

"MODUS VIVENDI"

new work by

MARIEKE PAUWELS

Yna van der Meulen



Although Dutch and Flemish seem to be very similar, there are many differences of nuance that sometimes lead to misunderstandings. "Elke Belg wordt geboren met een baksteen in zijn maag", was one of the first things Marieke Pauwels said when I went to see her. Roughly translated, this means "Every Belgian is born with a brick in their stomach". A brick in their stomach? To the Dutch, this seems a little strange. When the Dutch are faced with a worrying problem, they might say that it "lies heavily in their stomach". And a brick seemed really heavy to me! But what Marieke meant was that her home consists of clay to such an extent that the Belgians are a people who are always building. A love of clay is widespread, and consequently so is a love of pottery.

Being Dutch, I find this easy to imagine. We have great respect for the quality of Belgian ceramics. Countless Belgian ceramists are greatly admired in the Netherlands.

Marieke Pauwels' work is different from a lot of Belgian work. It

is not only perfect in regard to technique and artistic standards. There is also hidden depth to it, an added layer, a certain something that makes the viewer think, or which even confuses them.

What the work is trying to say is just as important as the technique used. Clay is merely a means to an end in this context. She draws, makes plaster and plastic sculptures and is a performance artist, sometimes together with her whole family.

In fact, Marieke is always asking questions: Why are things like they are? Why do people do what they do? She loves questioning things that actually seem quite clear. Marieke does not want to tell a story, she looks for her own answers to her own questions. And she wants to provoke questions among the viewers. Beauty is irrelevant.

Marieke does not allow herself to be restricted by fashion in her choice of subject. One of her areas of interest is popular culture. Popular cultures are not normally considered very interesting in the world of art, but Marieke uses many elements from popular



ILLUSTRATIONS -

left - "Installation at the Keramikmuseum Westerwald" - 2009
on the floor: Prize for sculptural work in the competition European
Ceramics - 12th Westerwald Prize 2009, Sculptural Work

In the background: *Figure of St. Apollonia*

above - "Silencieux" - mixed media

culture in her work, figuratively but not literally. You could say that she offers a contemporary translation. Or she withdraws it on an artistic level by preserving transience.

One example: a kitsch vase with popular designs that she has cast in a Plexiglas block. She asks herself, "Should you preserve something like that?", "Why do you want to save that?" - "Only by stopping it getting lost?" The banal becomes art.

Not only objects but also techniques and thoughts are there to be preserved. By preserving them, she makes them unreachable, isolated. Like a monument to transience.

Closely related to popular culture is popular devotion. This is correspondingly very important in Marieke's work. She believes in the meaning of things and has a love of people and what they do. In our countries, this means especially their religion. This is how she came to popular devotion.

An example: a statue of Apollonia, the missing head surrounded by small teeth. You can pray to Saint Apollonia when

you have toothache. In this context, Marieke asks herself, "What is the difference between a woman who wants to get rid of her toothache and sacrifices a wax tooth to Apollonia, and an artist who also wants to achieve something through the material, but something that transcends the material?" This is why Marieke started to make teeth, which have grown longer and longer. This idea was continued in heaps of bones, which bear the potency of sacrificial rituals.

Marieke does not shy away from controversy: besides religion, eroticism is a frequent subject in her work. Azaleas and flamenco dresses make regular appearances in her work, which are readily associated with the vulva.

But what is the difference between all of these subjects? Is there one? According to Marieke, it is all one: religion, eroticism, science, nature. She believes in what is not immediately apparent. On an earthly level, she transforms one into the other: an azalea becomes a flamenco dress, which becomes a vulva, which



ILLUSTRATIONS -

above and below right - From the exhibition "Modus Vivendi" at the Keramikmuseum Westerwald - 2009

below left - Marieke Pauwels setting up the exhibition at the KMW

ultimately reveals its essence.

Occasionally, she is intentionally provocative. Thus she takes up a critical stance towards the world of ceramics. She feels that she has one leg in ceramics and one leg in contemporary fine art – as we would say in Holland.

As an example, we can take her vessels with the title "Open Mind". Vessels with a hole. They are a gesture towards the world of ceramics, which she sometimes sees as being limited.

In a word, her work is very diverse, with regard both to content and form as well as materials and techniques. The result is sometimes baroque, even opulent. But for Marieke, minimalism and the Baroque are the same thing, or at least they are closely related. Thus baroque music can be very restful and minimalism very exciting – but also stifling.

Her work is always in motion. Every new step can bring a surprise. If Marieke feels she is getting into a routine, she wants something different. She does regularly return to certain themes, but she then approaches them differently. And she wants something new for every exhibition.

The space the exhibition takes place in is fascinating to Marieke: there is interaction between the exhibits and the communication between the bottom parts. Sometimes this is a problem for the gallery or the visitors. They have certain expectations. They want to see a real Marieke Pauwels...

They have to view the result themselves in one of her exhibitions. The title of her last exhibition was "Modus Vivendi" at the Keramikmuseum Westerwald. She thought about that too: "I really love juxtaposing various works in one room", she once said to me. Well, a modus vivendi is a situation in which you are more or less forced to live or work with each other.

Yna van der Meulen is a ceramist and visual artist. She works for the Dutch ceramics magazine Klei. She lives in the Netherlands.

Marieke Pauwels was born in Gent, Belgium in 1970. From 1992: Higher Education in Visual Arts, ceramics, at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Antwerp. From 1994, Postgraduate Training at the National Higher Institute of Fine Arts, Antwerp, graduating as a Master of Fine Arts. Since then, solo exhibitions in Belgium and abroad. In 1991, Marieke Pauwels won the 1st Prize at INAXI DESIGN, Tokoname, Japan; in 1993 1st Prize in the competition "Diamond Inspired", Antwerp; in 1994 1st Prize in the Musing Award, Antwerp, and in 2009 the prize for sculptural work at the competition European Ceramics – 12th Westerwald Prize 2009. Since 1998 she has participated in international artist in residence projects, e.g. in the EKW, 's Hertogenbosch, NL, FULE international museums in Fuping, China; Millennium Project Jingdezhen, China; INAX, Tokoname, Japan. Marieke Pauwels lectures and works in Gent, Belgium.



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