

**LIEVE BLANCQUAERT**  
**ECCE HOMO | BEHOLD MANKIND**

10.06.16 >< 17.01.17



## INTRODUCTION

M's collection is the beating heart of the museum. It offers a rich range of themes and artistic traditions, from fifteenth-century sculpture to nineteenth-century social realism. The photographer and documentary-maker Lieve Blancquaert (°1963, Ghent) was invited to cast her eye over this centuries-old collection and to create new work. She was struck during her visits by how frequently the Old Masters depicted sorrow, pain and loss. Just as she does today. For this exhibition, then, Blancquaert has photographed life in all its fragility. Her works engage in a dialogue with our medieval Pietàs and Descents from the Cross.

Lieve Blancquaert is now presenting her own version of this tradition at M: *'A dialogue arises between the suffering then and the suffering today. I took pictures at the refugee camp in Dunkirk, for instance, and at an A & E unit. But don't expect journalistic or medical reportage: my photographs focus on serenity.'* She created a fascinating dialogue between her work and the pieces in the collection. Photos of boat refugees, the disruption that migration causes to people's lives, the clothes of patients admitted to A & E, young people with a physical injury, and general evidence of the transience of the human body are all amongst the work she is presenting at the museum. Together, they form a mosaic that shows people as beings marked by fate and by life, and who are finite.

Curators: Marjan Debaene and Peter Carpreau

## PIETAS

Lieve Blancquaert has come across an incredibly large number of Pietàs, so it was not difficult for her to find inspiration in one dating from 500 years ago. It is important to Blancquaert for us to realize that the story of these mothers, of these Pietàs, is repeated over and over again. It is a timeless, universal story that goes beyond religion. It applies to everything and everyone. In this room, a video by Lieve is juxtaposed with medieval sculptures. The video shows a Syrian woman discussing the loss of her son in Arabic. The wooden statues from the collection stand around like silent witnesses

### ***Fourteenth-century wooden Pietà*** ***(anonymous, c. 1365, oak, 134 x 74 x 43 cm)***

This Brabant Pietà was made for the Chapel of Our Lady Outside the Walls in Leuven. It was displayed there alongside Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* and Jan Borman's *St George Altarpiece*. The Leuven Pietà was innovative for its time and so occupies a crucial place in the art history of the Low Countries. In earlier treatments of the theme, for instance, Mary looked at Jesus. Here she gazes at the viewer and presents her dead son, making it easier for you as viewer to feel a connection and share in the mother's sorrow. Mary is not sitting on the traditional throne, moreover, but on a rock – a reference to Golgotha. This places the sculpture within the narrative cycle of Christ's Passion, making it one of the earliest known examples of the western Pietà.



### ***Contemporary pietà***

The woman you hear and see here is a mother she met in Zaatari, a refugee camp in Jordan near the border with Syria, where some 80,000 Syrian refugees live. It is an unbelievable place, desolate, dry, almost uninhabitable. Though the people live cheek by jowl, they try to organize their lives. It is a place that really moved me because you see that people want to live, whatever the cost. This woman, like many women there, has lost her son. And for Lieve Blancquaert that is the theme of the Pietà. *“I asked her just one question: “Tell me about your son’s life, from the moment he started growing inside you to today.” It was one long monologue and I filtered pieces from it. Even without understanding her words, her body language tells you what she is saying. Her fear, her panic, her grief ... She talks about her*

*despair, she says they have been looking for him for two years, that she can't find him and that she is afraid she will never see him again. Even without understanding the actual words, you understand what she's saying. It is heartrending to see how universal language can be"*

## PHYSICAL PAIN

Lieve Blancquaert drew inspiration from the antependium with the Instruments of the Passion and Veronica's sudarium or veil. According to legend, St Veronica used it to wipe the sweat and blood from Christ's face as he carried his cross. His face was miraculously imprinted on the cloth, the veneration of which was believed to offer protection against sudden death.



*Antependium with the Resurrected Christ  
(anonymous, c. 1480, oak, 93 x 193 cm)*

This panel is a fine witness to the tradition of painting in Leuven in the late fifteenth century. The spirit of Dirk Bouts lives on in the depicted figures. The background of the panel is entirely red. The risen Christ appears at the centre in a red cloak, holding the cross pennant as a symbol of his Resurrection. Veronica's miraculous cloth hangs to the left, while the four robes on the right refer to the carrying of the cross. Two richly dressed men with an angel behind them kneel on the far right and left.



