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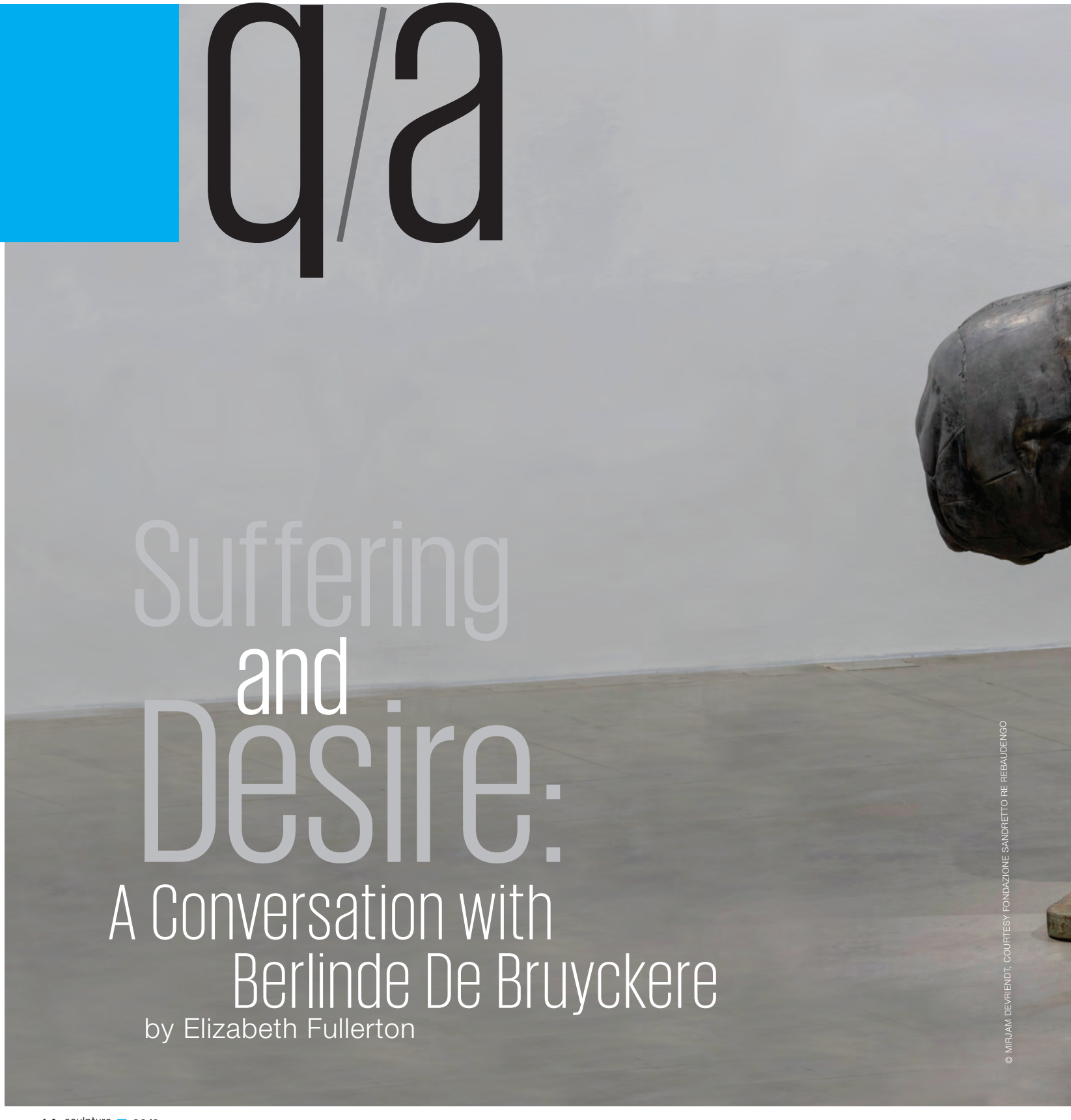
Suffering and Desire:

A Conversation with Berlinde De Bruyckere

by Elizabeth Fullerton



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***Palindroom 2019,* 2019.**
Wax, textile, steel, polyester, and iron, 180 x 200 x 220 cm.

berlinde de bruyckere

Berlinde De Bruyckere's raw, visceral sculptures embody death, life, passion, and vulnerability. Through the 1990s and 2000s, she made life-size, cast wax sculptures of bodies that crouch, huddle, arch, writhe, and merge into one another in ecstatic Baroque agony. These embodiments of human frailty, their skin often punctured with gashes or mangled and ridged with seams, draw inspiration from Christian iconography, mythology, and cinema. Equally unsettling are De Bruyckere's sculptures of dead horses, their bloated bodies strung up like punching bags or stretched on racks as if for a colossal spit roast.

In 2013, De Bruyckere visited a skin trader's workshop in Anderlecht, Belgium; the experience prompted a profound shift in her practice. Soon after, she moved away from figurative depictions and began taking wax casts of animal hides, which she felt offered greater scope for addressing the pathos of life. She also returned to blankets, an early motif in her work, but, where they were once intact, they have now become distressed and rotted.

These hide and blanket works are showcased to dramatic effect in "Aletheia," on view through March 15, 2020 at the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin. The title means "truth" or "unconcealedness" in ancient Greek. Visitors enter through a narrow corridor, its path obstructed by five waist-high piles of cast skins packed into blocks that grow progressively more disheveled. *Palindroom*, in the first room, resembles the large breeding mounts used for collecting semen from stallions. With its bursting fabric end barely contained by phallic leather casing, this sculpture provides a note of levity before the brutal revelation of the show's centerpiece. In *Aletheia, on-vergeten (Truth, unforgotten)*, layers of animal skins splay over wooden pallets, salt dusting the surfaces and floor in quantities suggesting a snow scene. Individually, these lumpy piles mottled with orange, pink, and blue assume the form of contoured maps; viewed together under industrial lamps, they recall Nazi death camps. The last room features three gigantic framed assemblages depicting swollen, carcass-like lilies and peonies, made with casts of skins, decomposed blankets, and

FROM OPPOSITE:
Berlinde De Bruyckere in her studio, Ghent, Belgium.

K36 (The Black Horse) 2003,
2003.
Polyurethane foam, horse skin, wood, and iron, 295 x 286 x 158 cm.

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wallpaper. United by ambiguity, these works are neither abstract nor representational, animate nor inanimate, neither portraits, still-lifes, nor landscapes. None and all of the above, they are something else altogether.

Elizabeth Fullerton: **What was the genesis of the site-specific installation *Aletheia, on-vergeten*?**
Berlinde De Bruyckere: I had never been surrounded by such an amount of death as I was in the huge space of the skin workshop that I visited, especially considering that it was located next to the slaughterhouse and the skins had been taken off animals that were living just half an hour before. For me, that moment of bringing the skins from one place to another in plastic containers was when they didn't have any value anymore. They were like garbage. Then, the men in the workshop took care of the skins. They hung each one from a hook on a huge iron construction, which I found very phallic; and then they folded it open, a gesture that struck me as very sexual. It was like looking at an enormous vagina. Their gestures called to mind Eros, especially when they started to shovel salt on the skins; this was a gesture of ejaculation. That place illustrated the relationship between life and death, Eros and Thanatos. It provoked deep human emotions.

EF: Why was this encounter with the hides so affecting?
BDB: It was the physical experience of being there—the smell, the activity, the salt and the dripping skins, salt mingled with blood. There was the ancient ritual for preserving the skins, but I was also seeing a sort of abstraction and a way to speak about mass graves, the Holocaust, and the recent crisis of refugees who have died trying to reach Europe.

