

To Cut Your Own Flesh

A Conversation with

Johan Creten

BY RAJESH PUNJ





La Vierge d'Aleppo, 2014–15. Glazed stoneware with grog and crystallization aluminum structure, 80 x 69 cm.

Rajesh Punj: Could you explain the colored bases that appeared throughout “Sunrise/Sunset,” your recent show at Perrotin in Paris?

Johan Creten: Each *Point d’Observation* (*Viewpoints*, 2017) offered an invitation to sit down. I first used them for a show at CRAC in Sète. The idea relates to something fundamental in museums—the benches or seats, which slow the urgency to keep moving. If I can get your attention for even 10 seconds more, then I win. I have also placed them in groups, so you can sit with somebody you don’t know or with a friend. I am asking that you consider a work in a different way from how you look at Instagram, where we see an image for less than a second. The idea is that you sit at these observation points and you look; at the same time, you can touch them, which gives you contact with the material, with ceramics, that you would not normally have from a show like this.

And then there is the shape, which derives from the bollards used to moor ships, and, at the same time, from a traditional upturned base for a classical sculpture. So, they become bases for us as viewers. In French, they are called *bite d’amarrage*, which is a little joke—*bite* is “dick,” so you are sitting on a big dick. But the idea with *bite d’amarrage* is that it is the anchor, and entirely stable.

RP: You are attempting to anchor the viewer?

JC: The hope is that you are anchoring viewers to look, to turn around while they sit, and to see the works in a different way. One of the greatest luxuries today is time, and one of the most difficult things to do is to calm down enough to look at things.

I think that we use, see, and send images so fast that we tend to look at things much more superficially now. We even see that in how art is made—much of it is made just for the image, which is a problem for sculpture, because a sculpture as a sculpture already has the diffi-

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If art is a reflection of an artist’s psyche, then Belgian-born, Paris-based Johan Creten reveals a soul enamored by corrosive beauty. His colorfully glazed, edgy ceramic works appear to be slowly hemorrhaging, riddled with imperfections that almost defy the static nature of objects in space. Creative catalysts that change intention and aspect over time, these works appear ready, at any moment, to decay into shadows of their former selves. Burdening his works with blemishes, Creten faces the inevitable with honesty. But he also produces monumental sculptures in bronze, their size and material strength as overwhelming as the intrusive intimacy of his smallest ceramic gestures.

Installed in a gallery, these objects (posed on plinths or mounted on the wall) are meant to be observed from specific vantage points that force viewers to slow down and engage. In his recent exhibition “Sunrise/Sunset,” Creten also added transparent curtains, or “veils,” in an attempt to create a more private experience. The partial concealment of a public space is as much about granting and denying exposure as it is about body politics.



Left: *Odore di Femmina—New York Beauty 2*, 2014–15. Blue glazed stoneware, gold luster, and ceramic base, 80 x 36 x 33 cm. Right: *Odore di Femmina—La Cible du Diable I*, 2017. Modeled glazed stoneware and multiple firings, 13 x 73 diameter cm.

culty of how it is seen in space. For example, if I send an image of a sculpture to an assistant, sometimes she doesn’t recognize it in the flesh, because she saw it from the back and not the front.

The fact that a sculpture can escape you through its multiple angles suggests that we should still go to places where we can look at things, where we can see and experience different textures, where we can experience the physical thing in space and see how it changes as we change position.

RP: I think a lot about how viewers need to invest time in a work of art and about the sensations that come with that.

JC: But if you say “invest” time, it means that it costs something. I think the idea is that it is a “joy.”

RP: I say “invest” because of how our time is divided up, how it is treated by industries and institutions as a commodity. Even recreational time has become the breeding ground for entrepreneurial ideas.