## Contemporary shroud



Lieve Blancquaert went in search of a contemporary shroud: 'I spent a week at the Accident and Emergency department at Ghent University Hospital. We agreed that no people would appear in the pictures. While I was there, I photographed the victims' clothes, which were cut up to allow the patients to be treated quickly. Contact with the victims' families was very intense at times. You're turning up at the worst imaginable moment in their lives, so you have to find precisely the right tone. All the same, virtually nobody refused. It's amazing how much importance family and friends attach to their loved one's personal things. They seek comfort in an ordinary T-shirt, which suddenly becomes a kind of relic. Our modern-day shrouds, you could say. A silly T-shirt suddenly has a story to tell, whereas what we normally wear rarely has a story.'

### POWER

In this gallery, Lieve Blancquaert has installed a triptych of a family of Iraqi refugees and a photograph of a boy at a rehabilitation centre. Her own works form a dialogue in this way with a painting by Rogier van der Weyden and another showing the martyrdom of St Quentin.

### Contemporary Christmas crib

Seeing her work hanging alongside a Rogier van der Weyden takes Lieve Blancquaert well outside her comfort zone. She doesn't try to put herself on the level of these artists. But she hopes people will look at the historical art with fresh eyes.



Lieve: *"For this triptych I photographed a sort of contemporary Christmas crib in a refugee camp in Dunkirk. It is a family of Iraqi refugees: father, mother and their son. They are wrapped in blankets to keep out the bitter cold. The use of blankets was inspired by the drama and the movement which the textiles, the blankets and tapestries give the paintings in this gallery. It was a memorable encounter. I explained to the father, an English teacher, what I wanted to do: show the scene as I see it. I see those people leaving home, coming off the boat... and at that point they are still intact. They still have their suitcases, their Samsonite on wheels...and gradually, the further into Europe they come, the longer their journey, the more impoverished they become. When I explained this to the father, he understood immediately what I meant."*

On the other side of the wall she shows a photograph taken in a rehabilitation centre. What she found so incredibly beautiful about the image is the young man's obvious strength. It is suffering, but suffering borne with great strength. The boy in the photograph is a real fighter. 'Imagine' it says on his chest. Here she saw a link with the painting next to it depicting the torture of Saint Quinten. That young man still has tremendous strength despite his mutilated body.



The Legend and Martyrdom of St Quentin  
(Jan van Rillaer and Bernard van Orley, 1537, 107 x 95 cm)

St Quentin is the patron saint of physicians, lock-makers and porters. This panel shows his life, condemnation and martyrdom. The painting has two sides: On the back, you can see a strikingly realistic depiction of his martyrdom. One of St Quentin's miracles is shown on the front, to the left. A blind man listens to the person who will cure him. A woman with crutches also awaits the miracle. On the right of the panel, the Roman prefect Ricius Varus condemns Quentin to death.

## MENTAL SUFFERING

Lieve Blancquaert makes lots of portraits, but never without a story behind it. It is those human stories that interest her. Then she looks for ways of visualizing them.

Lieve: *"The painted portraits in this corridor are all perfect and what I wanted to do was to give the mawkishness of those portraits a kick in the ass. So by way of response, I decided that the psychological suffering of children should also to be a part of this exhibition. The paintings here don't tell you about the psychological suffering. I went to a child and adolescent psychiatry unit and made a portrait of a girl. It's a hard image. But it is what happens today and what happened in the past too. We still idealize our portraits. When we have photographs taken of our children, the selfies... it is always at their best, idealized. This is quite simply a girl at war with herself and the world."*





Portret van Marie Thérèse Van Hemelrijck als kind

(Joseph Pinnoy, 1808-1866)

## POVERTY

The Meunier Gallery is all about 'Ecce Homo' for Lieve Blancquaert. The two images she is showing here deal with loneliness, poverty and religion. On the one hand, you see an image of a woman who is poor, incredibly religious and all alone. She is lying on a sofa praying. The woman was open-minded enough to share this intimate moment. On the other side, you can see the outline a crucifix has left on the wallpaper. It is a partial reflection of Lieve's view of religion. Of how religion is used as an excuse. How it is misused; how war is waged in the name of religion.

