

CRETEN'S CREATURES

Known for his unsettling semi-organic forms, Johan Creten recently exhibited new sculptures created during a three-year residency in Sèvres.

BY BROOKS ADAMS

JOHAN CRETEN (b. 1963) is widely regarded for his extravagant ceramic sculptures of female torsos covered with delicately handcrafted yet razor-sharp porcelain rose petals. He is Belgian, boyish-looking, fair-haired and given to wearing cowboy boots—talismans, perhaps, of his stints at ceramics works across America. One of his heroes, Bernard Palissy (1510-1589), a multifaceted artist-architect-chemist famed for his ceramic platters filled with teeming flora and fauna, is memorialized with a statue at the Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres outside Paris, where Creten was the artist-in-residence from 2004 to 2007.

Many of Creten's recent sculptures—big, glowering behemoths—may have been inspired by what he saw at Sèvres: the chimneys, the ovens, the snaking exhaust pipes of the ateliers. The new works, softly ribbed and relentlessly knobbed, feel to the touch like old font radiators or ceramic Meissen stoves. For those who visited the artist at Sèvres, the pieces are entwined with vivid memories of the setting: the quiet of the huge Industrial Age workshops at lunch; the blackened, beehive-shaped kilns one can walk into; the countless models of Creten's sculptures in various stages of production; the ascetic quarters where he basically lived for three years with a few beloved artifacts, a Navajo blanket and books; and the strange crack in his voice when he spoke of producing this body of work.

How to be a contemporary artist—a nomadic and post-studio spirit—amid the venerable yet somewhat stultifying hierarchy of the French national porcelain factory, renowned since the days of François Boucher (its first artist-in-residence) and Madame de Pompadour? That was the question Creten wrestled with at Sèvres, and the spectacular results of that struggle were recently on view at two Parisian venues.

At the Musée de la Chasse in Paris,

where Creten had a show last summer, the artist's sculptures looked bigger and bolder than ever, the glazed colors lusher and earthier, the modeled forms more convoluted and polymorphously perverse. The effect of those robustly textural volumes, and all those high-fired celadons, purples and burnt yellows, was radically sensuous. Creten seems to have mastered the red tape at Sèvres. He prevailed on the staff to



Omphale, 2007, glazed stoneware, 75 by 27½ by 33½ inches.

All photos this article courtesy Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris and Miami.

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reintroduce wood fires, stoneware (for the first time in 50 years) and *pastillage* (hand-sculpting porcelain flowers) to achieve his very personal, almost primal freedom of expression.

The biggest works in the museum show were from Creten's "Vague" series. Each colossal wave is abstract yet suggestive of both plant and animal forms—among the latter, sea anemones, swollen breasts, coiled intestines, gigantic buttocks and engorged scrotums. The surfaces are animated with a network of applied ribs and knobs. (Creten is something of a knobophile, having in 2007 exhibited his work alongside examples of the 17th-century "auricular" or "earlobe" style of decorative arts at the De Lakenhal museum in Leiden, Holland.) In the refurbished,

Rococo interiors of the Musée de la Chasse [see *A.i.A.*, Feb. '08], with their splendid accretions of marble and ormolu, and their often humorous juxtapositions of hunting paraphernalia and contemporary art, Creten's craquelured leviathans more than held their own.

An especially haunting piece was *Omphale* (2007), a semi-abstract vertical hunk of stoneware in which a crouching figure or tree trunk is suggested at the center, with one arm/branch holding aloft a shell or mask. Is this Creten's vision of the World Navel? (Much of his ceramic work is full of puckers, navels and vulvas, all lubricious.) This ghostly, monumental presence, yellow at the top, flushing green-gray at the bottom, sits on a mass of tubular volumes, one of Creten's many homages to the high-relief snake and lizard forms in Palissy's ceramics. (In 2005-06, Creten exhibited several of his "Vague" sculptures in the Salle Palissy at the Louvre.) Different from Palissy's ceramic wildlife, though, Creten's huge stoneware sculptures present the illusion of morphing before your very eyes, devolving, melting or washing away.

Creten's iconography tends toward the operatic and the Symbolist. "Odore di Femmina," the series title of

his rose-covered female torsos, is a line from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. In a video component of the show, Creten talks freely and passionately of the scent of women, of their menstruation and how it reminds him of the brininess of shellfish. Indeed, his barnacle-covered Venuses alternately suggest French Surrealist fashion objects (a Creten work was recently used by architect-designer Peter Marino for a Chanel boutique in Beverly Hills) and archeological treasures hoisted up from the deep.

