

Mara Hoberman

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THE EYE

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STORM

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*When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about.<sup>1</sup>*

Never quite what they seem, Johan Creten's sculptures are capricious shape-shifters—enigmatic *trompe l'oeils* of form, medium, and meaning. From delicate shells that are also imposing masses of clay (the *Fortuna Grande* series) to brittle and seemingly frayed wicker simulated in sturdy bronze (*The Cradle / De Bakermat*), Creten's artworks belie the physical properties of their materials. Each piece is also profoundly influenced by such variables as the angle at which a particular sculpture is confronted, the quality of light cast on its surface, or the context in which it is exhibited. To best appreciate this uncanny malleability—a quality not often applicable, in fact, typically antithetical, to large-scale, so-called 'monumental' sculpture—there may be no better conditions than those of the unpredictable great outdoors, a setting the Middelheim Museum now provides. Bringing together more than two dozen ceramic and bronze sculptures made over the past two decades, *The Storm* reprises themes central to Creten's oeuvre—from codes of femininity and masculinity to the art-historically problematic relationship of a sculpture to its pedestal—in a fresh milieu, inspiring new associations and interpretations.

Having prepared a number of fascinating exhibitions in non-white-cube settings, including a stately Renaissance chateau<sup>2</sup> and a subterranean cistern,<sup>3</sup> Creten is hyper-aware of the environment's effect on formal and conceptual impressions of his works, and vice versa. Invited to exhibit his work at the Louvre in 2005,<sup>4</sup> Creten selected several large-scale abstract green and white glazed ceramics to be shown in the company of Bernard Palissy's sixteenth-century earthenware. Playing off of the Renaissance master's signature 'rustic figuline' decoration, a style of high relief featuring fauna and flora motifs, Creten revealed a compelling link between the textures and colours of his own glistening abstract forms and Palissy's snake and sea-creature designs. In the context of a 2008 exhibition at Paris's Musée de la chasse et de la nature<sup>5</sup> (Museum of Hunting and Nature), Creten's ceramic petal-encrusted surfaces took on a bestial pet-like quality in the company of taxidermy game, antique muskets, and seventeenth-century hunting scene paintings. Similar ceramics shown at the Musée national Eugène Delacroix in 2012,<sup>6</sup> however, assumed a soft, velvety appearance in the presence of the French Romantic's floral paintings.

Providing a less explicitly referential context, *The Storm* promotes an appreciation of Creten's works on their own terms. While there are most certainly connections to culture, politics, and art history in this exhibition, the installation at the Middelheim Museum forefronts the organic qualities of Creten's oeuvre—highlighting relation-

1 - From *Kafka on the Shore*, Haruki Murakami, 2002, p. 6. 2 - *La Mort d'Adonis*, FRAC Auvergne, Château de Chareil-Cintrat, France, 1994. 3 - The 5th International Istanbul Biennial, 1997. 4 - *Contrepoint 2*, Musée du Louvre, Paris, 2005. 5 - *Ex Natura*, Musée de la chasse et de la nature, Paris (in coproduction with the Manufacture nationale de Sèvres), 2008. 6 - *Des Fleurs en hiver: Delacroix - Othoniel - Creten*, Musée national Eugène Delacroix, Paris, 2012.

ships between the human body, fauna and flora. Surrounded by trees, hedges, flowerbeds, and grassy lawns, Creten's artworks move into dialogue with nature as well as with each other, creating a curious biosphere that includes birds, fungi, beehives, human figures, and beguiling abstract forms.

