



## FOCUS PRESENTATION #2: BERLINDE DE BRUYCKERE

26.09.2020 – 21.02.2021

*Focus Presentation #2: Berlinde De Bruyckere takes *Onschuld kan een hel zijn* (1995) as its starting point: a unique portfolio of archive material that Berlinde de Bruyckere (Ghent, 1964) put together in preparation for her exhibition of that title at the Middelheim Museum in 1995. The presentation in the collection pavilion offers an insight into the thinking process of the artist. Two monumental works were (re) installed in the Braem Pavilion and in the art park.*

### *Onschuld kan een hel zijn, 1995 (archive portfolio)*

In 1995, the Middelheim Museum presented the first major solo exhibition by Berlinde de Bruyckere: *Onschuld kan een hel zijn* (Innocence can be a hell). Now, 25 years later, the archive portfolio with the same title offers us a unique view of a specific part of the artist's work process: the development of an exhibition. What we find there are drawings, working photos and written project proposals made by the artist to give shape to her ideas and to discuss them with the museum.

The drawings vary from designs for an installation to impressions of what the work would look like. They are not artworks, but nor are they plain technical drawings. The paper is often yellowed and brittle, and the drawings are in pencil, felt-tip, ink and watercolour. We also see how the artist painstakingly communicates, among other things about the difference between working titles and definitive titles, and about the ideas behind the works. These notes are handwritten or typed. The photos are studies of the places in the museum where she would like to work, or else they show prototypes, illustrations or sources of inspiration. The portfolio is also accompanied by two blankets that are part of a work in the exhibition which is now for the first time being set up again in the place for which it was created: the Braem Pavilion.

### **The work process**

Focus Presentation #2 situates the sketches, photos and writings from the archive portfolio in a broader collection of drawings, photos and newspaper cuttings that De Bruyckere assembled with great care. She surrounds herself with images that inspire her, drawings and photos that document her work process and in their turn inspire new works. As an entity, this stream of images gives us an insight into her work process. Not the physical process of making moulds and sewing blankets, but that of amassing inspiration, developing ideas, expanding on themes, asking questions, looking for forms, telling stories. De Bruyckere invites us to look at this process and shares with us her quest as an artist.

These images demonstrate her interest in art, the human body, and the tragedy of being human. We see images of art and history, often with a focus on the body and on suffering and mortality. We see images of current events, from refugees on the road or stranded somewhere, of people struck by disaster. We see images of bodies, human and animal, living and dead, beautiful and distorted, dancing and posing.

Anyone who is even a little familiar with De Bruyckere's work will recognise much of this. But there is more: you can see how a wide variety of sources, meanings and artworks become interwoven in a

creative process. In the film made for this presentation, the artist gives us more explanation of these connections. We see and hear how everything is connected together in her mind and how she consistently makes links between past and present, recent and early works, inspiration and artwork, art and society.

### **The artworks: *Onschuld kan een hel zijn, 1993* and *Onschuld kan een hel zijn, 1995/2020***

So Berlinde De Bruyckere's artworks form part of a complex system of connections, meanings, intentions and choices. They are the result of a process, but this often remains hidden from the viewer. In the film, the artist looks specifically at the genesis, interweaving, context and present relevance of the two monumental sculptures that you can also see in the museum. A work from the 1995 exhibition is temporarily being installed again in the Braem Pavilion: *Innocence Can Be a Hell, 1995/2020*. And visitors can see *Onschuld kan een hel zijn, 1993* in the art park. This work was purchased for the Middelheim collection recently with the aid of the Middelheim Promotors and the artist herself.

These two artworks look completely different and were not made at the same time, nor have they ever been shown together. Yet they are related to one another in more than one way: by their titles, by the combination of innocence and violence, by such themes as mortality and suffering, and by a timeless and at the same time currently relevant commentary on man and society. The fact that they both contain the seeds of recent works by De Bruyckere also connects them to each other and to the present day.

### **The artist**

Berlinde De Bruyckere (Ghent, 1964; lives and works in Ghent) creates sculptures, installations and watercolours. Using wax, textiles, animal skins, hair, wood and metal, she explores such motifs as the human body, trees and flowers, blankets and horses. Her forms and materials are metaphorical, her vocabulary highly individual yet recognisable. Beneath their first, often appealing layer, lies a huge complexity of ambiguity and contrast. She sees this as reflecting the universal human experience, being human. Suffering, death, loneliness and fear go hand in hand with beauty, life, love and care. De Bruyckere shows us what we feel and know, but not always what we want to see or be aware of. And it is precisely this recognition and acknowledgement of our shared destiny as fragile humans that contains a powerful message of consolation and beauty. De Bruyckere studied monumental art at Sint-Lucas in Ghent. She exhibits internationally and her work has been acquired for major collections in Belgium and abroad. In 2013 she made a powerful impression when she represented Belgium at the Venice Biennale in collaboration with the Nobel Prize winner J.M. Coetzee. More recently she has also engaged in projects in the performing arts. She has received the Prix Jeune Peinture Belge, the Flemish Culture Prize for the Visual Arts, and an honorary doctorate from Ghent University.