LEFT: CLAIRE DORN, © JOHAN CRETEN/ADAGP, PARIS, 2018, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE PERROTIN / RIGHT: © CRETEN STUDIO AND GERRIT SCHREURS, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE PERROTIN



JC: So, after only five minutes, we are already talking about the politics of time. Each one of these sculptures has something to do with a reflection on the world, which is what you did just now with your critique of time. Even an abstract piece brings you to the ideas, which was a major aspect of the show. Some of the works are very dramatic, particularly *La Vierge d'Aleppo* (*The Virgin of Aleppo*, 2014–15). When you put a title on an object, it can become even more dangerous. Throughout the show, I placed see-through curtains against the windows, which for you, as an art historian, will trigger certain associations.

RP: So, what you see takes you to another situation or set of circumstances?

JC: A lot of my work uses the mechanism of revealing or re-energizing cultural memories. In this case, for you, maybe it is Félix González-Torres because of the curtain and the wind. But, for me, the curtains are veils. The word “veil” today is taboo, and not only in France. For me, the veil is about secrets—for instance, the veiling of brides. *Aus dem Serail* (*From the Seraglio*, 2016–17) refers to Mozart, because the veil is not just a recent taboo, it also represents the West’s centuries-old obsession with the Orient as a grand *fantasme*, as a kind of projection of exotic dreams. I called her *La Vierge d'Aleppo*, which naturally puts it in a different context because the virgin also works for Catholics.

RP: Could you talk about your approach to ceramic sculpture? I see it as fundamental that you allow the process to perform on the work and to determine what happens.

JC: What I like is the richness of the glazes. It takes a lot of work. Many pieces are fired and re-fired, and sometimes I work on them for several years. Each work is a unique object—there is only one. A small miracle takes place when a work comes out of the kiln, because you can say there is “somebody” there. I started out as a painter, and I never trained as a ceramicist—I hate the whole kitchen thing. With painting, you are fundamentally in con-



De Gier, 2015–17. Patinated bronze and lost-wax casting, 440 x 220 x 100 cm.

trol, but what I love about ceramics is that the final gesture is beyond my control. **RP:** You have used the word “liberty” about painting, but isn’t there a greater liberty in letting go than in control? Clearly the moment of abandon is a beautiful thing. **JC:** Yes, there is a wonderful thing going on each time, because sometimes there are things that I cannot solve. For instance, with *Aus dem Serail*, I couldn’t solve the skin. After the last firing, the skin of the veil had a lava glaze, which led to a kind of drawing that didn’t exist before. You had the contrast between the naked unglazed clay, and the texture of the skin. The glaze appears as a veil, because it is a skin applied to sculpture—I love that kind of creative process. **RP:** Are your works incredibly heavy? **JC:** Some of them have an aluminum backing and require two people to hang them, which becomes difficult for collectors. I love to make my life, my dealer’s life, and my collector’s life difficult. I could have made my whole career just from the flower works of the “*Odore di Femmina*” series, but in these works, you see a large spectrum of stories that go from almost conceptual to very expressionistic. There is an incredible liberty about that, too. **RP:** When you choose, you have a remarkable ability to move between mediums. **JC:** I think of Sigmar Polke, who embodies the idea of liberty that you must have as an artist—a “deliberate freedom.” This is a very difficult position to take today because of merchandizing and brand-building in the art world. For a long time, marketing and merchandizing have been bleeding over from the commercial world. It is difficult to be free because people want to see the same thing, to buy the same thing, and to all have the same thing. So, I haven’t chosen the easy way for myself. It has never been about taking the easy route; it demands that you take a position as an artist. I have always produced my own work. I cast *De Gier* (*The Vulture*), which is an outdoor work, without knowing where it would go. It is a scary position sometimes.