Befitting Creten's multifaceted works, the show's title, *The Storm* is open to numerous interpretations. On an environmental level, the storm refers to a brutal force capable of destroying or refreshing the landscape. Psychologically speaking, the term can be used to describe an internal emotional tumult. Throughout art history, storms have been a popular subject because of their wild energy, unexpected colours, majestic scale, and narrative intrigue. When we think of the storm in relationship to nineteenth-century painting, for example, representations as diverse as Henri Rousseau's naive-style tropical gale, *Tiger in a Tropical Storm (Surprised!)* (p. 37), and J.M.W. Turner's series of impressionistic churning seas (p. 36) come to mind. By representing individual characters and landscape elements instead of entire narrative scenes, Creten reduces the storm to various isolated experiences of movement, colour, and emotion. For example, the twisted, gilded bronze whorl of *Neurose – Golden Wave* (p. 37), and the billowing sails of the three *Fortuna Grande* ceramics recall certain aspects of Turner's wild windswept seascapes. Meanwhile, evoking Rousseau's teeth-bearing tiger, Creten's intimidating beasts, such as the bronze *Octo* (p. 36), embody the savagery of the storm.

Invoked as a literary device, the storm is often symbolic of the subconscious. A classic example would be L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, in which Dorothy enters a bizarre dreamscape via a tornado. Achieving a similarly disorientating effect, Creten renders the familiar strange by playing with notions of scale, texture, and juxtaposition in his sculpture. An author like Shakespeare, on the other hand, uses the storm in *The Tempest* as a metaphor, showing how his characters' political manoeuvrings and interpersonal relationships mimic the turbulent seas. Creten, too, relates stormy imagery to politics and current events.

The reference to Shakespeare here is perhaps more than tangential, considering the fact that one of Creten's early artistic impulses was towards the theatre. As a young artist he envisioned making stage sets for plays and operas.<sup>7</sup> This nascent interest is, in a sense, reborn in *The Storm*, which is presented as a succession of thoughtfully conceived tableaux. Organizing his artworks into four sections — perhaps more aptly described as acts — Creten provides raw ingredients: characters, props, and scenic elements. The binding threads (context, action, and dialogue) are left for the viewer to weave together. Because Creten's works have so many possible readings and associations, there are infinite ways in which to relate to these sculptural groupings. The following essays attempt to summarize the four acts comprising *The Storm*, but are by no means exhaustive analyses of the works included. Rather, these short texts put forth just one of many winding narratives the viewer may encounter as he makes his way through this complex and extraordinary exhibition.

7 - From an interview with Michael Amy: *Concentrated Forms: A Conversation with Johan Creten*, Michael Amy, *Sculpture*, vol. 32, no. 7 (September 2013), p. 36.

## ACT I

Showing off virtuoso bronze technique, the sculptures comprising this first tableau feature a wide variety of textures and sheens, ranging from gleaming polished surfaces to matt black, almost burnt-looking, patinas. Recognizable animal and human presences appear strange thanks to their unusual skins, which inspire both environmentalist and political connotations. While the bucolic garden setting reinforces connections to natural processes of change like metamorphosis and biodegradation, the presence of a magnificent bronze bench (*Le Banc des amoureux*) — a sort of throne honouring the male and female form — serves as a reminder of mankind's potential to adversely impact the environment.

Two large birds, *Pliny's Sorrow*, and *The Tempest*, flank the garden at opposite ends. With outstretched wings, *Pliny's Sorrow* (p. 38) suggests an eagle/cormorant hybrid vainly poised to take off. Recalling horrifying post-oil tanker spill photographs, the sculpture describes a bird whose feathers are so saturated with crude it can no longer take flight (p. 38). The sculpture's gluey black surface is convincingly suffocating and a thick black drip hanging from the bird's beak suggests an oily tear. By presenting the eagle as a tragic figure, apparently maimed and begrimed by a man-made disaster, Creten effectively nullifies a traditional symbol of military strength and political power. The sculpture's title, a reference to Pliny the Younger (whose letters provide an extraordinary first-hand account of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius over Pompeii), likens animal victims of oil spills — and, by extension, other toxic pollutants — to the humans whose bodies were scorched and sheathed by molten lava and volcanic ash in 79 ce.

