

BERLINDE DE BRUYCKERE PLUNDER | EKPHRASIS

MO.CO.

18.06 →

02.10.2022

EXHIBITION BERLINDE DE BRUYCKERE PLUNDER | EKPHRASIS

The solo exhibition of Berlinda De Bruyckere at MO.CO. is the most ambitious presentation of her work in France thus far. On the occasion, MO.CO. inaugurates a new chapter of its history, from now on incorporating vast monographic exhibitions to its programme. Berlinda De Bruyckere's exhibition, conceived in close collaboration with the artist, brings together around fifty works made between the 1990s and today, exploring the diversity of her preferred medias: sculpture, installation, drawing, watercolour, and collage. Taking over all the spaces of Hôtel Montcalm, it includes six new works created specially for the Montpellier-based project.

Born in Ghent, Belgium, in 1964, where she currently lives and works, Berlinda De Bruyckere was deeply influenced by Flemish Renaissance paintings. Drawing on the legacy of great European masters, religious iconography, as well as on ancient mythology and traditional culture, her work is based upon the dialectic experienced between images of current affairs and the breath of universal and timeless parables. By experimenting with malleable materials, like wax, fabric, or animal hides, Berlinda De Bruyckere has built a unique, moving, and at times also unsettling body of work, which translates the paradox of 'sublime weakness' posited by Lao-Tzu into the flesh of the sculptures. Working both as a painter and a sculptor, her hybrid forms with human, animal, and plant features, bear an envelope—a diaphanous skin, or a bark—under which quiver very dainty veins, a sap that ceaselessly flows and witnesses the hope contained in the miracle of each life.

The seeming economy of spectacular effects, recalling a starkness worthy of Zurbarán, leads to works of an intensity that summons our confusing relation with transcendence. Although the martyr, redemption, and metamorphosis are well-known themes in Berlinda De Bruyckere's work and crucial part of the exhibition at MO.CO., it will equally focus on less highlighted aspects of her work, such as eroticism, the complex relations between humans, plants, and animals, or even the notions of work and exploitation.

Under the artistic direction of
Numa Hambursin,
Chief Executive Officer of MO.CO.
Montpellier Contemporain

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INTRODUCTION

The title of the exhibition, *Plunder | Ekphrasis*, derives from Berlinde De Bruyckere's discussions with South African author Antjie Krog.

The notion of plundering has an immediately violent connotation. Berlinde De Bruyckere conceives it as something inherent to humanity, but also as one of the drives of the artistic act: that of taking inspiration from existing works, images, or socio-political agitation to which the artist cannot remain insensitive, and which resurface in her work. In this context, plundering also designates the extraction or diversion of materials and objects, as well as their integration into the creative act. She lets blankets rot, prepares casts from animal hides coming from the leather industry, and restores animal bodies, bringing them back to life as an artwork.

The second part of the title brings into play an ancient notion: the Greek term 'ekphrasis' refers to the meticulous and complete literary transcription of a work of art or an object. A description so precise, that the object becomes real: a new work of art is born. Here, ekphrasis refers as much to the evocative power of Antjie Krog's texts as it does to the narratives that the artist's works give rise to.

The exhibition opens with the sculpture *After Crippelwood II, 2013-2014*: a cast of a tree trunk on a metallic stand. Its colour and position suggest a recumbent figure, while the bark evokes flesh: the plant, animal, and human kingdoms merge. This is what unfurls in the first five rooms: an equivalence of the living, a constant metamorphosis of shapes and materials that will inhabit the entire exhibition. Eroticism, whether explicit in certain works on paper or suggested in wall sculptures of evocative forms, is one of the themes that are present throughout the exhibition.

The notion of work, labour, and animal exploitation are equally as present by the means of the objects employed (harness collars, for instance), the presence of horses, or the evocation of a tannery in the last room. The first rooms of the Hôtel Montcalm are intended to introduce visitors to the elements present in the work through an intimate presentation of sculptures and drawings dating from 1999 to 2022.

The first large floorspace of MO.CO. hosts an exceptional series of *Arcangelos*, multiple of which were created especially for the exhibition. The group is completed by large-format mural sculptures (from the series *Pioenen* and *It Almost Seemed a Lily*) which testify the spiritual dimension in the artist's work, as well as her interest in ominous traditional representations in art history. The following floor is articulated around the central sculpture *No Life Lost II, 2015*, with two blindfolded horses lying down on top of each other in a glass cabinet, textile works of the *Courtyard Tales* series, as well as a monumental work created for the exhibition, the cast of a worn tree trunk: here, the equivalence between living beings resurfaces and focuses on the notion of empathy. The basement floor receives a new immersive installation, composed of superimposed and suspended casts of hides. This imagery of the tannery underlines the notions of exploitation, exhaustion, and plundering.