### **The Collection Pavilion**

In 2019 the Middelheim Museum opened a new Collection Pavilion housing 50 objects and artworks from its hidden collections. Every so often the museum 'activates' one of these 50 pieces in a 'focus presentation'. This begins on the basis of research into the origin and meaning of the work, and the aim is to further expand on the meaning of this work together with the artist and the public. For the museum, it is also an opportunity to carry out research into the collections: what they contain, how they have been built up and organised, and what is to be collected in the future. For the public, it is a chance to situate one specific object within the artist's broader practice. For the first presentation, on Michel François' *Résidence Terrestre*, the focus was on the evolution of a single work as a result of being repeatedly re-installed and re-interpreted. This second presentation focuses on an artist's creative process.

**Berlinde de Bruyckere**  
*Onschuld kan een hel zijn, 1993*

Purchased for the museum in 2019 with the aid of the Middelheim Promotors and the artist herself. The work will be installed in the art park for the first time on the occasion of Focus Presentation #2 and will remain on display there afterwards.

Innocence can be a hell

When you walk through the art park, you will come across three enormous maces that brutally disrupt the peaceful atmosphere. The pointed heads of these mediaeval weapons remind us that in the past the woods were often a dangerous place for innocent passers-by. And the metal stranglehold that looks as if it will choke the trees is a threat to the innocence of nature. Or, as the title says: innocence can be a hell. Such contrasts are typical of De Bruyckere's work, as are such themes as mortality and suffering.

The tree motif

This work dates from 1993 and is the first in which the artist examined the tree as a motif. She continued this research for her 1995 solo exhibition at the Middelheim Museum, where she installed blanket women in and up against trees. This was eventually to result in the monumental *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood, 2012-2013*, a high point in her oeuvre that received great praise at the 2013 Venice Biennale.

Acquisition for the collection

*Onschuld kan een hel zijn, 1993* was created for the 'Zoersel '93' exhibition, but the tree motif links it to the Middelheim Museum. This work has never previously been shown at the Middelheim Museum, but because it was made for a park, it is perfectly suited. Like a hammer blow, but entirely appropriate, both for these surroundings and for our times.

**Berlinde De Bruyckere**  
*Onschuld kan een hel zijn, 1995/2020*

This work was created for the Braem Pavilion as part of De Bruyckere's 1995 solo exhibition *Onschuld kan een hel zijn*. It is now being re-installed in the same place in a slightly modified form. This is a temporary display on the occasion of Focus Presentation #2.

Onschuld kan een hel zijn

You see three rotary clothes dryers with dozens of old-fashioned blankets hanging from them. You may feel like enveloping yourself cosily in one of them, but beware: they are as much like barbed wire as they are a comfort. The words sewn onto them count as a warning. De Bruyckere sees these blankets as extremely ambiguous. They protect us, offering warmth and consolation, and are a symbol of homeliness, but they can also suffocate us and remind us of disasters and wars, of refugees and the homeless who derive their only warmth from their blanket. Innocence and violence in a single image.

The blanket motif

This work dates from 1995, but remains relevant today: the blanket is still a powerful motif in this artist's oeuvre, and its relevance to society is still at least as substantial. In 1995 the context was provided by the Rwanda genocide and the Balkan war, while today there seem only to be more wars, disasters and homeless people in the world. And then there is the Corona situation, with which we are all confronted and in which taking care of each other is both so important and so challenging.

The connection with the archive portfolio

De Bruyckere created this work for her 1995 exhibition at the Middelheim; the archive portfolio contains the preparatory sketches. In addition, visitors at the time were able to buy the blankets as an art edition, which is how two blankets found their way into the exhibition's portfolio.

## **The Middelheim Museum**

The Middelheim Museum is a unique institution where the amazing interplay between art and nature results in exceptional experiences. The open-air museum showcases modern and contemporary art amidst a green park setting. Works by artists such as Auguste Rodin, Henry Moore, Rik Wouters, Isa Genzken, Chris Burden, Andrea Zittel, Ai Weiwei, Barbara Hepworth, Bruce Nauman, Germaine Richier and Richard Deacon provide a unique overview of more than a century of visual arts.

Every year the Museum sends out an invitation to renowned and promising artists. Freed from the typical "white cube" of a museum hall, the artists interact with the endless opportunities offered by the park and the existing collection. This inspires them to create new work, custom-made for the Middelheim Museum. In the past, the Museum has already collaborated with Berlinde De Bruyckere, Wim Delvoye, Yoshitomo Nara, Paul McCarthy, Chris Burden, John Körmeling, Erwin Wurm, Richard Deacon etc.

With an annual average of 500,000 visitors and free entry, the Middelheim Museum is a gateway to modern and contemporary art for young and old, from nature lovers to art experts. Culture and recreation come together in perfect harmony.