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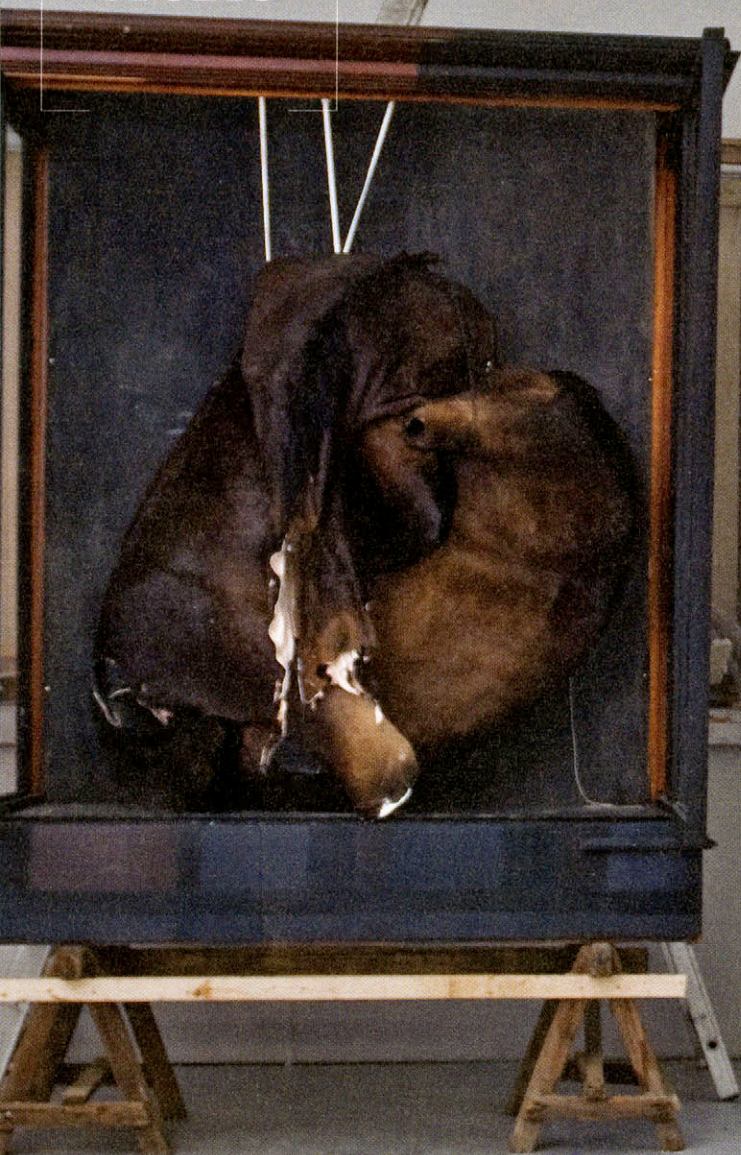
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ART + AUCTION



IN THE
STUDIO



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At 44, De Bruyckere has an ascetic air: She sports no-nonsense, close-cropped hair and speaks in a slow, considered way. More often than not her face wears the intense, thoughtful expression you might expect from someone whose work grapples with the universal themes of life and death, suffering and solace. She filters the imagery and emotions of the greatest Old Master works through the lens of present-day atrocities, creating life-size wax and horsehide figures that are, as she puts it, “both frightening and comforting.”

It's impossible to walk the length of her studio without glimpsing her sources of inspiration. Pinned to the wall opposite a bookcase overflowing with monographs on Giotto, Dirk Bouts and other masters are reproductions of paintings by the likes of Lucas Cranach the Elder, whom she studies for “how he paints skin, how he deforms his models,” and Matthias Grünewald, whose Isenheim Altarpiece she describes in rapturous tones. Next to these are placed ephemera, such as a magazine clipping about an Abu Ghraib torture victim. “Not so much has changed,” De Bruyckere tells me, looking at reproductions of two paintings by the 17th-century master Luca Giordano depicting bound, writhing figures: Saint Bartholomew about to be flayed and Prometheus awaiting the eagle that will gouge out and devour his liver. “There is still brutality. You see the same things in Guantánamo, in Iraq.”

