

Berlinde De Bruyckere ALETHEIA

Curated by Irene Calderoni

Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo
November 1st 2019 - March 15th 2020

The work of Berlinde De Bruyckere (Ghent, 1964) investigates universal themes such as the suffering body, pain and memory, and the need to overcome and transform. Consistently drawing from art history and mythology, as well as the everyday reality of failing social structures, De Bruyckere creates work with a strong emotional impact, whose materiality invites the viewer to reflect on the human condition.

On this occasion, the artist has conceived a condensed body of work that is displayed throughout the entire exhibition space of the Foundation in order to create an organic narrative – an intense dramaturgy developing from distinct monumental sculptures to culminate in a large, environmental installation.

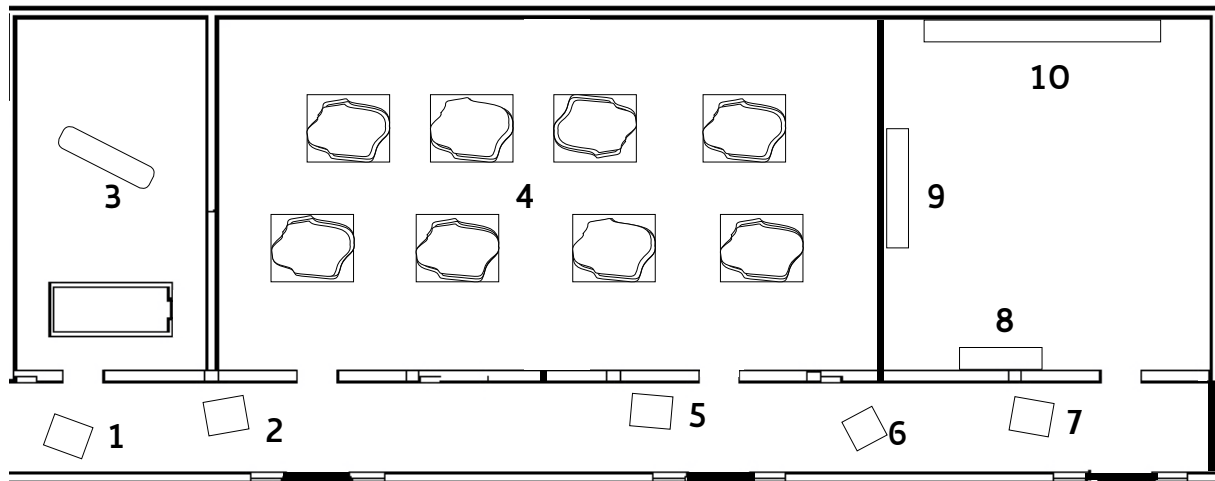
While the exhibition was conceived as a response to the Foundation's specific architecture and its wide minimalistic spaces, it draws inspiration from a place that the artist visited in the recent past and that has influenced her work ever since: a skin trader workshop in Anderlecht, Belgium. Here, the freshly flayed animal hides get piled up onto large pallets and covered in salt, to protect and preserve them for future treatments. The extreme violence that has been perpetrated is evident, recent; but it appears muffled by ritual-like gestures of attentive care.

As a repository of powerful images and extreme sensations, of vast anonymous death and the emergence of something new, the place materializes themes that are key to the artist's research: the complex relations between life and death, Eros and Thanatos, beauty and anguish. It is a repulsive place, and yet it is able to evoke an ideal of sacredness in relation to the body's mortal coils, hereby incarnating the core of Berlinde De Bruyckere's work: the question of how to face the intolerable, and how to redeem it.

The figure of the animal skin plays a key role in the narrative developed by the artist, both in denotative and connotative terms. The hides are subjected by the artist to a series of different operations: cast and reproduced in wax, folded and stacked, constrained and deformed. These are all key actions within an ambiguous visual dictionary in which abstraction and figuration collapse, resulting in sculpted volumes of minimalist impression, whose solidity is contradicted by their fragile materiality and delicate tones. While being evocative of an act of cruelty and suffering, the skin alludes to the body through its very absence: it is an ambivalent image that speaks of wounds and contact, of wrongs and comfort.

In this metaphorical shift, the animal skin takes the place of the human figure within the work of the artist, in order to carry the theme of the suffering of living beings – the unspeakable plight of the tragedies that characterize our time at an unprecedented scale. Berlinde De Bruyckere's work urges us not to look away, but instead to stare at such horror, so that truth can emerge from oblivion, be revealed, and our collective conscience can be made aware of it. This is evoked by the title of her exhibition, *ALETHEIA*; an ancient word that strongly expresses a call to un-forget.

Berlinde De Bruyckere ALETHEIA



1. Nijvel II, 2019

Cera, bronzo, resina epossidica, ferro
Wax, bronze, epoxy, iron
120 x 108 x 123 cm

2. Nijvel I, 2019

Cera, bronzo, pelle di cavallo, resina epossidica, ferro / *Wax, bronze, horse skin, epoxy, iron*
118 x 106 x 116 cm

3. Palindroom, 2019

Cera, tessuto, acciaio, poliestere, ferro
Wax, textile, steel, polyester, iron
180 x 200 x 220 cm

4. Aletheia, on-vergeten, 2019

Cera, legno, resina epossidica, sale
Wax, wood, epoxy, salt
Dimensioni ambientali
Environmental dimensions

5. Anderlecht II, 2018, 2018

Cera, ferro, resina epossidica, bronzo
Wax, iron, epoxy, bronze
115 x 129 x 132 cm

6. Anderlecht III, 2018, 2018

Cera, ferro, resina epossidica, bronzo
Wax, iron, epoxy, bronze
116 x 146 x 128 cm