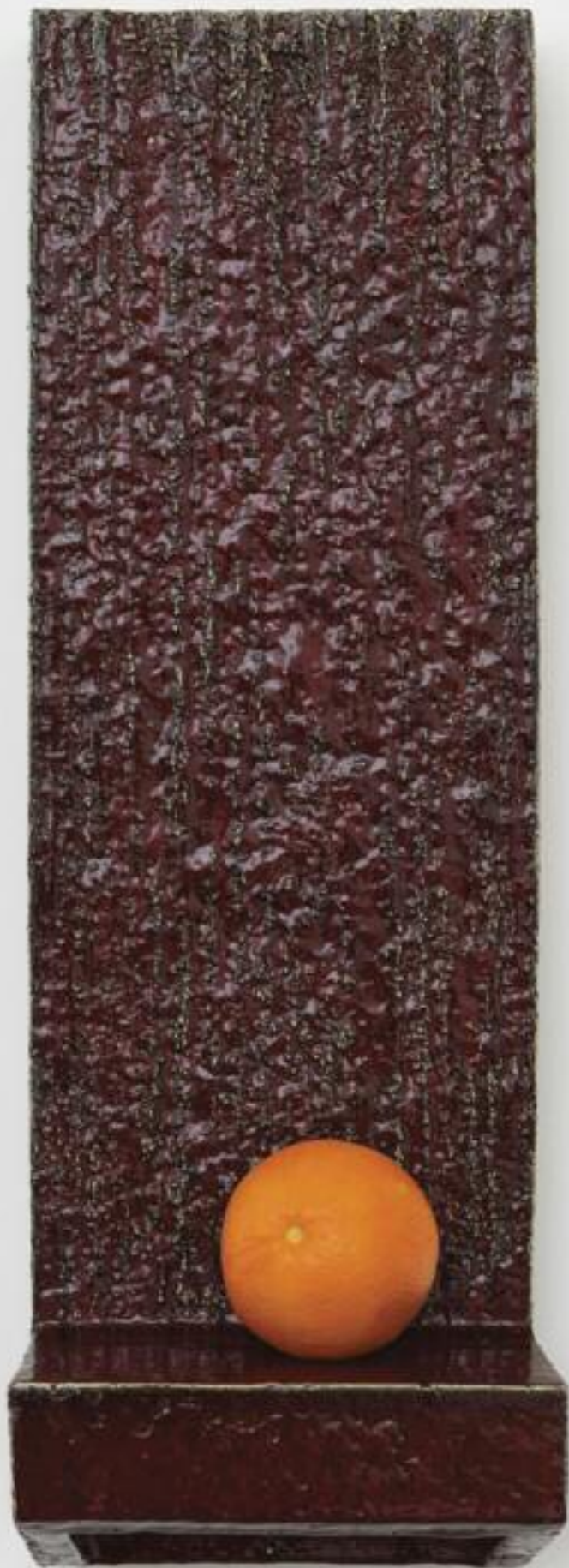
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Right: *Vulva*, 2017. Patinated bronze and lost-wax casting, 10.5 x 8 x 5 cm. Below right: Exhibition view of “*Sunrise/Sunset*,” Perrotin, Paris, 2018.

RP: But that must be when you feel at your most creative, when you are free to act without consequence. **JC:** Yes, it makes you feel more alive “to cut your own flesh.” I think we all have to take more risks. **RP:** I am drawn to the scale shifts in your work. The experience of something intimate against something monumental becomes very interesting. **JC:** That is the beauty of the show for me, going from one to another. There were small bronzes—cast, polished, lacquered or varnished *Vulva* works—throughout this show. **RP:** Did you determine the arrangement of the works, and is that something you consider well in advance of the opening? **JC:** Yes, this show was almost two years in the making. Some of the works are from the '90s. *Madame Butterfly* (1995), for instance, was made during a Kohler Arts/Industry residency. It consists of two porcelain baseball bats that have become entirely decorative and are entangled in flowers. They refer to a particular politics, because a baseball bat has two connotations, recreational and something more ruthless—a weapon of sorts, a phallic armament. I would say that its original purpose has become almost redundant as it takes on more unsavory associations. I placed it next to *Présentoir d’Orange* (*Display Orange*) (1989–2017), for which I used a real orange on a ceramic base. It will degrade, or it can be replaced. **RP:** What is that about? **JC:** The whole idea is, as Duchamp decided, that everything can be sacralized and turned into an artwork. I made *Présentoir d’Orange* as a young artist. The orange shimmers on its ceramic base, and it looks almost wet with the light. It was installed next to a banner with the title of the show, “*Sunrise/Sunset*.” Oranges are a natural vitamin balm, which is why they’re brought to prisoners and to the ill. At the same time, the orange recalls the image of the sun, in the sense that it is a perfect