De Bruyckere selected the Giordanos to accompany her wax sculpture of two conjoined male figures in the exhibition “Berlinde de Bruyckere/Luca Giordano: We Are All Flesh,” running until May 2 at the space on Old Bond

Street that her London gallery, Hauser & Wirth, shares with the Old Master dealer Colnaghi. Having her work displayed alongside historical pieces is nothing new for De Bruyckere: The dealer, tastemaker and all-around aesthete Axel Vervoordt included her in his *Wunderkammer* of a show “Artempo: Where Time Becomes Art,” which extended over several floors of Venice's Palazzo Fortuny two years ago, as well as in a similar display in the chapel of Paris's École des Beaux-Arts last September.

It's telling that De Bruyckere's residence and studio are tucked away in De Muide, a neighborhood, once home to dockworkers and now popular with a recent influx of immigrants, that is 10 minutes north of the city's touristic center. Here she is closer to a cluster of well-preserved medieval buildings—including the Saint Bavo Cathedral, which houses Hubert and Jan Van Eyck's famous Ghent Altarpiece—than to any art world hot spot.

De Bruyckere became fascinated with the Old Masters as a child. Born in Ghent, she was sent at age five to a boarding school outside the city, where she spent much of her time holed up in a library, poring over art books. “It was a self-made study and a way to get away from the school, the nuns,” she says. “The history of Catholic art was my escape.”

At 16 she returned to Ghent and enrolled in the Sint-Lucas Visual Arts school. Not long after graduating, she became known in Belgium and Holland for spare sculptures consisting mainly of woolen blankets, sometimes simply stacked on tables or beds. In response to news footage of blanket-swathed refugees in »



HER DEALER, YVON LAMBERT, SAYS OF DE BRUYCKERE, “SHE NEVER COMPROMISES.”



Clockwise from far left: Pots of melted wax De Bruyckere uses to achieve her subtle colors; the grounds of the studio that she shares with her husband, the artist Peter Buggenhout, which was once a Catholic boys school; *Wezen*, 2003–04; and *Behind Sadness*, 2008.



Rwanda, she began adding wax legs sticking out from the coverlets. So convincing was one of these that when she installed it in a pool of water in Holland, it was mistaken for a corpse, causing an uproar in the local media.

De Bruyckere had a breakthrough in 2000, when the In Flanders Fields Museum, in the town of Ypres, site of a legendary World War I battle, invited her to make a work dealing with the conflict. She delivered five life-size splay-legged horses captured in their death throes. Three years later, her place on the international scene was secured with the inclusion in the 2003 Venice Biennale, directed by the curator Francesco Bonami, of her sculpture *Black Horse*, depicting an equine form curled up in the center of a table. Her *Lichaam (Corpse)*, 2006, a horsehide draped over a table, was in that year's Berlin Biennial, organized by the artist Maurizio Cattelan and the curators Ali Subotnick and Massimiliano Gioni.

Last fall De Bruyckere had her first New York solo show, at Yvon Lambert. It featured life-size, lugubrious (as several critics described them) wax figures: a hulking fragment of a horse perched dramatically on a table set in the center of the gallery and surrounded by a group of human forms. The latter all lacked heads, which she says would detract from their universality, and their pale flesh-colored

bodies were contorted, knobby, one of them seemingly no more than a hanging slab of meat and two others standing bent at the

waist, their arms morphing into tree branches. It's challenging subject matter. "She never compromises," says Yvon Lambert.

Gioni, now a curator at New York's New Museum, included in the institution's fall 2008 show "After Nature" de Bruyckere's *Robin V*, 2007, a prostrate wax figure in a glass vitrine, its arms and torso exploding, like the Lambert sculptures, into a profusion of tree limbs. "Berlinde has imagined an entire universe that goes from medieval sculpture to contemporary life, all the way to Futurist dystopia," he says.

With their distortions, De Bruyckere's pieces are hardly easy to live with, but they appeal to a set of adventurous and thoughtful collectors. The New York-based oncologist Marc Straus, who with his wife, Livia, owns three of the artist's wax sculptures, says he sees the works "in relation to the concept that in cancer there is something growing out of control that the body can't contain. That is frightening. But her work is also beautiful."

