

CERAMIC ART



Ceramics is a medium that has endured since ancient times. Although ceramics had little or no place in modern art for a long time, in recent years, artists have increasingly been pushing back the boundaries of the material, thus demonstrating its versatility. Imagicasa now puts some of these contemporary ceramic artists in the spotlight.

JOKE RAES

The artistic career of Joke Raes is anything but straightforward. At an early age, her parents enrolled her in art school. 'That was a wonderful place for me, where I had the freedom to develop in my own way,' she says. 'I was a very shy child, but at art school I was able to express myself well. Not with words, but through the material in front of me.' She found that same freedom during her training in Word Art-Drama. Raes continued to work as a designer and performer in the theatre. However, after training at LUCA School of Arts and the Higher Institute of Fine Arts, both in Ghent, she found her place in the art scene. 'I realised that I didn't want to be a performing actor but wanted to create of my own.' Her artistic focus shifted from performance to the visual arts and exhibitions, both at home and abroad, began to follow one another in rapid succession. Just as her artistic trajectory is not straightforward, neither are her works. Her oeuvre consists of a varied range of works of art, with various materials and forms, often worked out in sober pastel colours. She has already worked with drawings, watercolours, ceramics, live performances and sculptures, sometimes with natural elements such as dried willow catkins. The result of this experimentation is a work that is complex yet accessible. In 2017 the artist realised her first major public art commission for the General Hospital Alma in Eeklo, in the meantime her works have been exposed nationally and internationally in several exhibitions.



Raes is known for her eye for detail: gluing thousands of plastic teeth in her work is no problem for her. Her drawings, sculptures and installations appear to come about seemingly effortlessly, until you take a closer look at her works. Her sculptures are all created with great attention and an enormous eye for detail. The artist is guided by the material she works with, without knowing exactly where she will end up. She draws inspiration from culture and nature. 'Not only nature, but also the position of man in nature is an important source of inspiration. The complex forms found in nature also fascinate me endlessly.' The imaginative botanical forms – from roots, to trunks, fungi, seeds and stamens – that Raes draws, lasers, forms in clay, knits and assembles, therefore have an important place in her work.

Through her eclectic use of materials, the artist blurs the distinction between nature and culture. Or rather: in her work, the human being disappears into nature and at the same time nature disappears at the hands of the humans. This conflict is not the only theme the artist deals with in her work, but perhaps the most important one, as it is also expressed in the organic aspect of her sculptures. Equally important for the artist is the interaction between her works and the public. 'It is one of the reasons why I make art: the possibility of opening up and maybe even changing people's perception through my work. I find it interesting when my works are different from what you expect. That they feel different than they look, for example, or that you only realise later what material they are made of. In this way, I want to awaken amazement of the beholder,' she tells us.

JOHAN TAHON

Johan Tahon did not become a sculptor. He always has been and always will be one. 'For me, sculpting is like breathing,' we hear. He studied sculpture at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent and entered the international art scene before he was thirty. He now lives



'I think about the human condition in relation to the spiritual, the findings of which take shape in ceramic and bronze figurative sculptures.'

The artist repeatedly explores the boundaries of the great unknown. In doing so, he repeatedly relies on his material, technique and skills. But for Tahon 'searching' goes further than that: 'I want to break through the boundaries of my own discipline again and again.' He is a passionate lover of music and literature. Conversely, many writers and musicians are also inspired by his work. Among them are Belgian poet Peter Verhelst and German singer Till Lindemann, front man of Rammstein. The artist finds inspiration in life itself: 'But also through self-examination and by reading a lot, mainly art-historical and spiritual texts. I also have a weakness for medieval sculptures and ceramics from early Islam,' he tells us. Where does the love for ceramics come from? 'Ceramics has the specific characteristic to express deep emotions and colours within an ancient technique,' says Tahon. 'The material has the ability to fuse art history and contemporary emotion.' His sculptures arise very spontaneously, he adds. 'The most important thing is to prepare the studio and create the right atmosphere in the room. The rest follows automatically. The artist makes few if any preliminary studies. 'The work grows out of the work itself. I am often surprised myself about what happens during a good session. As if I am awakening from a trance. This makes me a grateful person.' What is important when creating his works of art? 'Silence,' it sounds resolute.

