

Berlinde De Bruyckere

Plunder

March 3 – May 13, 2026

Madrid

Plunder marks the first solo exhibition of renowned Belgian artist Berlinde De Bruyckere at Pedro Cera Gallery in Madrid, highlighting a sculptural sensibility that is both compassionate and disarming. Assembling new works that extend investigations from her pivotal appearances at the 60th and 55th Venice Biennale, the presentation revisits foundational concerns of De Bruyckere's career with renewed attention to color, process, and the human form, offering a contemplative encounter with finitude and transformation.

The word *plunder* entered De Bruyckere's vocabulary in 2022, during preparations for her solo exhibition at MO.CO Montpellier and through conversations with South African author Antjie Krog, then commissioned to write for the MO.CO catalogue as she was developing her own collection of poems entitled *Plunder*. Releasing the word from its primal associations with pillaging and colonial violence, Krog broadened the scope to the realms of internal depletion shaped by the complexities of love and family, the body robbed of its strength in the brittle light of old age, and collapsing ecosystems, coincidentally providing a flawless framing of the themes that characterize De Bruyckere's work.

As a working method, the word equally came to resonate with De Bruyckere's system of affect and attraction, her impulse to absorb literature, poetry, cinema, art history, and visual registers of social and political upheaval, materially translated through the extraction and transmutation of animal skins, weathered blankets, furniture, beeswax, and other salvaged elements.

Building on this reflection, the exhibition opens onto *Plunder VI, 2025-2026*, part of a linoleum series initiated in 2024. The show's titular work activates a microcosm formed through the accumulation of timeworn, patchworked materials, unpacking the existential weight of both being and coexisting. Bearing the imprints of the artist's journey to Iran in 1996, where she encountered museums partially emptied in the aftermath of the revolution and display cabinets stripped to nothing but *accrochage*, *Plunder VI, 2025-2026* coalesces from a deeper questioning of inflicted violence and self-preservation, forming a fragile mosaic in which each new scar is carefully sutured.

A related structural logic informs the new *Cosmos* series, which began as a sculptural extension of De Bruyckere's exploration of layered floral forms and gradually evolved as she began sewing the linen back panels from deconstructed liturgical vestments, eventually developing into compositions of paper petals, golden thread, ribbons, and brass nails mounted on old book covers. The works kindle constellatory, zodiac-like patterns, their abraded surfaces and tactile density articulating an entropy of impermanence. Concurrently, they establish a decisive connection to the still-life tradition of 16th to 18th-century Dutch and Spanish painting, a long-term influence within De Bruyckere's practice manifested in series such as the *Lost horse* sculptures, lingering on the edge of preservation and decay.

The impulse to shelter a plundered life – un forcenement *de la mémoire*, in the words of Édouard Glissant – guides works such as *City of Refuge (Detail), 2025-2026*. Elaborated in the aftermath of De Bruyckere's pivotal *City of Refuge* installation for the Sacristy of the Basilica di San Giorgio Maggiore at the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024, the monumental vitrine exemplifies a recurrent methodology through which the artist withdraws and isolates elements from larger installations. Purposefully designed to house a wax cast of a tree trunk split in half by lightning during a summer storm – the same type used at San Giorgio Maggiore – the vitrine's verticality accentuates the unmistakably phallic presence of the body it contains, its stratified layers portraying ecological fragility. At the rear, stained mirrors disrupt visual legibility by reflecting both figure and surroundings, while heavy red-and-gold pillows echo reliquary interiors, where life persists beyond destruction.

The mediation of vulnerability continues in *Need VIII, 2025-2026*, with flesh-toned wax-cast branches, draped against one another within an enclosed cabinet, acting as surrogates for human limbs and bones. Conceived for the long corridors of the Monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore, the *Need* works derive from the magnificent 16th-century wood carvings of the Major Choir created by Flemish carver Albert van den Brulle, which portray episodes from the life of St. Benedict of Nursia. Among these, a panel depicting the saint casting himself into thick briars and thorn

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bushes to overcome his carnal temptations proved particularly inspiring for De Bruyckere. As in *City of Refuge (Detail)*, the antique-glass panel gives rise to a swarming, irregular surface that obstructs optical clarity, inducing a condition at once multiplied and dispersed through which the traces of laceration emerge as a shared register of corporeal fragility.

