

# Berlinde De Bruyckere

## No Life Lost — After Humanity

28 October — 24 December, 2022

*“I believe in the power of sculpture to ignite change, to awaken something in the viewer and to allow them to project their questions and thoughts onto the work.”*

*(Berlinde De Bruyckere)*

Pedro Cera is pleased to present the first exhibition of Berlinde De Bruyckere at the gallery.

Inspired by mythology, Christian iconography, and Renaissance painting, as well as current social and political events, the timeless works of the Belgian (Ghent-based) artist, are characteristic of a unique language bridging the archaic with the most contemporary. Making the body, both human and animal, and that of plants, its central motive, the practice of Berlinde De Bruyckere points to the vulnerability and fragility of the living while addressing themes of mortality and pain, but also of beauty. Using natural and seemingly humble materials such as wax, wood, metal, fabric, or animal skin, her practice transforms organic elements into ambiguous sculptures, where the idea of transformation and metamorphosis relates equally to the work’s materiality, as well as to its manifold conceptual layers rooted deeply in the idea of rebirth and transcendence.

The horse has been a recurring subject in De Bruyckere’s work. First introduced in 1999 as part of the exhibition *In Flanders Fields*, the result of the artist’s research in the archives of the WWI Museum (Ypres, Belgium), the horse has since then found its firm place in the practice of the artist, becoming a key component in shaping the more recent visual language of her sculptures. Introduced through the monstrosities of WWI documentation, specifically photographs of dead horses, the horse, through its bodily vastness, for De Bruyckere became a symbol of the vastness of death. *No Life Lost II*, 2015, the exhibition’s central piece, is in many ways a continuation of De Bruyckere’s sculpture for the WWI Museum. Depicting three dead horses, stacked on top of each other, animals traditionally associated with power and strength, their means of display, on the one hand, suggests defeat, while on the other, points to their bodily strength and inherent and nonreducible power, emphasized by the impossibility of their containment in the glass vitrine. Visibly exposed to signs of pain, accentuated by strapped legs and wounds, the bodies at the same time appear fragile and vulnerable. Their placement in the vitrine, a place associated with protection and preservation, then furthers the dichotomy of the dead horse, building up the tension in the works while pointing to the idea of metamorphosis and the becoming of something else. With the facial features of the horses concealed, De Bruyckere further highlights the idea of protection and shelter associated with their placement in the vitrine while removing the animal’s individuality. Through this gesture, De Bruyckere avoids any sense of sentimentality while shifting our attention to the language of the body, through which the narrative of the artist’s works typically unfolds.

A similarly disturbing encounter in the exhibition is *Lost V*, 2021-2022, a new sculpture of a young horse installed in the second exhibition room. Its composition and mode of display, emphasized by the centrality of its placement, might remind of sacrifice, a motive explored by some of De Bruyckere’s works, mostly inspired by Francisco de Zurbarán’s *Agnus Dei*. Disguising its narrative, however, from themes directly related to Christian iconography, the *Lost* series instead suggests greater ambiguity. Through its stillness, the horse can be perceived as dead, fast asleep, or, in between states. The placement and position of the body on the slab of noble yet desecrated marble allow us to feel the body’s weight, questioning its temperature in relation to the cold surface of the stone, generating a sense of temporal uncertainty that results in a heightened sense of ambiguity. The contrasting theme of care, closeness and that of protection, also unfolds in this work, namely through the presence of an old blanket carefully wrapped around the body of the horse.