The exhibition was conceived in close collaboration between the curators, the artist, and her collaborator and studio manager, Katrien Driesen. It is accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue in French and English, in which the artist explains her trajectory and creative processes.

Co-curated by:
Vincent Honoré,
Director of Exhibitions,
Rahmouna Boutayeb, Curator,
Anna Kerekes, Senior Curator

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ROOM 1 *AFTER CRIPPLEWOOD II, 2013-2014*

The sculpture *After Cripplewood II, 2013-2014* finds its origins in an earlier work: *Kreupelhout - Cripplewood, 2012-2013*, a monumental sculpture made from the cast of an elm tree, produced for the 2013 Venice Biennale. In *Berlinde De Bruyckere's* oeuvre, the themes, inspirations, and forms are recurrent over the years. The flesh colour and the reclining position of the work may suggest a fragility similar to that of a recumbent or injured body. Strips of cloth are applied to its extremities, which have become like stumps, and are kept in place by leather straps. The multiple layers of coloured wax accentuate the ambiguity between bark, muscles, tendons, and bony joints.

ROOM 2 *THE WOUND SERIES*

The series of works entitled *The Wound* is inspired by photographs from 19th century medical archives that the artist discovered in Istanbul in 2012. These photographs document the successful surgical operations of veiled women, reluctantly opening their garments to show their scars. The sculptures are assemblages made from horse harness collars gleaned from flea markets. As always is the case with *Berlinde De Bruyckere*, the carefully chosen objects are diverted from their original purpose. Used as much for their shapes and stories as for their symbolic values, the horse collars combined with worn fabrics and wax can suggest vaginas or wounds.

ROOM 3 *INFINITUM II, 2017-2019*

Infinitum II, 2017-2019 consists of casts of wood and fabric sections, arranged under bell covers. Their phallic forms contrast with those of the wall sculpture series *The Wound*. The process of transforming one being into another often evokes images loaded with eroticism for the artist. This blurring of boundaries is explained by the central importance of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the idea of 'becoming other,' and the associated element of hope: nothing disappears or ends, everything is continuity and evolution. Furthermore, the *Infinitum* series of works is reminiscent of religious reliquaries as much as it is of specimens kept in medical schools. They can embody the transience of life and the pursuit of immortality.

ROOM 4 *PORTRET, 2013 - 2014*

Portret, 2013-2014 [Portrait] presents a truncated form of a horse, with the head twisted towards the inside of its legless body. It is suspended by a leather strap inside an antique display case, a piece of furniture that is recurrently salvaged in the artist's practice. Many elements are preserved, horsehair and skin (always from an animal that died of natural causes) are reconstructed and meticulously sewn onto an epoxy resin mould partly based on fragmentary horse casts. The work suggests a horse, but the forms have been deconstructed and restructured in such a way that they acquire their own autonomous and abstract beauty.

PLATEAU 1

ARCANGELOS SERIES AND TRE ARCANGELI, 2022

Berlinde de Bruyckere began the *Arcangelos* series in 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, a moment when the need to be protected and taken care of was evident. She returned to the human figure, which had been absent from her work for ten years. The *Tre Arcangeli, 2022* group of pieces, created for the exhibition, is surrounded by three other *Arcangelos*. These guardian figures are enigmatic and ambivalent. Their bodies are covered with hides, while slight protuberances may suggest wings to come or that have been lost, and the faces are absent. They stand on tiptoes as if they are about to fly away, or have just landed. They radiate an atmosphere of equal parts strangeness and desolation, transcendence and hope.

