

## PLATYPUS

The sculptor Eric Croes (born in 1978 in La Louvière, lives and works in Brussels) has been working several years on the development of his themes of choice through the medium of ceramics. Motivated by both his personal interests as well as his practice as such, Eric Croes, like many artists of his generation, utilises new tools and new production methods, transcending long-prevailing polarities: craft versus art, tradition versus modernity, art versus design, traditional tools and media versus technology. For Eric Croes, 'making' is a key concept that leads to a return to the workshop, the apprenticeship of autonomy and the pleasure of craftwork and actual doing. <sup>1</sup>

This present tendency, adopted by Eric Croes since his debut, returns to the era before the Enlightenment, which had sought to rationalize, to classify, and finally reach an eighteenth century that separated the Fine Arts from the Crafts, much as it rendered insignificant, or relegated to the world of childhood, an entire universe that comprised the imagination of an entire society.

The unbreakable bond, both formally and emotionally, that connects Eric Croes to the bestiary is thus a fundamental key to the understanding of his oeuvre, a body of work which the soil has allowed him to develop in all its nuances, while reconnecting with the whole of cultic tradition. These ceramics bases with bear claw finishes that evoke the animal world indeed remind the careful reader of Claude Levi-Straus and his logic of totemic classifications that finds, among the Luapula, the 'elephant' and 'clay' clans 'because at one time, the women, instead of shaping the pots by hand, would cut from the soil the footprints of elephant feet, and used natural forms as containers'. <sup>2</sup> The animal and the soil, ancestral allies, which Eric Croes has brought together in a previous series inspired by the writings on the bear by the medievalist historian Michel Pastoureau, author of many essays on the central place of the animal in ancient society.

Even today, by means of a detour to his personal bestiary, Eric Croes invites the visitor to ponder the case of the 'Platypus', literally the 'flat foot', the Latin name the British scientists gave the ornithorhynchus. When, at the end of the eighteenth century, the first descriptions of this animal were sent from Australia to England, British scientists first believed them to be a hoax or the work of an Asian taxidermist. For a long time, the 'Platypus' was considered a chimera, since it was, at the time, unthinkable to imagine an egg-laying mammal, with a horny jaw resembling a duck's beak and a tail like that of a beaver, replete with the paws of an otter. Eric Croes likes the resonance of the word 'Platypus', which sounds like the name of a Roman emperor, while referring to a rather unusual animal, proof of god's sense of humour.

The Platypus is probably also the animal that best reflects the new series that Eric Croes started work on several months ago. In the isolation of an artist residency in Isola Comacina on Lake Como, he

<sup>1</sup> See Roxana Azimi and Harry Bellet, « *Cet art qui n'épate plus la galerie* », in *Le Monde*, 12 September 2015.

<sup>2</sup> See *La pensée sauvage* by Claude Levi-Strauss first published in 1962 by Plon (with our thanks to Valérian Goalec for the reference).

started making, together with Simon Demeuter, exquisite corpse drawings, a practice born during the twenties among the Surrealists who aimed to reconnect with the subconscious, with imagination. The drawings of exquisite corpses produced by four hands are inspired by both Eric Croes' methodology and the objects that surround him. As they are translated into three dimensions by the artist, the scales of the drawings are in turn distorted so as to achieve a point of balance with the used material, the soil, adding an extra touch of the unlikely to the soon-to-be-created ceramics. The contingencies inherent to the firing also affect, with surprising effect, the enamel and colour, which is often monochrome – not only in function of the design but also for the sake of the unity of the sculpture.

Eric Croes reached the fullness of his working with clay when he discovered the ceramics of Gauguin, which confirmed his practice that transcends all divisions. Gauguin the painter who practised an art considered 'minor', Gauguin who one day fled from civilization to find meaning in a life called 'savage' and 'primitive'. The avant-gardes of the late nineteenth century and the interwar period have indeed been crucial in eliminating categorisation through the collecting of tribal art, folk art, naive art and the development of an idea of a world built on the juxtaposition of antithetical ideas and objects.

The mental universe of Eric Croes finds a present culmination in a series of ceramics that bring together the concepts of play, chance, fantasy, humour, accident and wonderful mastery. His works embody many of the issues that are specific to the avant-garde, yet also remain sculptures in the 'classic' and 'noble' sense of the term. Mainly because these hybrid objects should not curb the artist's desire to inscribe himself in a historical tradition, he who could, in the future, develop the technique of plaster or bronze casting or even a so-called 'traditional' iconography.

Virginie Devillez (Brussels, November 2015)