Since 1994, Tahon's sculptures have been on a continuous tour. They have already been on show at the Gerhard Marcks Haus in Bremen, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington and the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul, among other places. But several monumental sculptures have also been placed in public spaces: in the atrium of the Ministry of Finance in The Hague or in the Marktkirche in Hanover. Another special retrospective exhibition is currently in the making. As of April, you can admire the artist in the MOU, Museum of Oudenaarde.

TAMARA VAN SAN
After Tamara Van San had completed her education in sculptural art at Sint-

'THE IDEA COMES FROM THE SCULPTURE'

their unique visual language. Van San's images may at first sight appear colourful and cheerful, but underneath there is something disturbing going on. Her works say something about reality and our constant struggle against disorder. The artist believes that colours are also a kind of material. 'They can mislead us when looking. On the other hand, they also call for greater attention, just as a confusing shape does.'

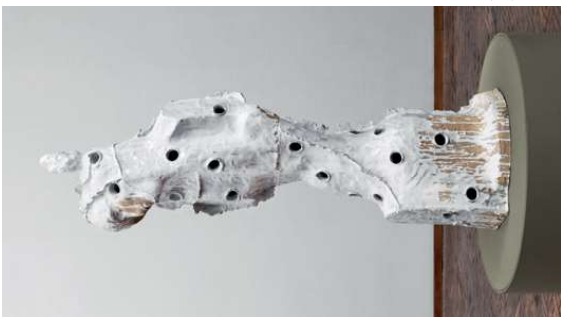


Photo: Debrah, Johnen Tahon

Lucas in Antwerp in 2006, the artist has been making sculptures continuously. She started with classical modelling, but soon began to experiment with different, non-classical materials. 'I use all materials,' she says. These range from plaster and wood to less conventional materials, such as polystyrene or latex. In recent years, the focus has been more on ceramics. 'I like this material because it's basically earth or mud. It's something you step on, but by working on it, it becomes something.' Van San makes spatial sculptural installations for indoors and outdoors, but also sculptures of a smaller size for a more intimate setting. The artist plays with basic elements like volume, shape and colour. She regularly finishes her works of art in clay with a layer of brightly coloured glaze. In her oeuvre, bright pink and fluorescent yellow are effortlessly combined, and she also gives shapes free rein. In this way, she creates powerful pieces that retain their unique visual language. Van San's images may at first sight appear colourful and cheerful, but underneath there is something disturbing going on. Her works say something about reality and our constant struggle against disorder. The artist believes that colours are also a kind of material. 'They can mislead us when looking. On the other hand, they also call for greater attention, just as a confusing shape does.'

Van San does not want to start from a certain idea or philosophy. 'The idea comes from the sculpture, the shape and the colour. It is the sculpture that transmits knowledge or evokes memories. Not the other way around.' In turn, she finds inspiration in the world, the universe and everything that exists. Her ceramic works of art are created by means of a kind of thinking practice, according to the artist. 'I don't make any sketches in advance and don't have any definite plans. It is primarily a matter of whether the form is new. I think about which material and which technique I will use. In advance, I think up certain criteria for my works, such as: it must have holes or lumps, it must be tall, or it will be yellow. I am concerned with formal ideas, but not or little with social, political or other themes. Or at least not explicitly. Of course, you think about the place of your work in relation to the art that already exists or, for example, about the environment, the universe, architecture or human insights, but for me the most important thing is to find new formal solutions.'



