BERLINDE DE BRUYCKERE: 
WE ARE ALL FLESH
ACCA EDUCATION
Berlinde De Bruyckere was born in 1964 in Ghent, Belgium. In a career spanning 26 years thus far, De Bruyckere reached international acclaim at the 2003 Venice Biennale, when her sculptures were shown in the Italia Pavilion. She was the subject of a major exhibition: ‘Mysterium Leib: Berlindes De Bruyckere in Dialogue with Cranach and Pasolini’ at the Moritzburg Foundation in Halle, Germany (2011). Other recent solo shows include Espace Claude Berri, Paris (2008), Galleria Continua, San Gimignano (2007), Museum Moderner Kunst Karten, Klagenfurt (2007), and Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Ghent (2007). Her numerous group shows include the 8th Gwangju Biennale Korea (2010), The 3rd Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art (2009), ‘Artempo – Where Time becomes Art,’ Palazzo Fortuny, Venice (2007) and the 4th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art (2007). She has had several exhibitions at her gallery Hauser & Wirth in Zurich, London and New York.

De Bruyckere’s residence and studio are located in the De Muide district of Ghent, in a converted catholic boys school which she shares with her husband, sculptor Peter Buggenhout and two sons. Fittingly, this district is in proximity to the Saint Bavo Cathedral where Van Eyck’s Ghent Altarpiece resides. De Bruyckere’s artistic practice has been profoundly influenced by the aesthetics and subject matter of the Flemish Renaissance and other Old Masters.

Known for beautiful, unsettling figurative sculptures that are life-like yet contorted and fragmented, De Bruyckere uses uncannily realistic materials such as wax, wood, iron, wool, hair and the hides of horses. The central themes in her work are those that have always confronted humanity: suffering, loneliness, birth and death and remembrance.
Berlinde De Bruyckere’s sculptures speak of birth, renewal, courage and empathy in the face of cruelty and loss. They bring forth the duality of the human condition, depicting the dark and the light sides of our nature and confronting great existential themes such as death being the only certainty, with a contemporary viewpoint.

As a Belgian artist, the traditions of Flemish art are an inescapable part of her visual culture. The German Renaissance painter Lucas Cranach the Elder, who used the physical body to represent the mental condition, particularly influences De Bruyckere. She has described how, when she looks at his paintings she experiences “their physicality as the medium to express the thoughts and concerns of those figures; their fears, their passions, their doubts... it is all to do with man's mental state which is evoked by the visible body.”

Both Pagan and Ecclesiastical in character, as well as deeply psychological, there is universality in her headless, sexless figures.

“I no longer think the presence of the head is necessary,” she says “The figure as a whole can express a mental state making the presence or absence of a head irrelevant.”

Using mythological transformation and demise to portray the duality of human nature, De Bruyckere’s sculptures often depict a body in an Ovidian-style metamorphosis. The human body morphs with animal and vegetal, contorting bodies with twig like limbs or bloodied flesh coloured antlers. The artist explains these works as “Something growing out of you without control; you can’t stop it. In a way it’s covering the face but destroying the whole head.”

De Bruyckere is also highly influenced by the Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, explaining that in his films “religion also becomes so important and the question of how you deal with human life, the mystery of life. [His film] ‘Teorema’ is all about seducing and how you can be destroyed by desire. Those two topics are so human and it’s also mystical how Pasolini deals with it. It’s on a very sophisticated level. It’s at the same level like the workings with religions. We don’t understand it but we need something higher to deal with life. We are longing for norms and truths. We need to try to arrive somewhere. Even in moments when you are dealing with bad thoughts, there is always that higher motif that you have to focus on, to continue. In this way my work is also dealing with everyday life. [The branches are a similar paradox] that metamorphosis is from Ovid. The human body transformed into a tree, and this one now is also from Ovid where Diana transforms Actaeon into a deer. The movies of Pasolini were the biggest inspiration for this body of work, and it’s the same thing.”