The sense of ambiguity is a common denominator for most of Berlinde De Bruyckere's works, a tool allowing for the universality and openness of the piece in terms of reading, whether through the collective or personal memory. The abstract yet familiar nature of some of De Bruyckere's works remind us of the *Unheimlich* (Uncanny), Freud's term for the concealed, the repressed, and the re-surfaced. Berlinde De Bruyckere's *Met Tere Huid III* and *IV*, 2014, serve as the perfect example. The ambiguous approach towards the sculpture's materiality and material relation to the body generates a feeling of visual unease followed by a heightened sense of curiosity, drawing the eye deep into the work. A horse halter made from residues, such as discarded horse collars, old blankets, weathered leather, or wax casts of animal skins, the work encompasses, through its stillness, a relation to the past. Its "fleshy" aesthetic and the tenderness of some of its materials create associations with the body, human or animal, that which has been wounded, that which has been left behind. Its nature connects the sculpture with the stacked horse bodies nearby. Their relation, however, is unspoken, allowing for opposing themes such as care and exploitation, beauty and death, to loosely intertwine while simultaneously introducing a layer of sexualization into the work, emphasized here by the nature of the object, a reference to field labor, a symbol of male domination, set against the formal resemblances of the sculpture with the female sex.

The theme of sexualization is outplayed further in De Bruyckere's works on paper and their direct relation to the above-mentioned *Met Tere Huid* series. Tied to their production process and the treatment of dead animal skin, used for wax skin casts, De Bruyckere's works on paper are inspired by the cleaning process of dead animal skin. Part of this process is also spreading the skin against a large pillar, in this case, a phallic symbol and a reference to the male sex. With their formal features reminiscent of female genitalia, the work builds up on the tension between the two sexes, furthering the interplay of oppositions, symptomatic for the artist's work. Although seemingly abstract, the carnality of their colors, suggestive of mutilation, their sensuality, and the sexuality of what appears to be soft flesh echoes the complex emotional and metaphysical bodily states, subject to continuous transformation, healing, and rebirth, as *No Life (is) Lost*.

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De Bruyckere's sculptures and drawings have been the subject of numerous exhibitions in major institutions worldwide. These include 'PEL – Becoming the Figure, Arp Museum, Remagen, Germany (2022), 'Plunder/Ekphrasis, MO.CO, Montpellier, France (2022), 'Engelenkeel', Bonnefanten, Maastricht, The Netherlands (2021), 'Aletheia', Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, Italy (2019-2020), 'Il Mantello' (5x5x5 event for Manifesta 12), Santa Venera Church, Palermo, Sicily (2018), 'Berlinde De Bruyckere', Sara Hilden Art Museum, Tampere, Finland (2018), 'Embalmed', Kunsthall Aarhus, Denmark (2017), 'Berlinde De Bruyckere. Suture', Leopold Museum, Vienna, Austria (2016); 'Berlinde De Bruyckere. Penthesilea', Mus.e d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Strasbourg, France (2015); 'Berlinde De Bruyckere. The Embalmer', Kunsthau Bregenz, Bregenz, Austria (2015); 'Berlinde De Bruyckere. The Embalmer', Kunstraum Dornbirn, Dornbirn, Austria (2015); 'Berlinde De Bruyckere', Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Hague, Netherlands (2015); 'Berlinde De Bruyckere. In the Flesh', Kunsthau Graz, Graz, Austria (2013); 'Philippe Vandenberg & Berlinde De Bruyckere. Innocence is precisely: never to avoid the worst', De Pont Museum of Contemporary Art, Tilburg, Netherlands (2012) which traveled to La Maison Rouge – Fondation Antoine de Galbert, Paris, France (2014); 'We are all Flesh', Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, Australia (2012); 'The Wound', Arter, Istanbul, Turkey (2012); 'Mysterium Leib. Berlinde De Bruyckere im Dialog mit Cranach und Pasolini' at Kunstmuseum Moritzburg, Halle, Germany and Kunstmuseum Bern, Switzerland (2011); DHC / ART Foundation for Contemporary Art, Montreal, Canada (2011); and 'E.n', De Pont Foundation for Contemporary Art, Tilburg, Netherlands (2005) among other. In 2013 De Bruyckere was selected to represent Belgium at the 55th Venice Biennale where she unveiled her monumental work 'Kreupelhout – Cripplewood', a collaboration with Nobel Prize novelist J.M. Coetzee.