That multivalent effect often begins with images culled from De Bruyckere's watercolors and drawings but ultimately results from a process that she began to develop some 15 years ago, when she was conceiving her blanket women and looking for a material that would render the jutting legs as lifelike as possible. Madame Tussauds popped into her mind, and she started experimenting with wax. Now she and her team of assistants—three women in their 20s and 30s—have perfected the technique. *(continued on page 106)*



DE BRUYCKERE TRAINED AS A PAINTER, AND SHE STILL THINKS OF HERSELF AS ONE.



Clockwise from left: De Bruyckere's Old Master reproductions in her studio; the blanket work *Gedragen Worden*, 2000; the 2007-08 sculpture *Piëta*—she often places pillows under her figures, which she calls "vulnerable"; the artist at work.



In the Studio

(continued from page 50) De Bruyckere trained as a painter and still thinks of herself as one. This becomes apparent in the crucial final stages of each sculpture: After making silicone casts of horse or human bodies, each part done separately so that she can reassemble them creatively, she brushes on layers of melted colored wax, using as many as 15 hues in one sculpture. This layering accounts for the eerily realistic splotches of red and blue, representing veins, abrasions or contusions. The pots, pans and burners arrayed on the studio's tables lend it an alchemical air.

She points to a wax sculpture in progress perched atop a high wooden plinth. It's slated for the Spedale di Santa Fina, a hospital in the medieval Tuscan hill town San Gimignano, home to her Italian gallery, Continua. A 15th-century wooden crucifixion recently discovered there is her inspiration. The figure's pose is roughly based on photographs of an emaciated model curled over his bent legs. For the colors, she refers to the green and blue flesh tones of a 17th-century figure painted by Andrea Vaccaro, a reproduction of which is attached to the wall.

When De Bruyckere is not manipulating wax limbs, she's wrestling with horsehides. In another work in progress, she is experimenting with a new approach: Using the same molding she employed for the massive wax equine sculpture in New York, she will construct one side in skins and the other in cast iron—a new material for her—to convey, she says, “the heaviness of death.” On a nearby wall are photographs of the model she used, a bloodstained carcass in the Ghent University equine clinic. Such images don't faze De Bruyckere, whose father once owned a butcher shop down the street from her studio.

She has a longstanding arrangement with the clinic: When a horse dies, the veterinarians alert her so that she can come and cast it. Despite the fact that her process is entirely humane—the skins come from a man in Brussels who otherwise prepares them for the leather industry—an animal-rights group once took umbrage at an outdoor sculpture in Holland in which she strung a series of horse figures from trees.

De Bruyckere considers the supports for her pieces integral to them. She used to scavenge for the wooden tables and vitrines—always secondhand, like her blankets—but now works with a furniture dealer in Antwerp. In her studio is a cabinet from a ceramics museum in France, with several wax limbs piled inside, and a vitrine, from a museum of African art in Ghent, that awaits a horse sculpture—a spherical composite of two animals' hides. Stacked on filing cabinets are white cushions that De Bruyckere sometimes places between her creations, which she thinks of as vulnerable beings, and the surfaces on which they rest, as in *Pietà*, 2007–08, a headless male figure stretched supine on a bed of pillows, its spindly legs dangling onto the floor. “I wanted to show how helpless a body can be,” she says. “And the beauty of that body.”

The artist insists that her sculptures are never strictly narrative, but stories of all kinds influence her. While working on the pieces for the Yvon Lambert show, she and her assistants discussed Cormac McCarthy's 2007 novel *The Road*, in which a man and his young son traverse a postapocalyptic landscape. “The way the father was always telling his son that everything will be okay,” she says, “it's about giving hope and your love for your child.”

An old-fashioned humanist, De Bruyckere says she is happy to see the go-go art market cool off. It made her uncomfortable even as it helped her own prices, and she feels that the current economic downturn, together with the change of administration in the United States, may bring some attention to the issues she explores: vulnerability, personal responsibility, human contact and caring for others.

“It's been hard making this type of work,” she says. “A lot of people think I'm depressed. But I'm a happy woman and a happy mother. Certain things in the world make me feel helpless. I hope people look to my work and find something that can help them.” ☐