The engagement with martyrdom culminates in *San S., 2025-2026*, marking De Bruyckere's return to distinct human figuration – an important development in her recent practice – alongside an intensified focus on unveiling the sculptural process, evident in the unsealed cast edges and exposed iron supports. After a period away from anthropomorphic representation and following a recent tentative return in the *Arcangeli* series, *San S., 2025-2026* introduces a recognizable male torso severed at the neck, consistent with the artist's refusal of facial representation. Inspired by Saint Sebastian iconography, bound to a tree and pierced with arrows, the figure relinquishes the saint's traditional stoicism in favor of a visceral utterance of death and solitude. Since De Bruyckere's monumental sculpture *Kreupelhout-Cripplewood, 2012-2013*, created for the Belgium Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013, the tree has served as a metonym for the body; in *San S., 2025-2026*, the two fully converge, fusing organic and anatomical forms in a metamorphic entity that recalls Ovid's tales.

Transformation likewise animates the *It almost seemed a lily* collages, named after the myth of Apollo and Hyacinthus. At the origin of the series lies De Bruyckere's encounter with the 16th-century Enclosed Gardens of the Hospital Sisters of Mechelen (Belgium), whose delicate yet painstakingly detailed compositions left a lasting impression on the artist. Conceived as reliquary altarpieces, these *kunstkammer*-like cabinets assembled intricate constellations of mixed-media elements, including densely layered floral arrangements held in a state of simultaneous bloom and decay, whose tension resonated with De Bruyckere's enduring logic of superimposition and material accretion. Since its inception in 2017, the series has explored multiple plastic possibilities, with the latest iterations employing frottage on carbon paper to produce textured impressions that echo the Sisters' intimate, devotional labor steeped in ornamental excess. *It almost seemed a lily* thus embodies the highly personalized *topos* of love and sublimated desire of the Brides of Christ, with the *Song of Songs* serving as a poetic horizon of devotion for these "lust gardens."

This contrapuntal tension finds further expression in *Madonna del Parto IV and V, 2025-2026*, transposing matter into a carnal desire of phallic resonance. Referencing Piero de la Francesca's eponymous fresco, a rare Renaissance image foregrounding the Madonna's pregnancy, the womb-like glass domes enclose abscised, purple-clad forms evocative of the priestly vestments worn during Easter and funerary rites, a hue De Bruyckere, once long eschewed, has in recent years reintroduced with persistence. As something between shelter and wound, *Madonna del Parto* holds open a space of anticipation where passion, growth and death converge, rising and raising something into being.

Perceiving plunder as something hostile but fundamentally truthful about existence, Berlinde De Bruyckere's works displace, gather, preserve, and reconfigure loss, revealing how life, even at its most fragile, exposes the hidden beauty of mourning and the enduring promise of renewal.

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Berlinde De Bruyckere was born in 1964 in Ghent, Belgium, where she continues to live and work. Her practice is deeply informed by poetry, art history, and the painting of the Renaissance and Flemish Old Masters, as well as Christian mythology. These influences converge in works charged with intense psychological pathos, navigating the fundamental dualities of existence, such as life and death, love and torment, danger and protection.

Her work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions in institutions such as the Ernst Barlach Haus (Hamburg, Germany, 2025); a permanent installation at St. Bavo Cathedral (Ghent, Belgium, 2025); BOZAR (Brussels, 2025); Abbazia di San Giorgio Maggiore, Collateral Event of the 60th Venice Biennale (Venice, Italy, 2024); Artipelag (Gustavsberg, Sweden, 2024); Museu de Arte Contemporânea / CCB (Lisbon, 2023); Diocesan Museum Freising (Freising, Germany, 2022); Arp Museum (Remagen, Germany, 2022); MO.CO (Montpellier, France, 2022); Bonnefantenmuseum (Maastricht, The Netherlands, 2021); Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo (Turin, Italy, 2019); Sara Hildén Art Museum (Tampere, Finland, 2018); Kunsthall Aarhus (Aarhus, Denmark, 2017); Leopold Museum (Vienna, 2016); Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain (Strasbourg, France, 2015); Kunsthhaus Bregenz (Austria, 2015); Kunstraum Dornbirn (Austria, 2015); Gemeentemuseum

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Den Haag (The Hague, The Netherlands, 2015); Kunsthaus Graz (Austria, 2013); De Pont Museum of Contemporary Art (Tilburg, The Netherlands, 2012), which travelled to La Maison Rouge – Fondation Antoine de Galbert (Paris, 2014); Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (Melbourne, Australia, 2012); Arter (Istanbul, Turkey, 2012); Kunstmuseum Moritzburg (Halle, Germany) and Kunstmuseum Bern (Switzerland, 2011); DHC / ART Foundation for Contemporary Art (Montreal, Canada, 2011); and De Pont Foundation for Contemporary Art (Tilburg, The Netherlands, 2005), among others. In 2013, De Bruyckere was selected to represent Belgium at the 55th Venice Biennale, where she presented *Kreupelhout* – Cripplewood, a collaboration with Nobel Prize laureate and novelist J.M. Coetzee.

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