbold's
cathedral, Mechelen, Belgium



(fig.1)

instance, took place in the town of Sète in 1994 and was held in the Mediterranean Sea, on an abandoned breakwater. More specifically, an old 'lazaretto' where seafarers were kept in quarantine. 'But the projects I enjoy most are those where I can interfere in a historical space. Because a charged location allows you to tell a different story and to give the viewer a different experience.' In Istanbul he did a presentation in the magical decor of the age-old Yerebatan Cistern. The same is actually true for public projects like the one in Mechelen, because, in a way, this place too is 'sacred' to him. Although he considers France his adopted country, he is still Flemish and, as such, feels a connection with his native soil.⁵

Conversely, his work was integrated in existing museum presentations in Miami, The Wallace Collection in London and the Louvre, the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, and the Musée national Eugène Delacroix. Such settings make his sculptures dialogue with the objects surrounding them. It is a type of presentation closely related to his interests in various ways.

Many of Johan Creten's recent sculptures were created in close collaboration with ceramic workshop Struktuur 68 in The Hague and the aforementioned French Manufacture nationale de Sèvres porcelain factory. The craftsmanship of such institutions combines with Creten's artistry to produce artworks that are exceptionally beautifully executed and always radiate something unique.

On the subject of his role as an artist, Creten is very clear. As a designer — in this case, thinker — he compares himself to a director or architect who has to ensure that everything conforms perfectly to his artistic vision. He is also very generous in his acknowledgement of the sometimes numerous people involved in creating his sculptures. Other successful conceptual artists, such as Wim Delvoye (1965), Jeff Koons (1955), and Murakami (1962), hire permanent assistants who work in high-tech workspaces. Although *The New York Times* claims that Creten has separated ceramics from the craft sphere, he still likes to work alone, as a soloist, covering his hands in clay. This aspect of uniqueness is important to him. He devotes a lot of attention to the skin of his sculptures. Sometimes it is rough or aggressive, or covered with small details such as crystals. Other times, it is the opposite, smooth through the application of a glossy coat of glaze. During the preparation stage, he makes sketches and drawings that sometimes languish in a drawer for years (fig.1). Remarkably, his often lavish, lascivious form language is made up exclusively of what he considers the humblest of all art materials: clay. It fairly literally stands before him as the fertile soil from which rise his fascinating sculptures. As Creten himself says regarding the material's apparent contradiction: 'Clay is excremental, it's the ashes of the dead', 'At the same time it's mother earth, it links the sacred and the profane, in a brutal way, disgusting and magical at the same time.'⁶⁷

The symbolically chosen title *Naked Roots/Naakte Wortels* refers not only specifically to the foundation of Creten's sculptures, but also to more general themes, such as origin, provenance, the place of the individual in history, and interpersonal relations. These themes return again and again in his oeuvre.

This exhibition also speaks about the roots of who we are as individuals and how we function as a community. Its theme is also linked to clay as one of Creten's most important raw materials, but clay is also more: it represents the earth, a breeding ground, and therefore, also fertility. More negative aspects, such as 'uprooted' and 'desperately clinging', are also woven into it. The Dutch title *Naakte Wortels* sounds 'rawer' than the English one, and because of that, it may point more clearly to our dark side as humans, although those 'roots of evil' are connected to vices that we would rather keep hidden. It also references mankind's vulnerability. Vincent van Gogh's (1853-1890) depiction of tree roots was meant to 'express something of the struggle of life'. This gives even more symbolic weight to the relatively recent discovery that his last work is not *Wheatfield with Crows*, as was commonly assumed for many years, but *Tree Roots* (fig.2), which he painted on the morning of his death in 1890.⁸



(fig.2)



(fig.3)

All of these facets find expression in Creten's work. Even without explicitly pointing out this connection for each of his pieces, it becomes clear that they contain many interwoven themes. Exposing them is a work of great patience. 'My work is not one thing, one concept, or one world. It is like the different layers of what goes on inside of each and every one of us. We are not just one layer. As an artist, too, you can work with many different layers at the same time.'⁹

Those curious about the origin of Johan Creten's sculptures may sometimes have to dig very deeply and push their own limits. No matter how 'accessible' most sculptures appear at first sight, behind them lies an agglomerate of (personal) associations, references, and derivations. His beautifully coloured sculptures — sometimes deliberately repulsive, sometimes seductive — are full of (ambiguous) references and 'nods', as he calls them, whose interconnections and meaning cannot be identified in an instant. Because of this, his work is not easy to gauge, not even to the initiated (who by now are familiar with his use of caricatural enlargement and choice of glamour materials). The themes that Creten addresses are often 'veiled', if only through some wordplay in their titles. Nothing is left to chance, and nothing is what it seems. The artist himself knows the various storylines, but he lets viewers make their own interpretations or look for possible provenances, so long as they lead to a 'story'.