When I first saw the pallets, I couldn't even tell that there were more than two or three skins. The mounds were so enormous I couldn't distinguish the many layers and differences. This was something I took home with me—the need to find a solution to showing the layering—because you start with one skin and it's just flat, the same with the second one; but after 50, you start to see a new shape, and it's like the animal's form is coming back. If you look closely, you see parts that were once bones or a hip or a spine, and that is beautiful because they are not anonymous anymore.

> **"I have always felt myself to be both a painter and a sculptor.** I'm not a sculptor who is sculpting. I start from casts and do deformations and put different elements together."

***Courtyard tales 2017–18,* 2018.**
Blankets, wood, polyurethane, and epoxy, 275 x 270 x 42 cm.

I was touched because the skins gave me a way to make the work more abstract, to address human tragedy in a kind and silent way.

EF: Presumably it would have been too obvious to introduce an element of smell?
BDB: Yes. That was the opposite of what I wanted to express. It was too narrative and too close to the men's work. I also wanted to bring it to another level, to share the silence and loneliness of that place with viewers. I can't say that the smell was bad; it's the smell of real life. The skins weren't rotten—they were completely fresh. You got the smell of blood and the taste of salt on your lips. It was important for me to have this experience, but if you replicate those things you can't transcend them.

EF: This is the first time that you've stacked pallets on top of each other. Why the monumental scale?
BDB: I needed that impact. The scale and height of the sculpture is really important, making the viewer feel small. You can't get an overview. You enter and are overwhelmed by what you encounter, and you have to walk from one end to the other to have the complete feeling. You become part of it. That's maybe the moment when you can start to see the beauty and the silence.

EF: The skins in the corridor are presented differently, compressed like bales from charity shops.
BDB: That's a nice image; I also have that sense. I needed to start with the rigid blocks. You see them first, not knowing what's in the exhibition, and they stop you because you're attracted by the shape or the colors. Then when you look closely, you discover some hair and real skin inside. The first few recall Arte Povera. They look like they might be clothes ditched in a plastic container, or they may almost resemble a landscape, like the patterns you find cutting through marble. They challenge our perceptions, which also allows us to look at the other works in a different way.

EF: You've included fragments of actual horse skin tucked in among the wax layers in *Nijvel I* (2019), one of the stacks named after the town where a second trader was located.
BDB: I find it really interesting that you don't see it

immediately. When you look harder, you discover there is real horse skin in the pallet. Is the inside full of skin or is it empty? Is it fake? I like these questions that you are not able to answer.

EF: Are the hides an extension of the work you did with blankets?

BDB: The blanket has been a crucial element in my work from the start. In the late '80s, blankets were a universal symbol of intimacy and protection. We all had blankets on our beds; now we don't—they're old fashioned. When I started to work with wax, especially with the figures, I incorporated the blanket. In the 1990s, I made "blanket women" in which the body was covered with a blanket and just the feet and legs exposed. With *Aanéén-genaaid* (2002), which means "stitched together," the blanket became part of the body as a second skin. After this, I started to do the same thing, but all in wax. I was stitching together the wax parts while they were warm so I could let them grow into each other and deform the body. From then on, blankets became less present in my work.

The three Anderlecht skin pieces (2018) in the corridor are more related to my previous works with blankets. The blankets that I keep in storage are also folded and stacked on wooden pallets. Because of this link, I made the colors in one of the piles much lighter and more human than those of the first two Anderlecht skin piles. They are in light blue, pale pink, yellow, green, and gray so you have some references to the softness of the blanket. They are not so tough as the two Nijvel blocks at the entrance. The pile at the end of the corridor looks as if it has collapsed and is much grayer. It could be made out of lead or stone—the colors are heavier and the composition in decay.

EF: Why did you reintroduce blankets into your work?