## SCARS

The series of photographs were taken in a rehabilitation centre and shows the scars paraplegics are left with. The marble sculpture of the sleeping child is not usually here, but Lieve had it brought out of the museum store and placed it next to this triptych. For her those two pieces arouse the same emotions. What links the two children is silence. The duality of the image is also appealing. Is the child asleep or....? Perhaps it was a memorial?





### **Le Sommeil**

(Jean Escoula, ca 1885)

Portraits or sculptures of children are mostly playful. But not in this case. The little boy here sleeps naked on his left side, with a marble blanket and pillow. The child evokes a strange tranquillity and fragility. As if he were dead rather than sleeping. The white marble emphasizes the petrified, perished body. Sculptures like this of sleeping children often had a mourning or memorial connotation in nineteenth-century Belgian sculpture.

### **BOAT REFUGEES**

Lying here on one side is a fragment of a statue of Jesus. We still have his torso, but his head and arms are missing. The sculpture resembles a piece of wreckage. Opposite it hangs a large cold Flemish landscape by Permeke that reminds Lieve Blancquaert of the landscape in which refugees come ashore.



Lieve: *“The young men in the photographs had all travelled by boat and were washed up on our shore. They are very deliberately all men, partly because it is mostly men who flee and partly to establish a link with Christ and the Apostles. They are received in Europe with a gold thermal blanket. When I took the photographs, those blankets brought vivid memories of the crossing flooding back to the men. I could barely communicate with them, I had to use gestures to explain, but they had little difficulty understanding that I wanted to recreate the feel of the boat. For them the boat is really a byword for the great trauma they have suffered and the vast expanse of water is a monster. They are men who have been through a very painful experience. One of the boys told me that he had to swim for two hours when a part of their boat sank. They are so elated when they get off the boat, they think they have made it. But then they are faced with an ordeal of a different kind. People have been fleeing like this for centuries and centuries. Religion has been at the root of some of the diaspora.”*

### **Landscape** (Permeke, ca 1938/1943)

The Expressionist Constant Permeke used yellow, grey and brown to set out a powerful, open meadow landscape on canvas. It is a carefully conceived, classical composition, in which the forces of nature are at work. The bales of hay create depth in the painting.

The Second World War was a dark period for the artist. His son Paul was deported, and Permeke refused to show his art in Germany, for which he was prohibited from exhibiting or painting. This work is not dated, but he painted numerous landscapes in the period 1938–43.

### **DREAMS OF THE FUTURE**

Carved wooden angels playing music are juxtaposed in this gallery with a series of photographs of sleeping refugee children and a soundtrack. All these photographs taken in the pitch dark are of children who fled to Europe alone. Many are sent on ahead, some lost their parents en route. Never have so many young children come to Belgium unaccompanied as in recent years.

Lieve: *“I photographed the children while they were asleep accompanied by K3 dolls and a Spiderman soft toy. A child asleep is a fantastic thing. There is nothing more beautiful than a child sleeping soundly. That is what these children have missed. Now they can sleep because they feel safe and secure. This room should evoke that sense of security. The wooden images of music-making angels link up with the audiotape on which we hear the voices of children singing and narrating. What I like about the series is the children’s zest for life. They sing, they listen to their own music, they have dreams for the future. It is amusing and positive but also sad. It is disarming. What I want to show here is the children’s strength, their courage and spirit. “*

## PRACTICAL INFORMATION

### OPEN

Monday > Sunday 11:00 >< 18:00

Thursday 11:00 >< 22:00

Wednesday closed

### TICKETS

	Tickets reception desk	Online tickets (°)
+ 26 year	€12*	€9*
+ 26 year & concessions	€10*	€7*
13-25 year	€5	€3
0 - 12 year	free	free

\*audio tour included | (°) + € 1,50 per reservation

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## PRESS IMAGES

Can be downloaded from the online press room of M – Museum Leuven

<http://mleuven.prezly.com>

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