Like Pasolini, De Bruyckere deals with the dark side of humanity: with the ability of humans to kill or inflict pain, and yet at the same time to endure immeasurable suffering. Christianity is founded upon a positivistic philosophy of suffering, accepting it as an essential part of human life. A founding member of the Confessing Church, the German Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer explained, “Passio passiva’, suffering because we have to suffer... but we also boast in our suffering (tribulation) knowing that suffering produces patience, and patience produces experience, and experience produces hope and hope does not disappoint us.”

However De Bruyckere’s figures are not intended as revelations about God. While recalling the exquisite suffering of the Catholic saints and martyrs, they represent the human condition and the universality of suffering in the present, with reference to plight of refugees and victims of war and trauma.
The materiality of De Bruyckere’s sculptures accentuate the transitory nature of life. From a distance her figures look like marble, which has the connotations of wealth and enshrined permanency. Yet in choosing wax she re-enlivens the form. The colouration suggests veins and arteries, while the fragility and possible disintegration of the material reflects the eventual corrosion of organisms and impermanence of life. De Bruyckere’s works conjure the austere museum environment, with marble like sculptures, formal displays and old-fashioned drawings of viscera on intentionally aged paper. Exhibited in such a genteel manner softens the response of the viewer, making it easier to accept the disquieting figures.

De Bruyckere has emphasised that she is not motivated by a political agenda but by a fundamental interest in humanity. As she investigates the duality of the human condition, her work provides disparate insights:

“On one hand, I shoot disconcerting questions at the spectator, to which I do not give any reassuring answers; on the other hand, the presence of human characteristics in my figures is familiar, and therefore comforting.”

The artist wants people to see hope and find comfort in her work.

“Life is beautiful even if we have to deal with fear and pain,” she says “It makes it easier if we take care of each other and if we have a language with each other to communicate about pain, suffering and fear.”
**Ovid**  Ovid (43 BC – AD 17/18) was a Roman poet who is best known as the author of the epic poem *Metamorphoses*. Completed in AD 8, *Metamorphoses* consists of a 15-book catalogue re-telling almost 250 events in Greek and Roman mythology. In each myth, mortals are often vulnerable to external influences and Ovid suggests transformation as a universal principle, which explains the nature of the world: Troy falls, Rome rises. Nothing is permanent. Considered a masterpiece, *Metamorphoses* was one of the most popular classical works during the Middle Ages and has influenced much art and literature in Western Culture.

**Cranach**  Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553) was a German Renaissance painter known for his portraits of German princes and leaders of the Protestant Reformation, as well scenes from the bible and mythology. A close friend of Martin Luther, Cranach tried to find new ways of conveying Lutheran religious concerns in his art. He was a master of printing and engraving, was elected the mayor of Wittenberg, and managed an apothecary shop as well as a press that produced Bibles and tracts written by Luther. He continued throughout his career to paint nude subjects drawn from Classical mythology and Christian religion.

**Pasolini**  Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922 – 1975) was an Italian film director, poet, writer and intellectual. He demonstrated a unique and extraordinary cultural versatility, becoming a highly controversial figure in the process. As a director, Pasolini created a picaresque neorealism, showing a sad reality. Many people did not want to see such portrayals in artistic work for public distribution. Pasolini referred to himself as a ‘Catholic Marxist’ and often used shocking juxtapositions of imagery to expose the vapidity of values in modern society. His friend, the writer Alberto Moravia, considered him “the major Italian poet” of the second half of the 20th century.
CURATORIAL RATIONALE

This is the first major exhibition of Berlinde De Bruyckere’s in Australia, and as such ACCA wanted to use the opportunity to commission major new works and also present a breadth of practice to audiences new to her work.

ACCA’s artistic director Juliana Engberg explained that

“When I invited Berlinde to [the gallery] for her site visit I imagined she might find the space, which is vast and inspiring, somewhat like a cathedral. This was exactly her reaction. We decided then that the commission would use ACCA’s long room as a kind of approach to an altar and that the side galleries would become akin to chapels where one might have a more intimate scale to contemplate.”