Image: Thomas Van San

Van San's approach to sculpture is often considered 'anti-classical', as her work seems to go against the pursuit of unity and purity. The artist allows a more intuitive and intimate process to prevail, which often leads to surprising forms that she moulds with her own hands. 'The form determines the way you experience the work of art,' she says. She regularly works with circles and ovals, which for her refer to the infinite. 'Geometric shapes have something pristine about them, they leave us free to look. In the same way, you can give meaning to a work by deviating from these forms, by making them distorted or unsuccessful. You provoke a kind of confusion or astonishment, which makes people look more attentively.' And provoking or maintaining a sense of wonder in the viewer is precisely what the artist hopes to achieve with her works.



Photo: Thomas Van San

NADIA NAVEAU
Nadia Naveau studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, where she still teaches sculpture, and the Higher Institute of Fine Arts. She currently lives and works in Antwerp and Saint-Bonnet-Tronçais in France. Her works of art often start from classical figuration. 'I process them with stylised forms, in search of a fascinating field of tension. Sometimes, abstraction can take over from figuration, which in turn partially disappears. I combine tradition and contemporary forms and impressions, both in the way I knead my materials and in the collage-like gathering of art-historical references and popular media in my works. This process of 'recycling' is also very important in my practice. I apply the same thinking to different techniques and materials, which makes it experimental,' she explains. 'The artist works with a wide variety of materials, such as plaster, ceramics, polyester, wood, concrete or bronze. Meanwhile, various works by her adorn different collections and public spaces: among others, in the Flemish Parliament. **M.HKA** in Antwerp. **MAZEB** in Ostend, the University of Antwerp and the National Bank of Belgium.

For Naveau, anything can be a source of inspiration: 'I am fascinated by the images that surround me, no matter how banal



Chris Orland / Photo: The Document Art

or weighty the reference. Popular child heroes like Goofy carry just as much weight as Mexican masks and sculptures by classical or modern masters like Bernini. I have a lot of documentation in my studio of everything that interests me: from museums to ordinary

'MY IMAGES MUST HAVE AN ASSOCIATIVE CHARACTER'

street scenes, from magazines and cartoons to my own photographic material, films or music. Everything is in my head. Often, these are images that I have forgotten, but which come out of my fingers again while I am modelling. The selection and distortion of my memory has gone over them first. This is what makes my images at first sight less recognizable and so eclectic.' While making her sculptures, Naveau finds it important to remain amazed. 'They must have an associative character. My sculptures are always modelled by hand in clay. The initial act of modelling is usually intuitive. Often, a shape that happens to be in the clay triggers a certain association that leads to new shapes and



Photo: Naveau / Photo: The Document Art



Wesley Spragg / Summer-Orland / Photo: The Document Art

thus to a new sculpture. That makes it also fascinating. I never fully know what the final result will look like. Coincidences or failures are just an asset. That is what happens in the clay, the material sets its own conditions,' we hear the artist say.

With ceramics, the surprise is the greatest, according to Naveau. 'I work very intuitively with ceramics and rarely make trial samples. That means that a lot of things fail. Moreover, I have had no training in ceramics, which means an even greater risk of 'failure'. Nevertheless, I am convinced that by approaching ceramic sculpture from a sculptor's point of view, I can be much fre-

er. And failures lead to new possibilities. A 'failed' sculpture can also sit in my studio for some years, until I see something in it, tackle it and give it a new life. You can do anything with glazing, such as let the colour dominate. When I use white glaze, the form will prevail. The added glaze, which only gets its final shape in the oven, takes away certain details and reinforces others. It has something sensual about it. It enhances the fluidity of the movements.'