7. Anderlecht, 2018, 2018

Cera, ferro, resina epossidica, bronzo
Wax, iron, epoxy, bronze
103 x 163 x 137 cm

8. It almost seemed a lily V, 2018

Legno, carta, tessuto, resina epossidica, ferro, poliuretano, corda / *Wood, paper, textile, epoxy, iron, polyurethane, rope*
212 x 148 x 40 cm

9. It almost seemed a lily IV, 2018

Cera, legno, carta da parati, tessuto, piombo, resina epossidica / *Wax, wood, wallpaper, textile, lead, epoxy*
281 x 238 x 40 cm

10. Pioenen, 2017-18

Cera, legno, carta da parati, tessuto, ferro, resina epossidica / *Wax, wood, wallpaper, textile, iron, epoxy*
224 x 491 x 67 cm

Berlinde De Bruyckere ALETHEIA

Curated by Irene Calderoni

Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo
November 1st 2019 - March 15th 2020

1. Nijvel II, 2019

2. Nijvel I, 2019

Two solid geometric volumes open and close the exhibition space, introducing the theme of animal skin as a powerful presence, both physical and symbolic, that dominates the show. Realized in wax using a casting technique, the blocks reproduce fragments of skin extracted from the heads of animals, that were piled up and pressed together to form a permanent bond – a surface so neat it seems a cut of marble, stiff and incredibly heavy. The organic nature of their originating material contradicts this solidity; it softens it through multiplying lines rolling up, curving and blending together. From the surface, shreds of fur, scraps of meat, grains of salt emerge, muddling one's perception of a separation between inside and outside, but also putting the liminal nature of skin into play, as well as the casting process itself, as it establishes a visceral bond with the reality it expresses. The artwork's title is a reference to one of the skin traders workshops from which the artist drew her inspiration for this body of work.

3. Palindroom, 2019

In horse breeding farms, a mare puppet is employed for the artificial reproduction of stallions. While it's a substitute for the female animal, built to stimulate the male's desire, it has a clear reference to a phallic symbol, both in its shape and posture; and it is this ambiguity at the center of the artist's reflection. Though being a lifeless body, it is functional for its reproduction; it is a volume devoid of any sexual attributes, and yet it is in itself a sexual image and a powerful impulse-driving force. Berlinde De Bruyckere's sculptural work builds this semantic complexity by employing antithetic materials and formal solutions: the fragility of the wax covering the dummy's body is in contrast with the impressiveness and solidity of its bulk; the organic and tactile aspect of its surface opposes the coldness and rigidity of the metal structures onto which the body is propped up.

4. Aletheia, on-vergeten, 2019

This immersive environmental installation was conceived by the artist as a recreation of the Anderlecht lab, a place that deeply impressed her imagination. Heaps of just-stripped animal skins lie onto wide wooden bases, covered in salt to protect and preserve them, and surrounded by an environment populated with material clues of

the process they underwent. The artist is asking us to challenge ourselves with an extreme image, a mass of nameless deaths that evokes dreadful tragedies, both past and present. However, the work doesn't stop at this feeling of horror, but seeks a form of comfort and redemption; such intention arises through a complex work on the materials, a delicate rendering of these pathetic coils, and a care in recomposing – through the sculpting process – the unfolding of decay into shapelessness. The casting procedure that originated all these artworks speaks of contact, intimacy and sharing, and of a memory that presents itself again. And lastly, it is the act itself of making something present – of drawing it out of the darkness of conscience and knowledge, so it won't be forgotten – the most important gesture of reparation.

5. Anderlecht II, 2018

6. Anderlecht III, 2018

7. Anderlecht, 2018

As if in a further stage of the process, the skins are tidily folded and heaped on pallets, ready to be moved. From their previous configuration of nearly shapeless, low stacks, now the skins are built into massive, almost monumental volumes, as if they acquired a shape, presence and identity. The rigor of the composition is however mitigated by the sensual and tactile nature of its material, which bears similitude to a pile of blankets. That of the blanket is a recurring figure in the artist's practice, and it is important both on a formal level (the focus on folding, on stratification and occultation), and on a thematic level (the dialectic relationship between oppression and comfort, anguish and care, external and inner reality). Even though the grey tones are dominant, defining the viewer's first impact with the piece, the pictorial character of De Bruyckere's work emerges in the complexity and richness of the tones that stand out at closer observation, and contribute to the almost illusory realism of the representation.

8. It almost seemed a lily V, 2018

9. It almost seemed a lily IV, 2018

10. Pioenen, 2017-2018

The series of wall pieces that ends the exhibition path further develops the theme of animal hides, and of that symbolic place that is Anderlecht, towards a new direction, centered on floral imagery.

These compositions are inspired by the enclosed gardens that are commonly found through the Low Countries since the late Middle Ages, and that were cultivated by religious women for devotional purposes. These were little tabernacles, richly decorated, representing paradise worlds and religious scenes dominated by idyllic gardens in bloom, and realized in textiles, silk threads, pearls and semi-precious stones. Charmed by this form of anonymous and spiritual feminine art, De Bruyckere realized a monumental version of it, in which the figure of the withering flower is dominant; a grandiose memento mori charged with pathos, its materiality overflowing and decadent at the same time. In order to realize the enormous petals of these lilies and peonies, the artist resorted once again to casting animal skins, traces of which remain in residual fur, and in the conformation of elements and tones which recall bodies, limbs and organic tissues. Above all, the dominant idea is that of an overwhelming metamorphosis in progress, that doesn't stop transforming suffering into passion, decline into desire, death into life.