BDB: I wanted to show the blanket in a completely different way, as something that was not strong anymore, unable to give comfort and shelter. For me, it is a metaphor for our failing society—we cannot keep our promises to create a system to alleviate poverty and protect refugees. I brought the blankets to my courtyard and left them lying on the earth, hanging in the trees. I let nature and time take over. They took away the color; they took away the blankets' strength and made dark spots and new patterns. I often call time and nature my "silent workers." The blankets started to rot and smell; they lost value. The blanket structures in my courtyard brought to mind the Jungle refugee camp in Calais. You can feel human fragility through a blanket that is falling apart.

Installation view of "Aletheia" at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, 2019–20.

EF: What were blankets and hides able to express that bodies no longer could?

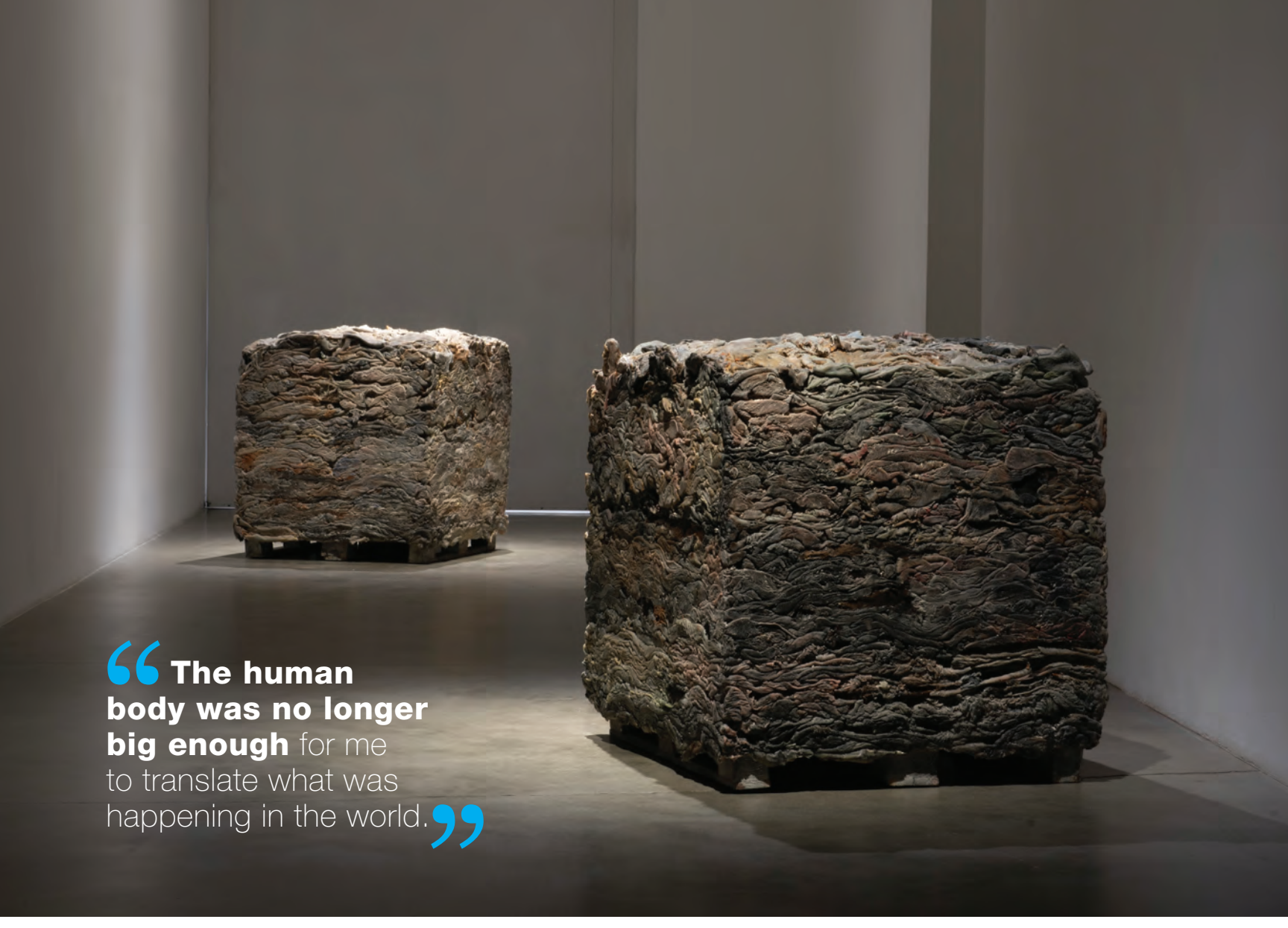
BDB: The human body was no longer big enough for me to translate what was happening in the world. I started to work with horses in 1999 while I was artist-in-residence at the In Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres, where I saw images from World War I, especially of the dead horses, and their corpses became an important metaphor for the enormous amount of death in that war.