Drownings, decapitations and ravishments are all standard fare in Creten's oeuvre, and all fit in smoothly with the iconography of hunter and hunted at the museum. Four examples from "Les Amants" (The Lovers), 2005-07, a series of bronze taborets with tentacular forms and dark turquoise and gold patinas, presided in the museum's Antechamber, where you could sit on them (the 18th-century fauteuils were pushed to the walls) and ponder various hunt-related paintings, bronzes and Sèvres porcelains.

Most spectacular, in the Stag Room, on a coffee-table base between two contemporary black couches, was *Narcissus Saved* (2005), a big horizontal piece that depicts a strange white creature—half man, half squid—struggling to break free from a low white tablet shape spattered with a dash of red-brown glaze.

Such clever and thoughtful installations underlined Creten's old-master connections—his fondness both for



Narcissus Saved, 2005, glazed stoneware, 26¾ by 43 by 30 inches; at the Musée de la Chasse, Paris.

Large Wave for Palissy, 2006, glazed stoneware, 39¾ by 27½ by 31½ inches.





Odore di Femmina, 2007, glazed porcelain, 36¼ by 21¼ by 13½ inches; at the Musée de la Chasse.

Below, bronze sculptures from the series "The Lovers," 2005-07, each approx. 23 inches high; at the Musée de la Chasse.



logue. In the courtyard stood a colossal bronze figure of indeterminate sex. Its torso and head are entirely obscured by a huge pluming form of knobby appendages. *Why does strange fruit always smell so sweet?* (1998/2008), we learn from the catalogue, was inspired by the sight of a mango tree outside the artist's room when Creten was an artist-in-residence in Monterrey, Mexico. But it is also obviously an androgynous fertility symbol, akin to the many-breasted Artemis of Ephesus statues from antiquity. Here it was, 10 years after its conception, finally cast in bronze, its fruitlike shapes patinated a deep rust red, and its metamorphic legs—replete with thorns—a soft gray-green. The sculpture suggests an allegory of Creten as a youth deeply at one with nature, his head lost in the low branches of a tree, his entire body draped in fruit.

Creten's work bridges many traditions and speaks a personal syncretism. At the second Paris venue, the Manufacture Nationale showroom, he exhibited "Wanderers," a series of little stoneware statuettes, pale and dabbled with hits of glaze, that represent, variously, a Buddha, a Venus of Willendorf-like figure, a crouching black slave, a Dionysian bunch of grapes and several tiny groups of intertwined lovers. These pieces look to be Creten's maquettes for larger sculptures, and they have a feeling of improvisation and

spontaneity. (A drawing related to *Strange fruit*, also shown at the Manufacture Nationale gallery, is inscribed with the curious phrase *c'est poli d'être gai* [it's polite to be gay].) Such works remind us that the artist makes sculptures with his own hands, and not just with teams of devoted experts. After his residency in Sèvres and the two shows, Creten returned to Paris, taking a new studio in the 19th arrondissement. ○

vanitas still life and the grotesque. For example, a large brown-and-pink work, *The Returned* (2006), was installed under a 17th-century Dutch still life, a Nicasius Bernaerts picture of cats fighting over a banquet. The big rearing volumes of Creten's sculpture, evocative of a veiled figure sitting on a bed of coconuts, looked bloody and visceral, reminiscent of Chaim Soutine's sides of beef.

Several smaller hanging wall pieces evoke negroid masks encased in what look to be huge mussel shells or pea pods. While these works recall, of course, the tradition of blackamoors, they also verge on kitsch—seeming rather too broad in their sense of charade. In the context of Creten's early work (not in the show), which is full of embarrassing faces, big boobs and copulating roosters, there might be some sense to including these pieces. Perhaps they have to do with Creten's

Flemishness, for he is heir to Marcel Broodthaers's mussel-shell assemblages and James Ensor's scabrous humor. Creten's ceramic imagery of blacks, often with pearls in their mouths, definitely resonates with the tradition of Bacchic and Silenic masks.

Yet the elegant Musée de la Chasse surroundings could not entirely obscure the fact that Creten has schlepped across Mexico, Florida, Arizona, California, Wisconsin, upstate New York and Europe for his various residencies at ceramics works, and an on-the-road ribaldry, not to mention an enthusiasm for Hispanic kitsch, have accrued to his work.

Homoerotic content was tamped down at the museum and in the cata-

"Johan Creten Sculptures" was presented at the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, Paris [June 21-Dec. 31, 2008]. A second Paris exhibition appeared at the Galerie de la Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres [Oct. 13-Dec. 31, 2008]. The exhibitions were accompanied by a catalogue with essays by David Caméo, Claude d'Anthenaise, Nathalie Viot and Chantal Pontbriand. Creten also showed at Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Miami [Mar. 8-Apr. 5, 2008].

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