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Présentoir d'Orange, 1989–2017. Black glaze on red stoneware and orange, 61 x 19 x 14 cm.

thing. It is also the incarnation of hope and lust for life.

RP: *Compositionally it makes me think of a Dutch still-life.*

JC: Yes, in a sense it does resemble a Dutch still-life, but I was influenced by my contemporaries. Do you know Joseph Beuys's *Capri Battery* (1985), which couples a lemon and a lamp? In that piece, the art object also functions as a battery—the idea is that a work of art, by concentrating our thoughts, becomes a way of energizing our lives.

RP: *You appear very conscious of your audience.*

JC: I am my best audience. Some people find the flower works very beautiful, while others see the work as being very cerebral. And that's where "Sunrise/Sunset" comes into being. In sunset, you have the word "set," which underscores how the show functions as a kind of theater, with a storyline. "Sunrise, sunset" is also our whole story: we rise and we set; sculptures rise and subside; empires rise and fall.

RP: *Viewers are invited to touch the work?*

JC: I like the idea that they can touch what they see. You have seen *Vulva*, but now place your hand in the crack.

RP: *It takes on an entirely different sensation, becoming like a forbidden fruit.*

JC: I love the texture of these works, that you can say things by your feel for the material. There are sensations that come only by touching a piece. That's why I find it necessary for viewers to sit down at the observation points.

RP: *There is always a degree of abstraction to your work.*

JC: That's why I say that my work can go from being an "abstract painting" to something with a lot happening. For instance, under-drawings appear and disappear when you move from one position to another. I made some of these pieces at Alfred University, where they were accompanied by a catalogue explaining all of the mistakes and violated ceramic taboos. You see cracks and blistering. In French, *la fissure* is the fault line. So, there is a link to a material crack and to a more intimate crack, though it might be more of a physiological crack that needs to be psychoanalyzed, like a plate with a crack. In French, there are more wordplays, like *fêlure*: when you are "cracking your head," you are going a little crazy, there is something slightly off, something slightly wrong.

RP: *You are interested in imperfections, not just physical but psychological.*

JC: That is just how I am, imperfect.

RP: *I find that interesting in relation to your work, where imperfections become a measure of beauty. Japanese*

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Exhibition view of "La Traversée," 2016. CRAC, Sète.

photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto talks about how beauty is far from perfect, how it exists in the fault lines or "cracks" as you call them.

JC: It's culturally driven. I just did a show in a ceramics village in the heart of France, where I presented new pieces that I made in relation to six early Japanese ceramic works. One was from 1000 BCE, and the others dated from the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries. The Japanese respect the imperfections that show, the imperfections of the earth. If you have the same discussion with a Chinese artist, you will have a totally different answer.

RP: *I think it also has to do with the artist's hand. There is the sense that with the Chinese everything takes on a "mass-*

produced" effect, and the individual is missing, which, by definition, becomes a very political statement. By allowing for imperfections, we experience the author, the artist's hand.

JC: When I was a young artist, it was all about Minimalism and conceptual art. I think of Donald Judd sculptures that were not touched by the hand of the artist, that claim a machine-like level of perfection. I find his works absolutely wonderful, I have absorbed them; but I chose ceramics as an act of opposition to all of that discourse, to just say "no."

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