I always worked simultaneously with human figures and horses, but lately I've come to feel that we live in such a complex world and the body is not enough. With this group of works, I wanted to express something that we are not able to talk about, though it happens around us: a sense of helplessness. I hope that this is where art can open a dialogue—that people being in this space, walking around all this death, will be inspired by ideas about the real world and real life, and this is just the start.

EF: In the last room, you incorporate both blankets and skins in a group of flower works.

BDB: People often don't recognize them as flowers; they see corpses. They are overwhelmed by the scale. It's a wonderful compliment for me, going beyond my intention of working around the flower, especially the flower in decay. I'm not showing the lily when it's open, fresh, and smelling strongly. I show the moment when it fades and loses its petals. I've taken a lot of photographs of lilies over the years, always in their last days, because I see so much fragility in the wrinkles and skin of their beautiful petals. They fall off, and the stamen, the male part of the flower, is still up and leaking, so this masculine organ is very visible. From my photographs, I started to make small intimate drawings in which parts of the flower are combined with sexual organs.

OPPOSITE: © MIRJAM DEVRIENDT. COURTESY FONDAZIONE SANDRETTO RE REBAUDENGO



> **“The human body was no longer big enough** for me to translate what was happening in the world.”

That leads back to *Palindroom*, which has the image of a huge phallus. Normally this object acts like a mare for the stallion to mount, so they can collect the ejaculation. When you enter, you see a phallus, but it should be the mare, so it's all upside down. I thought it was good to start this show about very heavy themes in an ironic way.

EF: The flower works display a tension between containment and expansion. They're tethered yet poised to overflow the frame.

BDB: This is something very important, shared by most of my works. There is a feeling that they want to grow and expand, but there is always an intention to restrain them. The blocks of skin in the corridor seem like they are forced to fit on the pallets. This goes back to my earliest works, when I was using cages. Looking at this, it's still a cage.

EF: To what extent are you inspired by religious iconography?

BDB: The image of Saint Bartholomew, who was flayed, came to mind while I was working on the skins. It was like there were all these saints, stacked onto pallets—endless piles of dead bodies, an enormous amount of loss. But the lilies and peonies were inspired by the

berlinde de bruyckere

enclosed gardens of Mechelen, which I discovered in 2016. These miniature Garden of Eden sculptures in wooden shrines, full of flowers, relics, and religious statues, were made and collected by nuns working in a hospital. Though the nuns were dealing with human suffering, they could escape in front of these small boxes displaying the dream of paradise. Both suffering and desire are visible in the gardens. I discovered that a lot of the materials I use in my work, such as wax, fabric, thread, and wallpaper, were also used in the shrines. I asked myself, "How can you translate this very small box full of treasures into your own work?" I started to think about how to enlarge that feeling, how to enlarge a flower. Normally I work on a scale of one to one, casting the real human body, the real horse, but the flowers were too small. I always need a certain scale. I used molds of the skin to create flower petals because the inside of the skin is very sensitive—you have details like small parts of fat or veins. Knowing that the petals are made out of skin makes them even more human and open to interpretation.