LELIE / IT ALMOST SEEMED A LILY SERIES AND PIOENEN, 2017-2018

Berlinde De Bruyckere's works often have an underlying erotic connotation. In the case of the monumental sculptures of *Pioenen, 2017-2018* [Peonies], *It Almost Seemed a Lily III, 2017* and *It Almost Seemed a Lily VII, 2018*, the abstract petals of peonies and lilies are rarely perceived as flowers: they are seen rather as images of vulvas, of silky flesh. This series is inspired by the *Enclosed Gardens*: a collection of sixteenth-century wooden altarpieces used by the sisters of the Mechelen hospital for private devotion. Although religious in nature, these altarpieces also represent sublimated desire. The series of drawings entitled *Lelie* was conceived at the same time as the wall sculptures. It is also linked to the fleur-de-lis, a symbol of the Annunciation. As a result of a collaboration with Guy Bronselaer in the context of an illustration for

a doctoral thesis on the genital sensitivity of men post-circumcision, Berlinde De Bruyckere has combined sexes with flowers.

PLATEAU 2

NO LIFE LOST II, 2015

In 1999, Berlinde De Bruyckere was invited by the Flander Fields Museum in Ypres to create a work on the theme of war. She discovered hundreds of photographs of horses that had died on the battlefields of the First World War. Since then, these animals have played a central role in her work. *No Life Lost II, 2015* shows the bodies of two horses that cannot be contained by the glass case that shelters them. The position of the bodies is unclear, showing abandonment, embrace, or death. As with the other equestrian piece, *Zurbarán, 2015*, one of the animals in *No Life Lost II, 2015* has its head bandaged and its legs bound with a leather strap. It is difficult to determine whether these bandages suggest execution or care.

COURTYARD TALES SERIES

Berlinde De Bruyckere has worked with blankets since the beginning of her career. Although they are symbols of protection and warmth, anchored in the private sphere, they can also suffocate. Their presence recalls childhood memories as well as more publicised scenes of human suffering. The artist identifies them more and more with the failure of a society that no longer offers refuge. The blankets are now faded, damaged, with holes. They have lost their function and their symbolic value to become large abstract compositions on the wall.

SAN SEBASTIAN, 2022

San Sebastian, 2022 refers to the martyr tied to a tree and shot through with arrows. Contrary to the *Cripplewood* series, this wax cast of a gnawed tree stands in all its beauty and self-sacrifice. It is placed on bronze wedges, slightly unbalanced in order to remove them from their original anchoring in their origins and the ground. It is also pierced by wooden wedges, alluding to an arrow, and dressed with shredded blankets. We are no longer faced with a wounded body to be healed, but rather an image of strength and resilience.

PLATEAU 3

NIJVEL / ANDERLECHT / MET TERE HUID SERIES AND NO LIFE LOST I, 2015-2016

The last room hosts a new immersive installation, composed of several sculptures made after a visit to a tannery in Anderlecht. The compressed stacks and suspensions of nineteen hide casts combining wax, animal hair, steel, and epoxy are complemented by the series of drawings *Met tere huid* [Of Fragile Skin]. The skins offer many levels of interpretation. They are simultaneously soft and protective, strong and fragile, masculine and feminine. Despite the brutality of the stripping, stretching, and cleaning of the skins, Berlinde De Bruyckere recognises a rare beauty in this place. From there, the skins have found their way into many of the artist's recent works. This imagery of leatherwork and animal exploitation also evokes the consumer society and its extremes, such as animal exploitation, profit made from everything everything, even from the scraps of exhausted bodies – in this case, horses that have

died after a lifetime of labour. It also explains the title chosen by the artist for this exhibition: *Plunder*. The series of watercolours and collages *Met Tere Huid* was inspired by the same experience by referring to one of the stages of skin preparation where the skin is opened on a metal pillar to clean the inside and determine its quality, after which they are labelled according to their value. Juxtaposing these works with the violence done to the animals makes the understanding of the room more complex. However, these drawings do evoke an erotic reading, one that links Eros and Thanatos, life and death.

BIOGRAPHY

Berlinde De Bruyckere's work has been exhibited in important international institutions. She represented Belgium at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013, in collaboration with Nobel Prize winner J.M. Coetzee. The exhibition at MO.CO. is her most ambitious solo show in France to date. Berlinde De Bruyckere is represented by the Galleria Continua and Hauser & Wirth.

Among her recent solo shows in France and abroad are *Engelenkeel*, Bonnefanten, Maastricht, Netherlands (2021); *Aletheia*, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, Italy (2019-2020); *Il Mantello* (5x5x5 program part of *Manifesta 12*), Santa Venera Church, Palermo, Sicily (2018); *Berlinde De Bruyckere*, Sara Hilden Art Museum, Tampere, Finland (2018); *Embalmed*, Kunsthall Aarhus, Denmark (2017); *Suture*, Leopold Museum, Vienna Austria (2016); *No Life Lost*, Hauser & Wirth, New York, United States (2016); *Penthesilea*, Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Strasbourg, France (2015); *The Embalmer*, Kunsthhaus Bregenz, Bregenz, Austria (2015); *Berlinde De Bruyckere*, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Hague, Netherlands (2015); *In the Flesh*, Kunsthhaus Graz, Graz, Austria (2013).

