

**Interview with Berlinde De Bruyckere, 17.10.2011,
conducted and edited by Kathleen Bühler****Q. What does „dialogue“ mean in relation to your recent work?**

A. The works of Cranach and Pasolini are dealing with the same subjects as I do. I discovered Cranach fifteen years ago. But then I was more interested in the way he deals with the language of the body. I learned a lot of him, like making a sculpture as a painting or how he uses a black background behind his figures. The bodies became more fragile because of this and their deformations become more visible. That was my starting point to Cranach. Later I also started to use the same motives. For example I started to use the deer some time after I had seen that huge exhibition in London (Royal Academy of Arts, 2008).

Q. Why did you use animals in your work? What do animals signify for you?

A. 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 the 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 symbol of loss in war, where ever 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 becoming so important. But then two years ago I started to work with the deer. This had also to do with the cycle of Pasolini. I wanted to find a relation between him and me and therefore I needed to reduce the subjects to three motifs or feelings that are mirrored in all of my Pasolini works. Because the universe of Pasolini is immense. If you have to deal with all the different aspects in his work it's endless. So I narrowed it down to: seduction, confession and transformation. Each character in his film "Teorema" goes through these three stages.

Q. Is this why you chose the films "Teorema" and "Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo"?

A. It's the films where religion also becomes so important and the question how you deal with human life, the mystery of life. '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 of religion. 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 daily life.

Q. How do you proceed when making a sculpture?

A. In the technical way it's classical sculpture. It's made of wax and it has the human body or the horse as the motif. What happens with the sculpture is part of daily life. I always say that we have three elements: the daily life for myself as a starting point, the religion.....

Q. Religion in the sense that it's about human experiences?

A. As an artist it's not important to show personal experiences to the public, because nobody can go further with this. But if you start with your own feelings and thoughts and you can show this in a more universal way, then it makes sense for the public. Because then they recognize themselves in it. For instance in the series with Jelle Luipaard (2004-2005) – an earlier group of works which is currently not on display –, a male figure is hanging on a stick protruding from a wall. Everybody had the association of Christ hanging on a cross. But at the same time there were images in the news from a bridge in Iraq where soldiers were hanged while a boat passed under the bridge. The image that I still recall shows figures hanging on ropes from a bridge. For me it was exactly the same that happened to the figures in the studio. I was influenced as much from ancient religious paintings and sculptures as by the image of the bridge. I'm the one in the middle and I make the connection. Otherwise I'm just making versions from an old master. And I'm not interested in that. I try to go further and to add something from today.

Q. Why do you focus on the wound and the pain?

A. If I show you today the wounds of the body and the deer, you are invited to look into that hole and at the same time to contemplate the feeling of emptiness. Much more than it is about the body, it's about emptiness and loneliness. At the end we are all very lonely even when you put two bodies together who are really connected like in "Into One-Another III".

Q. But they are not facing each other.

A. The one on top is much more exposed than the one below. The one underneath has to take care of the other. Loneliness and the taking care of each other are the two messages that I try to explain.

Q. I realize there is much more than just wounds and pain. Are vitality and sensuality important, too?

A. I'm always very sad, when people are thinking that it's all about death. No, you don't look carefully, because the part of life is even more important than the part of death. Life is beautiful even if we have to deal with fear and pain. 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. If we don't then it's not possible to live anymore.

Q. If we're not sure about the preciousness of life then we have no common base?

A. I was also looking for a material that could translate this consciousness of everything being so fragile that it can break easily. For example, if you look at people and their relations. They are so delicate today. We are in very difficult times. If I look around me, a lot of friends of my generation are divorced. To take care of your feelings you should watch out what you do, how you live together. It's very precious and you should value that otherwise everything can happen to you. That was also the feeling that I wanted to translate into the material. You know with wax that when it falls down it's broken. You can restore it but then it will always be visible. It makes us aware that we are parts of different elements we put together just to create one new person, one new object. So we have the two possibilities. You can see it with "Into One-Another III". The figure on top is protecting the other one.

Q. So it's interdependence that is important to you? Like the tree growing out of the man, growing into an animal?

A. For me it's important that when I used the trees, they brought the part of life into the work. It was the moment when I started to pay more attention to the color in the work, because it gave them more life. For example the color that I used on the "Schmerzensmann" was more green and grey. If you compare this to the "Into One-Another"-figures there is a lot of red. They are still living. You can feel the blood through their skin.

Q. Which sometimes can be unbearable. You feel them pulsating.

A. 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.

Q. In your Pasolini-cycle being destroyed by desire is a very strong issue. What was your fascination with this aspect of Pasolini?

A. I first saw all the Pasolini movies when I was twenty years old. It was too heavy then. I was too young, to understand it. In the preparation for the show in Halle (Moritzburg, 2011), Cornelia Wieg was asking me about the movies of Pasolini. I decided it was the right moment to watch them again. After having seen "Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo" I realized I was very close to his work and I want to spit out what this is all about. I wanted to show people what it's about in way so that they can understand it. Because the language that we use, is the language of beauty. It's not to block people. You recognize yourself when you are watching the movies as you can recognize yourself, when you are watching my work. The language starts from your thoughts, difficulties and questions and tries to give answers by making the work.

Q. So when you ask yourself what you expect from an ideal visitor then it's honesty?

A. Open yourself to give it a space to feed you. To give you some answers to existential questions. When people say that my work is only about death, I think it's because they don't open themselves to the work. When you're closed you see only the dark side of the work. There is of course a dark side. They figures are all full of holes and dark spaces. I show you these. It's not that when nobody shows you these that they don't exist and the moment you have to deal with them, you have no language. I try to give people a language when in certain moments in their life they have to deal with all this. I don't want to scare people, but give them hope.

Q. What are the reactions you normally get?

A. People who don't like it mostly don't say anything.

Q. What kind of art inspires you?

A. I'm often inspired by contemporary art, but mostly video art and film. There are few contemporary sculptures inspiring me the exception being Paul McCarthy. He has on one hand a brutal expression and on the other hand he's using fairytales to tell you the story.

Q. Again there's something universally human in fairytales.

A. It surfaces more in video and movies today than in other sculptures. Very often sculptures for me are stuck in formal issues. Even in my beginnings as a sculptor I was not concerned with formal questions, but I used material that had already some special meaning. For example, I

was using blankets because blankets are used to keep people warm and to protect them. There are very human aspects to blankets. I'm an artist who is always bringing things from different backgrounds together to create something new. Like these glass cabinets which are coming from a natural history museum they became part of the "Into One-Another" sculptures. They are their own universe now. I like the idea that they were used for other reasons.

Q. Do you relate back to their former life?

A. Yes. I could never show this type of work on a new made plinth. Because then it would only expose the work. I don't want to do that. I want to create its own universe around it. That's why I'm looking forward to my new works for a private museum in Istanbul. They will be installed in old buildings in Istanbul. 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.

Q. Is your art religious? Is it important to put a label on it?

A. I don't like to put a label on it. When you label it then you only focus on the label. I try to keep it open. But of course I grew up with religion, I was in a boarding school since I was five years old, living with nuns until I was fourteen. So it's part of me. I don't to hide it. It is there and it is still there although I'm not practicing it. I learned a lot of reading in the bible. Reading in the bible is like watching Pasolini. It urges you to start thinking and to add something personal, make reference to your own situation and thoughts. That is important. Now that people are against religion because of so many fundamentalist acts. If you deal with religion in a honest way, there is nothing wrong with it. I am what I am because of this. So I have a lot of respect for people because of my religious upbringing. I am one big ear for the world and my answers are my works.