EF: How do you make the skins?

BDB: I went to the Anderlecht workshop with my team and selected four piles of skins, and we made casts from silicone and plaster on top of the real skins. You have a lot of fragments because you can't transport or assemble the whole thing at once. There are holes and curves so deep they require a molding. Then we bring the molds to the studio. I make a wax cast of the original and place it on a wooden pallet. This is the first moment when I start to look and try to understand how I can change and deform it.

EF: You bring these molds of piles together in different combinations?

BDB: Yes. I might put the left part of one under another part, then make it higher, push it back, pull it out, make it larger. I did a lot of deformations on the top skins in the studio. I work with the wax when it's warm. I can pull, I can tear, I can do whatever I want, and if I'm not satisfied with the first attempt or the application of color fails, I can warm it up and adjust or start again since I have the molds.

EF: So the color comes after?

FROM OPPOSITE:
***Aanéén-genaaid 2002,* 2002.**
Blankets, wax, jesmonite, and wood, 166 x 48 x 50 cm.

***Romeu 2010,* 2010.**
Wax, epoxy, iron, wool, cotton, and wood, 82.5 x 77.6 x 153.8 cm.

BDB: No, the color is there from the beginning. I paint straight onto the molds, using between 15 and 20 layers of color. What appears on the surface as dark gray, yellow, pale pink, or bluish, is in fact layers of different colors varying in intensity and transparency. They melt into one another, and their visibility on the surface partly depends on the temperature of the wax. When the temperature is high, even colors applied in the depth of the wax cast will melt through the first layer and become visible on the surface. I work blind, you could say. I start with the first layer, but from the second layer on, I have to trust my knowledge and experience with the temperatures. If I want the black visible on the surface, then after 10 layers I have to heat the black to the exact right temperature so it melts to the first level.

EF: What is the role of chance?

BDB: I am very open to changes during the creative process. In the beginning, when we were working with the bodies, I was obsessed with ensuring that all of the

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seams were perfectly closed. But there's always a part left. I started to put two parts together and saw a thin layer of wax made by chance, and I felt that it was even more fragile than what I had done. From that moment, I kept the extra material visible, so when people look at the legs and feet, they know they're not real. It happens during the process, and it's up to you to decide whether to clean up or keep these mistakes and tell another story.

EF: Your sculptures often entail props like pallets, vitrines, tables, stools, and racks.
BDB: I have always felt myself to be both a painter and a sculptor. I'm not a sculptor who is sculpting. I start from casts and do deformations and put different elements together. Very often I start from old vitrines and old tables that I bring into my studio. It's not that the sculpture is made and afterwards shown in the vitrine or on the table. The vitrine will be the starting point. This is an important layer; it connects all these different stories as a sort of collage in three dimensions.

EF: Do you make sketches or maquettes?
BDB: The 2013 Venice Biennale was the first time; I made a scale model to position the work in the Belgian pavilion, determine the lighting, and find the right color for the walls. Now I make scale models for all my exhibitions. This is much more important than making sketches or drawings. For me, drawings have a completely different purpose. When I draw, it is because I want to work out a new subject for myself. When I started to make drawings based on my lily photographs, I created a whole new group of related images. Making drawings is something very intimate that I have to do on my own in a quiet place.

EF: What is behind the title "Aletheia"?
BDB: The title always comes last. It needs much more time, and it's not just a title. For me, it has to contain every single work in an exhibition. To confer a title is like naming your child. It's a very personal thing. I was discussing this with my studio manager and her partner, a curator, who came up with this beautiful word "Aletheia," which means "truth" or "unveiling," and then for the installation, "truth unforgotten." This is what we all want to be in the end.

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> **In the ’80s, blankets were a universal symbol of intimacy and protection.** We all had blankets on our beds; now we don’t—they’re old fashioned.

Aletheia, on-vergeten 2019,
2019.
Wax, wood, epoxy, and salt, installation view.