NICK ERVINCK

Nick Ervinck makes art on the dividing line between virtual and physical. The artist says he has always been fascinated by the way art



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develops through new materials and techniques. In 2003, he graduated with a master's degree in Mixed Media from the **KASK** in Ghent. 'That course was actually everything and nothing. You didn't learn how to work with a computer, you didn't learn how to sculpt. But I did have a good teacher who taught me to develop my own language and vision.' Somewhat disappointed with contemporary sculpture and its lack of innovation, Ervinck turned to architecture, applied sciences and new media, to work out that new language. After graduating, he immersed himself in working with materials such as polyester, plaster and wood, sculpture and computer modelling. '3D printing gave me new possibilities. It allowed me to create a form language that I could not possibly create by hand, with ceramics for example. I am therefore particularly interested in how the computer can be used to create new, organic and experimental spaces and sculptures, we hear from the artist.



Ervinck Studio Nick Ervinck

'When I started experimenting with a new form language, I made a lot of cube-like forms. When, after a while, that didn't provide much of a challenge, I became more obsessed with the organic. I wanted to achieve the perfection of my computer in reality. But once you reach that point, of course you can't go any further. And that is how I ended up with clay.' Or rather: ended up with clay again, because the love for ceramics already started in the final years of his secondary school. 'That was fantastic, because to this day there is no freer material than clay. You put your hands on it and can immediately put your ideas into action. You can never control clay one hundred percent. A glaze also has a completely different magic than a layer of paint: the little imperfections and cracks are pure poetry. Now I go back much more in search of those imperfections, which are almost textures. Although I am still not a classical ceramist. Because my computer work will feed my ceramics and vice versa, I can 3D scan my ceramics and process them into a 3D print. In that way, you create a cross-pollination within your oeuvre, that's the fun of it. By continuously working with other disciplines, you approach the medium in a completely different way,' explains the artist.

His work now includes large installations, handmade and 3D printed sculptures, ceramics, prints, drawings, light boxes and animated films. Using copy-paste techniques in 3D software, he borrows images, forms and textures from a variety of sources: from basilicas, to dinosaurs, twelfth-century flower wallpaper or fauna and flora. He explores classical themes such as the human being (with a focus on his anatomy and the creation of cyborgs), plants (especially their genetic manipulation), masks and animals. In doing so, he always starts from an (art) historical background, which he mixes with contemporary pop and sci-fi culture. 'At the same time, my work contains extensive references to sculpture, such as the work of Henry Moore or Barbara Hepworth, and to architecture, for example Greg Lynn, who introduced the 'blob' as an architectural construction principle', concludes Ervinck.

'THE HEADS QUICKLY TAKE ON A LIFE OF THEIR OWN'

Maen Florin, who studied at the Royal Academy in Antwerp and at Sint-Lucas in Ghent among other places, sculpts the human being mainly fascinated by painting. 'Especially the work of Rembrandt, Soutine and Marceline Dumas. Yet I make sculptures'. In the beginning, these were mainly exuberant sculptures in plaster, which radiate a certain power and dynamism. Gradually, the sculptures evolved into more tranquil ones. The artist works with various materials, from clay, plaster and bronze to substances such as epoxy or polyurethane, but in recent years her preference has been increasingly for ceramics. Florin works according to the classic methods: modelling, moulding and casting or firing. She then works on each sculpture individually, using different colours and adding or removing certain elements. Now the artist mainly makes heads in ceramics. In shaping the heads, she always starts from her own intuition, experiences and feelings. But at the same time the heads are a memory of art history or a reflection of the world today. In this way, the images are archetypes rather than portraits.

The heads quickly take on a life of their own. Florin wants to go further than just portraying a person, she undertakes a search for our inner psyche. She immerses herself in the world of feelings and thoughts and wants to expose the individual's deepest motives. She brings out what is in our heads. The artist tries to capture deeper feelings in the expression on the face. Her images are therefore a translation of powerful emotions and show ambivalent expressions of sadness or meditation. The spectator can recognise himself in the image. This creates a strange but intimate, almost human bond. Opposites such as power and powerlessness or love and suffering are always united in one image. The (im)possibility of communication runs like a thread through Florin's works. The question of how we interact with our fellow human beings, with different backgrounds and different expectations, arises. In this way, the images confront us with ourselves and magnify, as it were, our incapacity. Although we may not realise it immediately, when we look at her sculptures, we are actually looking in a mirror.