At the other end of the garden, meanwhile, *The Tempest* (p. 39) perches with its wings folded tightly against its body and its head solemnly bowed. Seen from the front, the bird appears stoic — prepared to endure the wind, rain, and come what may. The view from behind, however, tells a different story. From the rear, *The Tempest* is revealed to be a delicate shell, its insides apparently scooped out like ripe fruit. With its dark ashy patina and fragile and carcass-like physique, *The Tempest* recalls a burned-out tree whose core has been destroyed leaving only a crispy layer of bark (p. 39). On the one hand an embodiment of the fragile — even indefinite — boundary between life and death, *The Tempest* is also a powerful monument to resistance and strength. In spite of its vulnerabilities it remains a symbol of hope. Like the tree, which manages to stay standing by its roots and its bark, so *The Tempest* prevails against all odds.

Meanwhile, two human figures show off skins that complicate traditional notions of the hardness and stability of monumental sculpture. *Why does Strange Fruit always look so sweet?* shows a standing male figure covered by oozy protuberances that have taken over the entire body, save for the lower legs and feet. A dense layer of brown date-like fruits, which appear to be ripening before our very eyes, contrasts sharply with the sculpture's lower regions (legs and pedestal), which reveal a mottled grey

patina resembling marble. Calling to mind natural forms of regeneration involving seedpods or chrysalises, *Why does Strange Fruit always look so sweet?* celebrates new life as a miraculous event in which succulent fruit is born out of hard stone. The anonymous 'stone' feet sticking out from beneath the fertile organic matter suggest a classical Greek or Roman statue —perhaps an Adonis, god of beauty, whose rejoiced rebirth coincided with the arrival of new vegetation each spring season. Another humanoid form, *La Mamma Morta* (p. 40), is a large columnar bronze featuring a legless, armless, and headless female body on top of a series of plinths, each rendered in a different historically significant style. Relating the idea of support to both an architectural element and a maternal figure, Creten here fuses the two into a monument that contrasts soft flesh with hard stone. Like Bernini's masterful Baroque marble *Apollo and Daphne* (p. 40), which captures Daphne in the process of turning into a tree —her supple skin being replaced by rough tree bark and flowing hair morphing into stiff branches and leaves— Creten's sculptures are poetic descriptions of bodies in flux.

## ACT II

Set inside The House (Het Huis), Creten's second tableau features works that engage more directly with politics and relate the idea of the storm to authority, revolution, and reconciliation. Two more birds inhabit the pavilion, but their roles and relative scale are quite different than those in Act I. A small, stylized ceramic bust of an eagle, *La Naissance d'une ombre* (p. 41), is endowed with a proud profile and powerful wings. The bird's would-be regal status, however, is undermined by a glazing technique, which Creten uses to scatological effect. A runny white glaze mixed with drips of red, black, and other colours trickles down the sculpture's head and wings like layer upon layer of bird droppings. Denoting the eagle (a historic symbol of power used in many cultures including ancient Rome, Napoleonic France (p. 41), and the United States of America) as sullied vestige of a past empire, *La Naissance d'une ombre* is one of Creten's most overtly political artworks. This sombre work cannot help but be seen as a direct reference to the fascist movements that continue to haunt Europe like a dark shadow.

Offering a great contrast in terms of scale and affect, *Le Grand Vivisecteur* is an imposing monument that dwarfs the viewer and makes the surrounding pavilion feel like an oppressive (bird)cage. Detailed and accurate, save for its stark white finish, eerie hollow eyes, and strange carved-out area between its legs, this large owl features defined plumage, individuated talons, and distinct facial features. Standing protectively over a semi-hollowed ovoid form, the owl dares visitors to take a seat in its throne-size nest. The nature of this implicit invitation is ambiguous: are the owl's intentions nurturing (like a mother towards a hatchling) or threatening (like a predator stalking its prey)? By establishing a dynamic in which the authority figure is a source of both comfort and fear, Creten exposes a disquieting totalitarian trap.