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ALSO TO BE SEEN THIS SUMMER

21.05.22
→ **04.09.22**

AGAINST NATURE CERAMICS, A TEST OF FIRE

Against Nature is an exhibition populated by monsters, insolent and hybrid forms: made of enamel and earth, these grotesque creatures form a lush, original, mysterious, disquieting world. Nature is artifice and artifice becomes nature in order to decategorise scales and values, to overturn perceptions and clichés about sculpture and the ceramic tradition. The works presented deal with ceramics less as folklore, they rather approach modelling and alchemy as techniques and magic. Water, earth, and fire are the essential, unequalled components of these new worlds: "What we call against nature is in fact against custom."
Montaigne

Artists of the exhibition

Caroline Achaintre, Salvatore Arancio, Sylvie Auvray, Julie Béna, Jessica Boubetra, Gisèle Buthod-Garçon, Marianne Castelly, Cyril Chartier-Poyet, Johan Creten, Roberto Cuoghi, Michel Gouéry, Takuro Kuwata, Claire Lindner, Simon Manoha, Nitsa Meletopoulos, Marlène Mocquet, Sandrine Pagny, Aneta Regel, Brian Rochefort, Sterling Ruby, Elsa Sahal, Mathilde Sauce, Katrina Schneider, Elmar Trenkwalder, Tamara Van San, Marion Verboom, Anne Verdier, Duo Vertigo, Nick Weddell, Anne Wenzel

Open from Wednesday to Sunday, from 11 am to 7 pm
MO.CO. Panacée 14, rue de l'École de Pharmacie, Montpellier

17.06.22
→ **03.07.22**

À SUIVRE, À SURVEILLER

23 young artists who just graduated from MO.CO. Esba propose a group exhibition at the Œuvre de la Miséricorde, a classified historical monument and exceptional heritage location that contains a chapel and a pharmacy, witnessing some 500 years of history of the City of Montpellier.

Guest curator 2022: Eva Barois De Caevel

Vernissage Friday, June 17th
Free admission, from 2 pm to 6 pm
Chapelle de la Miséricorde 2, rue de la Monnaie, Montpellier

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

FROM TUESDAY TO SUNDAY

5pm

GUIDED TOUR

Informal and convivial visit of the temporary exhibition.

Included in the admission, no registration
These tours are for adult audiences
and are delivered in french.

Visits in English on request for groups.
90 € for groups of 15 people or less
150 € for groups of 15 to 25 people

Information and registration at
reservation@moco.art

MO.CO.

13, rue de La République - Montpellier
Accessible to people with reduced mobility

ACCESS

Tramway
Lines 1, 2, 3, 4 - Gare de Montpellier St Roch

Car
Parking Gare de Montpellier St Roch or Parking de la Comédie

OPENING TIMES

From Tuesday to Sunday
June to September → 11am to 7pm
October to May → 11am to 6pm

ONLINE

www.moco.art
facebook.com/montpelliercontemporain
instagram: @montpelliercontemporain

CATALOGUE

Berlinde De Bruyckere
Piller | Ekphrasis
Catalogue published by Bernard Chauveau Edition
Graphic design by Atelier tout va bien
Available for sale at MO.CO. and in bookstores
Price: 35 €

PRICING CONDITIONS ADMISSION PRICES

Full price individual admission: 8 €
Reduced rate individual admission: 5 €
Free admission, see conditions online
Free access on the first Sunday of the month
Annual subscription MO.CO. SOLO PASS: 30 €
Annual subscription MO.CO. DUO PASS: 45 €

For further information or to make a reservation
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MO.CO. MONTPELLIER CONTEMPORAIN: ONE INSTITUTION, THREE SPACES

MO.CO. Montpellier Contemporain is an artistic ecosystem, ranging from arts training related activities to art collections. The model is unique to Montpellier and encompasses two exhibition centres (MO.CO. & MO.CO. Panacée) and an arts school (MO.CO. Esba). MO.CO. Montpellier Contemporain benefits from the financial support of the Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles Occitanie, Montpellier Métropole and Ville de Montpellier.