JULIANA ENGBERG
ACCA’S ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

“I want a confrontation with the space. I’m interested in the dialogue. The space is the starting point for my work. This feeds me. It’s not just my own language that I’m going to show, but I want to create something new out of this dialogue.”

BERLINDE DE BRUYCKERE
ARTIST
WE ARE ALL FLESH
De Bruyckere worked for two years on a new commission for ACCA, made site specifically for the main gallery. Located in the centre of the space is a cast iron column seven metres high with a life size sculpture of two conjoined horse forms hoisted from it. Another horse form is hanging from a metal armature on the wall to the right. The space is sparse, dramatic, confronting. The viewer’s attention is focused on the dead weight of the horses, life expelled.

The horses retain their bodily mass and their hide, which has been allowed to keep its wounds and flaws visible. The evident holes in the hide are important, as they reveal there is nothing but emptiness within these bodies: these are representations of an actual and particular horse. Considered this way, the horse forms become awesome, majestic, yet paradoxically frail and wounded like the crucified figure of Christ figure or suffering of saints. Throughout the ages horses have symbolised power, glory, strength and freedom, the noble beast long ago domesticated by humans has served in many campaigns for civilisation, as for pillage and war. In De Bruyckere’s work they symbolise our fears of powerlessness and desolation, while perhaps too encouraging us to have courage and strength in the face of such deep seated emotional drivers.

“I only use animals in a human way. I started to work on horses in 1999, when the Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres asked me to reflect on war today. I was working more than one year in their archives and did a lot of research on this matter. The most important images for me were the abandoned city and the dead bodies of the horses. These images were staying with me. I took the motif of the dead horse as a symbol for loss in war, wherever it happens. Because if we address war, it’s about losing people. I wanted to translate that feeling so I started to work on six portraits of dead horses. Some years afterwards when people were asking about other animals in my work, I said ‘no’. I need the horse because of its beauty and its importance to us. It has a mind, a character and a soul. It is closest to us human beings. I couldn’t imagine another animal being so important.”

Berlinde De Bruyckere, 2011
“That’s what makes a good sculpture, I think: the fact it doesn’t rely on a meaning or subject matter, but that it is so broad that you can take it in any number of different directions, and lose your way in it.”

Berlinde De Bruyckere
Created especially for ACCA, Inside Me III is a tangle of flesh-coloured wax branches reminiscent of intestines, tree roots and human limbs, splayed across worn white pillows and slung between a frame based on a drying rack for herbs. This is a body turned inside out shown as a bag of bones and flesh. It's a body reduced to its most basic form. In this state the viewer is encouraged to think about what makes us human. Yes we are all flesh — but we are more than the physical, aren't we? Inside Me alludes to an interior state of being, a tangle of intangible emotions and feelings that are very real. Similar to the work in Gallery 4, here human limbs become branches, as tree trunks stand in for people in 019, reminding us of a universal life cycle, and for De Bruyckere ‘life and hope'.
To one side of the room a wax figure is crouched over a soft pillow, the body hairless, faceless and surface almost transparent. “The Pillow” is another important loan in the exhibition and the only obviously human figurative element. The figure appears to be protecting itself, curled inwards into a pillow atop a small wooden box. The fragility and rawness of the body is softened by the use of pillows. Here the pillow supports the figure as a sort of plinth, comforting the body.

Four antler-based works are suspended by strings from the gallery wall. Unlike the clichéd hunting trophies mounted in baronial halls, these antlers are pallid, delicate and raw. Antlers are a more recent motif for De Bruyckere. In Metamorphoses, Ovid retells the Greek myth of Actaeon, who accidentally stumbled across the Goddess Diana bathing. In an embarrassed fury she transforms Actaeon into a stag. He is unable to speak and flees in fear. His fellow hunters and their dogs do not recognise him and he is torn to death by his own hounds.