Four abstract sculptures also take on political overtones within the context of this act. The three colourfully glazed ceramics comprising the *Fortuna Grande* series are

some of Creten's most miraculous shape-shifters —appearing like solid imposing masses from one angle and lightweight deployed parachutes from another. Revealing their buoyancy like a secret weapon, these simultaneously robust and supple forms are an optimistic reminder that while it may be impossible to change the direction of the wind, one can always adjust the sails to take charge of the course. Seen in this light, the *Fortuna Grande* sculptures' sails imagine a means of harnessing a political windstorm for a revolution or other productive cause. Concluding this turbulent act on a peaceful note, *Neurose-Golden Wave* placed just outside The House, is a spirited gilded curl whose political associations range from the fiery torch held by the Statue of Liberty to The Hague's World Peace Flame Monument. Like a light at the end of a tunnel, this blaze of gold guides the viewer out of the dark and stormy night into a new dawn.

## ACT III

Providing an appropriately Eden-like setting for works relating to the dawn of man, the birth of civilization and the rise of culture, the third act takes place in a contemporary garden featuring manicured hedges and a small parterre. As the only human figure in this act, *Bi-Boy* (*édition dorée*) assumes the role of Adam, the first man, by default. Smaller than life-size, this male figure appears encased in a glistening gold membrane, a sort of hermetic amniotic sac out of which his fully formed body will imminently emerge. If *Bi-Boy* (*édition dorée*) describes the birth of mankind, *Le Baiser* (p. 42), raises questions about the origins of art —specifically, where an artwork begins and ends. Another celebration of masculinity, *Le Baiser* consists of twin squat phallic forms (frequently used by the artist in other sculptures as a base or pedestal, as in *Le Banc des amoureux* in the first act) balanced one on top of the other. A monument to love depicting a tender kiss, *Le Baiser* is also a commentary on art historical discussions about sculpture vs. pedestal. Referencing the rotated and stacked pyramidal bases that make up Brancusi's *Endless Column* series (p. 42) as well as Didier Vermeiren's vertically abutted pedestals (*Sculpture* (p. 42)), Creten playfully denies the traditional function of the base as a mediator between representational (art) and real (the world).

A tour de force bronze, *The Cradle / De Bakermat* (p. 43), consists of an impossibly delicate-seeming basket balanced precariously on top of Creten's now familiar bulbous toadstool base. The basket's peculiar oblong shape is based on a Dutch *bakermat* —a once-popular style of cradle in which a new mother could comfortably sit and nurse her infant child (p. 43, 45). Even without this association, however, the basket's tapered silhouette and womblike container code the object as feminine, in stark contrast to the phallic pedestal upon which it rests. Fusing these two sexualized forms together in bronze, Creten creates a monumental fertility figure that evokes the proverbial 'cradle of civilization.' Another basket, *Odore di Femmina* —Basket takes the form of a female torso and is made up entirely of bronze flowers. Part of Creten's *Odore di Femmina* series —an ode to femininity's complex and seductive mix of soft curves, sharp edges, and implied bodily odours— this variation shows the female body as a vessel. In addition to

evoking the womb and a baby bassinet, the basket is also a container for food and provisions, thus a symbol of nourishment, cultivation, and Mother Earth's bounty. Also suggesting a barnacle- or mollusc-encrusted fishing net, the sculpture's texture draws a connection between the French words for mother (*mère*) and sea (*mer*), not to mention the double sense of *moule*, which can refer to a mussel shell or a sculptor's mould.

Two sculpture series featuring beehives, *La Communauté / De Gemeenschap* and *Le Jardin des Simples* represent microcosmic civilizations. Often invoked by political theorists and philosophers in comparison to human society, the beehive symbolizes an organized and productive monarchy. Displayed here inside a small flower garden, where it is easy to imagine the worker bees gathering nectar and pollinating the surrounding blossoms, Creten's sculptures endorse a society that functions in harmony with nature. Meanwhile, a direct reference to man is conveyed through the primitive-style faces adorning the hives' exteriors. Recalling rows of ancient sculptures, tribal masks, or even woven baskets, the hives reveal a connection to the birth of art and material culture in early civilizations. Columnar works like *Massu I* and *Massu II* meanwhile, move the link between society and material culture further along in history, suggesting architectural columns, industrial tools, and minimalist monoliths.