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The heads are shaped larger than life directly into the clay and then painted with glaze. The way the artist does this, gives the facial features of the heads extra expression. Without any frills, emotions are made recognisable. The sculptures have human, but sometimes also inhuman features: big ears, long noses or a distorted mouth. The robustness of



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the enlarged heads contrasts sharply with the fragility of ceramics and the glaze painting on them. Although perhaps not a cheerful work, the artist's creations do not leave us untouched, that much is certain. Meanwhile, her work has been exhibited at home and abroad. Anyone who wants to admire Maen Florin's work can do so at the exhibition *Playing at being Human* in Mechelen,



Photo: Olinga/Pieter Maeyne (left) on www.123art.com; Johan Creten

where her ceramic heads will be on display until May. This summer, her work can also be seen at the Beaufort Art Triennial, on the Belgian coast.

JOHAN CRETEN

Johan Creten graduated from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent in 1985. Although he studied to be a painter, he soon began to focus on ceramics and bronze. The artist is regarded as a pioneer in the revival of ceramics in contemporary art. 'When I started in the 1980s there was a total aversion to clay and ceramics, there was a kind of taboo on it. It was considered a material for women and absolutely not suitable for contemporary art. Because I felt there was no room for my work in Flanders, I decided to go abroad. In those first years, Creten lived like a nomad. The artist worked in Mexico, Miami, Rome, Wisconsin and Paris, among other places, which earned him the nickname 'clay gipsy'. In the meantime, the artist has exhibited in many countries – Creten was the first Belgian to exhibit in the Louvre during his lifetime – and has taken ceramics to a more international level. 'Although I remain fairly unknown in Belgium. The first time I showed my work to the wider public in Flanders was only in 2014 at Antwerp's Middelheim Museum,' he tells us. After a wandering artist's existence for some time, he finally decided to settle in Paris.

CRETENS WORK IS OFTEN POLITICAL, MONUMENTAL AND AGGRESSIVE

Creten succeeded in taking ceramics out of the realm of craftsmanship and showed that it is possible to make fully-fledged works of art with them. We ask him where the choice for ceramics comes from. 'It is a very poor material: the earth we walk on, mud actually. But through the miracle of fire, that mud transforms into a material that transcends time. That fascinates me. But the colour is also important to me. Today you see nothing but sculptures with bright colours. The use of colour in sculpture from the sixties to the eighties was completely different. The beauty of ceramics is that it registers and translates emotions very directly.' Creten's work is of-

ten politically oriented and deals with contemporary society and social changes. It is monumental and oftentimes aggressive. But not pamphleteering. Topics such as politics or society are included but are not laid on thickly. It is only when you delve deeper into my works that more happens than you initially think. And often the realisation of what you are looking at comes much later. In the eighties and nineties, for example, I made sculptures with the heads of black men, sculptures that essentially dealt with emigration and racism. At the time, nobody in Belgium understood why I was talking about those subjects. But the nice thing is that this way of dealing with ceramics is now very topical,' says Creten.

Beauty and aesthetics also play an important role in Creten's artworks. 'Think for example of my sculpture of the women's torsos with roses. Those women's torsos are un-touchable in a way. Ceramics radiates a kind of fragility. How do you use this fragility to say something about the state of the world? That kind of complexity is something I've been working on since the beginning.' In addition to being a forerunner in ceramics, Johan Creten is also one of the first examples of slow art, a movement that encourages taking your time, letting things sink in and looking at them in a longer and more sustainable way. 'This new relationship with time is very important to me,' he tells us. You can admire his sculptures at his solo exhibition at Villa Medici in Rome until May. ☺

(Text: Nathalie Van Laere)

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