The male deer’s antlers serve to seduce the female but also to test their strength with other males and defend themselves against predators. In this sense they are also capable of destruction. The antler grows out of the body without control, and in some of De Bruyckere’s drawings they grow back inside it, suggesting that sometimes our strongest weapons can, despite their benefits, also be a threat to our own lives. Not only referencing mythology, the stag is also a traditional symbol of Christ. De Bruyckere has frequently used the Man of Sorrows motif, which throughout history has shown Christ, usually on the cross with the wounds of the passion, Here its interpretation enhances our sympathy for the hunted animal as well.

“I work with Romeu, my model, and then out of his head, body, you see antlers are growing... Usually the deer uses it [antlers] to seduce the female deer, where it’s something to be proud of. Here it’s completely the opposite: the antlers destroy the human body. In some of the drawings they are growing back inside the body and they hurt him. It’s all about being destroyed by desire.”

Berlinde De Bruyckere
“Behind the distorted, antique glass, you see sculptures in the shape of trees or branches. The trees are nearly the colour of human skin, so you end up with something fragile. Because the antique glass distorts your view, a couple of doors are left open, inviting you to look inside. I don’t want people to see the sculptures as trees, but as strange, vulnerable beings. The vitrines have a shelf at the bottom on which I placed three piles of blankets. It looks as if they are shielding and nurturing the roots of the trees... I also refer to those blankets as a “soothing circumstance” because they can sometimes lead us to a less harsh reality.”

Berlinde De Bruyckere

For Jung, the forest is understood as a symbol for life and the finding of one’s path through the woods is a metaphor for coming into self knowledge, and possibly a reason it features so prominently in fairy tales. This symbolic growth and transformation is suggested in the fleshy colouration of the wood, which alludes to the figure, and the journey through life that must involve growth and transformation.

In Metamorphoses, Ovid tells the myth of gods Zeus and Hermes, who disguised themselves as peasants and visited a town in Phyrgia. They wanted to see how hospitable the townsfolk were, and knocked on the doors of every house asking for a place to sleep that night. They were turned away by all, except an old married couple, Baucis and Philemon. Though they were poor they happily invited them to stay. Baucis and Philemon gathered what food they had and created a feast for their guests. At dinner they explained that though they were poor, they were rich with love and companionship. This impressed Zeus and Hermes, who revealed themselves and declared that they would punish the townsfolk but save Baucis and Philemon. They were ordered to climb a mountain and when they reached the top, they looked down. The town had been destroyed by a flood. However, Zeus and Hermes had saved their home, transforming it into a temple with marble pillars and a roof of gold. Zeus also granted them one wish. Baucis and Philemon’s wish was to serve as his priests, living and guarding his temple until the end. The only other thing they asked of Zeus was that they should never live alone, but would even die together. Upon their death, they were changed into an intertwining pair of trees, one oak and one linden.

De Bruyckere explains,

“For me it’s important when I started using the trees, they brought the part of life into the work. It was the moment when I started to pay more attention to the colour in the work, because it gave them more life. But the tree brought the element of hope into my work. I was very happy when I found the myth of Ovidius where the human transformed into a tree. When the body is dead and a tree is growing out of it, it becomes a symbol of life and hope.”
Investigate De Bruyckere’s work using the Analytical Frameworks.

**Formal Framework**
What materials and techniques has De Bruyckere used? How do the materials used or the technical skills shape or affect interpretation? Is this due to inherent qualities of the materials or to their application by the artist?

**Personal Framework**
What relationship does the artwork have to the artist’s life and experiences? What visual evidence supports this reading? Has the artist used a specific process or practice in creating the artwork that may reflect their personal philosophy and ideas?

**Cultural Framework**
How do the social, political, cultural or religious contexts of the artwork contribute to its meaning? How have historical or contemporary events shaped the intention of the artist or our understanding of the artwork’s meaning?

**Contemporary Framework**
How does the choice or presentation of subject matter or medium, materials and techniques reflect or challenge artistic or social traditions?

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**Further Reading**

SCHMERZENSMANN – Berlind De Bruyckere by Ali Subotnick. Published by Steidl 2008
http://www.kunstmuseumbern.ch/admin/data主持/kmb/files/page_editorial_paragraph_file/file/12/111019_Interview_De_Bruyckere.pdf?lm=1320741656
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