

In Studio with Patrick Van Craenenbroeck

Evelyne Schoenmann

Patrick's sculptures polarize: either one is immediately enthusiastic about the expression, the gestures of the figures, or one feels uncomfortable and rather looks at the imposing figures from a distance. In this conversation we try to find out how the artist experiences his own sculptures.

Patrick, at the Biennale in Haacht, Belgium, I had the impression that the observers approached your life-size figures rather timidly. Have you also had this experience?

Yes, it's my experience that coming into contact with my sculptures leaves few untouched. Why? Is it because of the dynamic, the movement, the subdued power and the pent-up energy? Or is it because of their penetrating look? Everyone feels it within their own context of the world, I think.

Visitors used descriptions like warriors, invaders, giants, or they talked about protectors, sentinels, companions. What do you consider your creatures?

into one whole.

Your Time Travellers have a similar face profile with, as you say, a penetrating, rather exigent look. The fascinating expressive power of the figures is obvious. Would you like to communicate something through these strong expressions?

The figures have a strong, expressive appearance, not angry or evil, but determined. Their dignity gives them an aura of power. They are, as it were, descendants of the same primordial father. Are they warriors? Merciless prophets? Or scouts? Scouts who have come into our world to defend certain values? I prefer to leave these questions unanswered as far as possible, so that the mystique remains

gravity, the grand scale of the figures?

A figure always starts out as pencil sketches. Sometimes it is just a few rudimentary lines, but that's enough for me to get a sense of a spatial dynamic and powerful expression, and then I continue my quest with the clay. My emotions and ideas continually push me towards a dynamic, spatial form. I work with chamotte clay. The general, spatial form must be created fairly quickly. Details, expression, textures and finishing flow together harmoniously later on.

It is a fight with gravity every single time. Even with the small sculptures. Certain parts of the sculpture have to be supported. My solution is not an academic approach. It is solved in a primitive way,



They provoke questions and compel dialogue of course.

Who are they? Where do they come from? Where are they going? What do they want to tell us? Why that penetrating look?

They are a bizarre new race. It is a mysterious race in a mystical world, inspired by old and diverse cultures. They are "TIME TRAVELLERS" who bring the links between the past, the present and the future to life, amalgamating them

and the visitor's imagination is and remains awakened.

I want you to see the earth talking, calling, being silent and whispering. I want you to feel the power, the dynamic, the mystique, even the timelessness.

We see you creating the figure "Refined I creep out of the fire". There is much of support necessary. Don't you encounter, when working on the life-size figures, problems of partial drying of the clay,

using sticks and twigs for support, which I continually have to shuffle around or shorten during the drying and the shrinking process.

The life-size sculptures of course require a much more carefully thought out construction, which occurs in various phases. The clay needs time to harden, because here it is certainly an ultimate struggle with gravity. The sculpture under construction is left to "rest" a number of times for a couple of days under plas-

tic. How long those phases last, I cannot determine scientifically. It depends on so many aspects, such as temperature and humidity in the studio, thickness of the clay surface, the (complicated) design, etc. Feeling and experience is the key here: touching the clay, stroking it and looking at the changing colour tint.

Inside the hollow form of the life-size sculptures, I place carefully considered supports using perpendicular clay plates, comparable to the ribs in the hull of a ship. And then comes one of the most delicate moments: transporting the sculpture from the studio to the kiln in the garden. This happens when the clay is leather-hard. The life-size sculptures sometimes have to be cut up. After the last firing, the various parts are reassembled, glued and finished. The sculpture will harden further in the kiln and some of the sticks will be replaced with fireproof material, others will remain in place and be burned.

And how do you fire the different sized figures?

In the early 1980s I started building

the figures and must emphasize the primal strength of the sculptures. I want you to see that they battled against the fire and came out victorious.

The sculptures are first fired at 950°. Then I colour the sculptures with various types of clay using paintbrushes, my fingers, water, sponges, etc. This is followed by a second firing process. They are oxidation fired up to 800°, and then the reduction begins up to 1200° for several hours. This reduction atmosphere gives beautiful patinas. The colour firing lasts about 20 hours.

A strong dialogue starts with the sculpture in the kiln during the firing process. This is a fascinating and magical moment, especially at night. It is often a struggle against natural elements, such as rain and wind. But that makes it so exciting, time and time again.

And then, after two days, when the kiln door can finally be opened, just a crack, and you can see what a wonder of colour was created by the fire and the smoke, then comes... the silence, minutes full of silent wonder... satisfaction.

takes three to four months each time.

Frans Boenders compares you with Prometheus: "Here I sit, forming humans in my image". What do you think?

There are indeed several art critics who have compared me and my work with Prometheus, the titan who steals the fire from the gods and gives it to the people so they can develop knowledge, science and creative art.

Fire is also a very important element for me in the process of creating the expressive power of the sculptures.

Or as in Goethe's poem:

Hier sitz' ich, forme Menschen
Nach meinem Bilde

And what are your plans for the near future?

I'm currently creating new sculptures for a big solo exhibition on a historical site. Meanwhile, a number of large projects are still ripening, on themes such as "Genetic Manipulation", "The Eighth Deadly Sin" and a series of sculptures inspired by the "Songs of Leonard Cohen". So there's certainly no lack of inspiration.



my own gas kilns. The interior of my current kiln is 150x150x160 cm. I chose the returning flame system as it gives the most even temperature distribution in the kiln, and above all it gives the best reduction results.

I have consciously stepped away from electric kilns and glazing. I wanted to go back to the beginnings of ceramics: nothing but different types of clay, fire and smoke. The firing process must be in complete harmony with the expression of

I can imagine that very well. – Can you estimate the time it takes to produce a life-size figure?

Putting an accurate time span on the creation of a life-size sculpture is almost impossible. As I said, construction and finishing occur in several different phases of activity and rest. Sometimes the large sculptures stand covered in plastic for days waiting to harden. And the drying process is slow. And then come the various firing processes. In total it probably

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Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview is with Steven Branfman (USA).

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