#### ACT IV

Having described the storm in terms of natural forces, manmade disasters, political struggles, and creation myths, the final act of *The Storm* focuses inward to explore fantasies and fears that create a psychological disturbance. Confronting the viewer with a landscape of sea monsters, witches, and fright masks, Creten dares the viewer to address anxieties that lurk in the depths of his own subconscious.

Deceptively straightforward, *La Borne* depicts a tall and slender brick chimney-stack, which immediately draws a connection to the Industrial Revolution. This sculpture, however, is not a monument to progress, but rather a grim reminder of the filth and exploitation that came with the economic boom and technological advances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A poem by William Blake comes to mind for its description of the deplorable situation of a motherless child forced to work as a chimney-sweep: 'So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep.'<sup>8</sup> Appreciated in this light, the chimney-stack casts a metaphorical dark cloud over the landscape. Adding to its ominous presence, an odd ring on the side of the chimney recalls the jogs — an ancient form of punishment and public humiliation whereby a prisoner was chained to the outside of a building with a hinged iron collar.

The only human presence in the final act is a disturbing personage, who manages to appear both repellent and sympathetic. *I am a Good Horse on a Soft Brick* depicts a voluptuous woman kneeling on a large phallic base, familiar from *Le Banc des amoureux*

8 - *The Chimney Sweeper* in *The Selected Poems of William Blake* (Wordsworth Editions: Hertfordshire, 1994), William Blake, p. 68.

and *Le Baiser*. Her swollen bare breasts recall ancient fertility figures like the *Venus of Willendorf* (c.28,000–25,000 BCE) while her wild kinky hair evokes Medusa's mythical mane of snakes. Adding to her witchy aura, dead birds hung like trophies around her neck suggest some mysterious primitive ritual. Her open mouth implies she is in the midst of an incantation whose imagined call strikes the same primal chord as Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. Like a shaman in the midst of entering a trance state, this strange female figure presents herself as our dubious guide.

Another chilling presence, *Octo* was inspired by a species of ray known as devil fish, which appear to have humanoid facial features on both sides of their thin, flat bodies. Presented vertically on a pedestal, Creten's larger-than-life representation of the ray's delicate form evokes an enormous double-sided mask with two eyeholes, a tight-lipped grimace, and limp, dangling ears. That fact that we find our own likeness in this animal is a telling trick of the mind's eye, which reveals much more about our own psychology than any true understanding of this animal's anatomy. Like a Rorschach test, this sculpture points to our narcissistic tendency to understand unfamiliar or abstract forms by anthropomorphizing them. The monster described here is neither in the sea nor on the pedestal, but inside of our own minds.

Other nightmarish but unidentifiable sea creatures include *Les Colennes Révolutionnaires – Flanders – Grand Format* and *La Colonne / De Zuil* (p. 44). These grand columnar forms appear sheathed in the sinewy musculature and slimy skin of a giant octopus or squid. Tightly wrapped tentacles shroud the forms beneath, leaving us to guess precisely what is being strangled, if not yet quite devoured. Describing the legendary Kraken, a deep-sea creature that haunted sailors and inspired fantastic drawings and paintings in the nineteenth century (p. 45), the great poet Alfred Tennyson wrote in 1830,

***Below the thunders of the upper deep;  
Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea,  
His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep  
The Kraken sleepeth...<sup>9</sup>***

Like this excerpt from Tennyson's poem, which brings on chills without actually describing the beast physically, Creten's monsters are most terrifying because they remain obscure. Though the forms and textures are highly evocative, these sculptures are basically abstract. Like Rodin's *Monument to Balzac* (p. 44), whose massive bronze cloak captures the writer's essence more so than his precise physical likeness, Creten's sculptures are built on multi-layered associations that twist and turn into final sculptures that are as evocative as they are enigmatic.

9 - *The Kraken* in Tennyson (Everyman's Library: London, 2004), Lord Alfred Tennyson, p. 42.