On the occasion of the placement of the thousand-kilo bronze sculpture *Le Grand Vivisecteur* (fig.3) at the St Rumbold's cathedral in Mechelen in 2017, Creten compared 'the secret' of a sculpture to a gift that needs to be unwrapped by the recipient or viewer themselves. He believes there is too much explaining going on in the art world. The title of a piece offers viewers a kind of key they can use if they want to go on a search, but it also simply indicates that it is a sculpture, to be looked at, to be discovered. So, 'if you allow the sculpture time to speak to you, it will slowly open up, and maybe it will gradually become an acquaintance'.¹⁰







19 — **THE BOY** (2015–2016)

5 — **MON PETIT NÈGRE** (1998–2000)





**3 – MIAMI EAGLE / LE CONDOR
(LE CON-DORT) (2003)**



COLOFON / COLOPHON

Dit boek werd gepubliceerd naar aanleiding van de tentoonstelling *Naked Roots/Naakte Wortels* in museum Beelden aan Zee in Den Haag van 1 juni 2018 tot en met 23 september 2018.

This book was published on the occasion of the exhibition *Naked Roots/Naakte Wortels* in museum Beelden aan Zee in The Hague from 1 June 2018 until 23 September 2018.

www.lannoo.com
redactiestijl@lannoo.com

- Curator tentoonstelling/Exhibition
Joost Bergman
- Auteurs/Authors
Johan Creten & Joost Bergman
- Vertaling/ Translation
Xavier De Jonge
- Redactie/Editing
Sabine Van Humbeeck
- Coördinatie/Coordination
Beatrice De Keyzer
- Correcties/Corrections
Jane Singleton, Nicolas Quaghebeur
- Fotografie/Photography
Gerrit Schreurs
Vincent Luc
- Grafisch ontwerp/Graphic design
Catapult
www.catapult.be



www.beeldenaanee.nl

© museum Beelden aan Zee
& Johan Creten
© Lannoo Publishers, Tielt,
Belgium, 2018
D/2018/45/439
NUR: 640, 642, 644
ISBN: 978 94 014 5512 1

Copyrights

- © Johan Creten Studio
pp. 12, 17, 18, 20, 24, 29, 30, 32, 38,
44, 53, 55, 60, 64, 66, 67, 70,
- © Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation),
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
pp. 13, 25
- © Galerie Transit, Mechelen,
Belgium
pp. 14, 26, 50
- © The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York, USA
pp. 16, 28,
- © Galerie Schmela, Düsseldorf,
Germany
pp. 17, 29,
- © Stanley Kubrick
pp. 17
- © Claire Dorn & Johan Creten
Studio
pp. 40, 51, 52
- © Guillaume Ziccarelli
pp. 42, 44, 127
- Cemal Emden
pp. 127
- © Roel Jacobs
pp. 54
- © Kristien Daem
p. 61
- © Gerrit Schreurs & Creten Studio
pp. 62, 69, 71, 72, 76
- © Marc Domage
p. 73
- © Musée Royal de Mariemont,
Morlanwelz, Belgium
p. 74
- © Raphaël Fanelli
p. 75
- © J. Beylard et V. Luc-Agence Phar
pp. 103, 105, 107, 108, 109, 111, 113, 115,
117, 118, 119, 121, 122, 123
- © National Gallery of Art,
Washington D.C.
p. 104
- © Ernes V. Sutton
p. 116
- © Christie's
p. 120
- © bpk Berlin, Walter Vogel
p. 17, 29

Alle rechten voorbehouden.

Niets uit deze uitgave mag worden verveelvoudigd, opgeslagen in een geautomatiseerd gegevensbestand en/of openbaar gemaakt in enige vorm of op enige wijze, hetzij elektronisch, mechanisch of op enige andere manier zonder voorafgaande schriftelijke toestemming van de uitgever.
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any other information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

Met dank aan/
With special thanks to
Anneke Bartelse, Janneke Dreesmann, Caroline Wynaendts, Vrienden, Gouden Vrienden, Sculpture Club, Zakenvrienden, Vormidable Patronen & Board of Trustees of museum Beelden aan Zee

Met de steun van/
With the support of
Bank Giro Loterij, Aegon, de Heus, Rabobank, Kurhaus

Courtesy

- Galerie Almine Rech, Brussels,
Belgium & Johan Creten
pp. 38, 75, 78, 83, 91
- Galerie Perrotin, Paris & Johan
Creten
pp. 43, 47, 48, 53, 68, 69, 84, 88, 92
- Johan Creten
pp. 41, 42, 44, 49, 50, 56, 57, 58, 61,
62, 64, 76, 94, 95, 97
- Galerie Transit, Mechelen, Belgium
& Johan Creten
pp. 12, 13, 20, 24, 25, 55, 87
- Museum Princessehof, Leeuwarden,
The Netherlands
p. 72
- FRAC - Pays de la Loire, Craquefou,
France
p. 81
- Royal Museum of Mariemont,
Morlanwelz, Belgium
p. 67

BankGiroLoterij
WIN MEER. BELEEF MEER

AEGON

de heus

Rabobank

KURHAUS
GRAND HOTEL ARRATS
THE BRASSerie SCHIEVENINGHE