

ART & DEAL

ISSUE 121 VOL. 14 NO. 88 OCTOBER 2018

₹150 \$38 €30 £28

ON THE SHOULDER OF GIANTS

JAN FABRE interview - RAJESH PUNJ

LAMENT

- AMIT MUKHOPADHYAY

KANTHA AS A CONTEMPORARY VIEWING EXPERIENCE - THE AESTHETICS OF TIME

- RAHUL BHATTACHARYA

PHOTO PESHAWAR

- UPASANA BHATTACHARYA

Artibus expositis gentes
Antverpia mundi ad Scaldim
solito conferet hospitio

ON THE SHOULDER OF GIANTS

JAN FABRE interview

RAJESH PUNJ

There is a certain kind of artist activist, performance artists Marian Abramović, Matthew Barney, Bruce Nauman, and Joseph Beuys, among them; and Arte Povera's Jannis Kounellis and artist Anselm Kiefer, who at a particular moment appeared ready to die for their work. Taking art into territories that not only challenged them physically, but also for their unrivalled emotional ambition, altered our understanding of the Modern experience. To those Modern Masters, one must add Belgian multidisciplinary artist, performer, playwright, choreographer and designer, Jan Fabre. He, like (Anselm) Kiefer and (Jannis) Kounellis, has never been satisfied with the notion of art entirely at the service of beauty. Fabre stresses, "Beauty is where ethical values and aesthetic principles come together - this is beauty; because otherwise if it is only about aesthetics it becomes entirely decorative." He goes further in his deconstruction of beauty, to describe himself as "someone on his knees for beauty" in his pursuit for visual truth.

It has been Fabre's brazen appetite for introducing alien elements to his art that has caused as much controversy, as it has encouraged a new lexicon for our understanding of his creative industry. Having applied, over the last four decades, much darker forces to his work, as a way of explaining reality's incomprehensible energies.

Historically (Joseph) Beuys and now (Maria) Abramović see art as a mode of action for social reinvention. Beuys arguing "art as the only possibility for evolution, and the only possibility to change the situation in the world. But then you have to enlarge the idea of art to include the whole of creativity. And if you do that, it follows that every living being is an artist." Everything, human and animal, satisfies Fabre's own adoration for the circle of life. And of Fabre's other fundamental attribute, American Matthew Barney tells how he has "a way of making narrative sculpture, where first you make a text and out of that text you make objects. I start with a story and then I make sculpture from that story." That as a measure for making ideas for art mirrors Fabre's own dedication to writing and drawings, as a generative tool for his own multidisciplinary practice. Explaining how "they (writing and drawing) are the two constants in my work in over forty-five years of being an artist."

Tellingly, in conversation Fabre sees himself as a 'dwarf in the company of giants', referring to artists not of the moment, but to a fraternity of men as Old Masters, who centuries earlier had illuminated the city and society's imagination of the superlative strength of art, as representational of humanity's virtues and vices. Born and very much belonging to Belgium's second city, Fabre sees Antwerp as his skin. A port city that is as culturally nourished by its illustrious past, as much as it is celebrated in the present for a new generation of artists, playwrights, designers, writers, and performers. As though art and aesthetics were born here, and have since been trademarked to the Flemish.

As a boy Fabre explains how his father fashioned trips to Rubenshuis and the zoo, with the intention that he would pencil his adolescent impressions of aristocracy and animals, until Fabre comfortably became obsessed with the beasts and the birds, and in later years of the notion that the animal and the individual suffer the same. Fabre cites, "Of a steadfast fascination for humans and animals, as a celebration of the force, power and vulnerability



of humankind”.

From his early theatre pieces and solo performances in the 1970's and into the 1980's, Fabre demonstrated a compelling confidence on stage. Setting money alight, launching living cats into the air, and locking himself for days at a time into a room full of objects. Employing techniques that suggested he, like Abramović and Barney, intended by means of his own heightened adrenaline and an air of danger, to arrive at raw emotions immediately. And such brilliant bravado was to influence his wider work, as Fabre became involved in bronze and marble sculpture, and as a reference to his long-standing fascination for animal life, of introducing tortoises and jewel beetles to his work. Both of which have since become the artist's emblems for explaining mankind's morality.

For his altar piece commission, Fabre has taken to using his generative ability for drawing and collage, to create templates for a triptych that excels in delivering a very modern version of Biblical events. And by way of explanation, Fabre sees everything in the light of Old Masters, to the artists who originally decorated the walls of the Saint Augustine Church, when Antwerp was at the centre of something quite remarkable. “It was an honour of course, when they asked me to follow (Peter) Rubens, (Anthony) Van Dyck and (Jacob) Jordaens. It is an honour, but you always stay a dwarf in this country. I am a dwarf working between giants.”

Explaining himself as a ‘Modern mystic’, Fabre appears dedicated to the mental and physical order of things, as his silicone self is seen balancing and bearing the cross, and in another work, reaching for the clouds with a measuring staff, to want to capture and control the heavens. Concentrating on the brain whilst borrowing from the animal world, Fabre is devoted to systems of faith, of fortune, and fantasy, as the physical and ephemeral substance of his work.

Interview

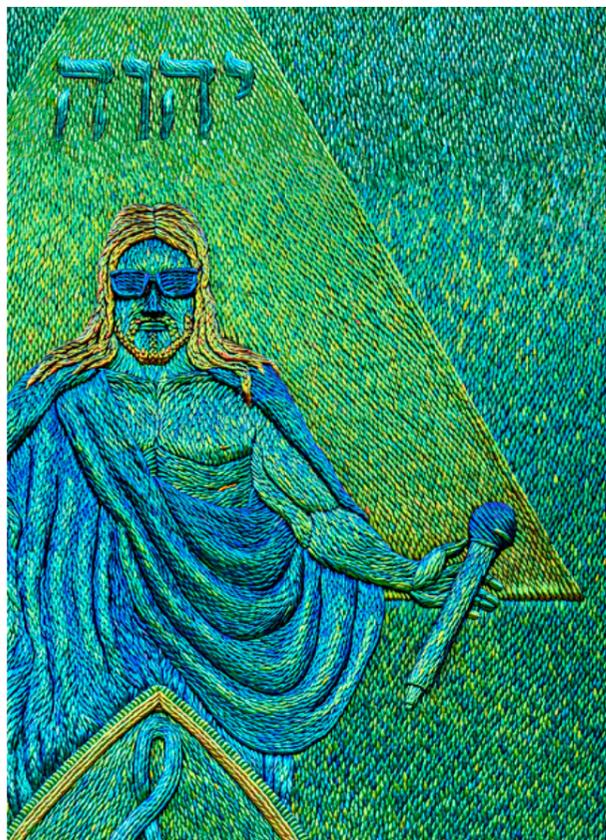
Rajesh Punj: *In the time we have, it would be interesting to begin by discussing the works here at AMUZ, a former Augustinian Church turned music theatre; and of the remarkable circumstances that led to your works replacing the original altarpieces by (Peter Paul) Rubens, (Jacob) Jordaens, and (Anthony) Van Dyck, commissioned a decade short of four centuries earlier. How does it feel to have taken the mantle from them, to pay homage to the Old Masters as a Contemporary artist?*

Jan Fabre: It was an honour of course, when they asked me to follow Rubens, Van Dyck and Jordaens. It is an honour, but you always stay a dwarf in this country. I am a dwarf working between giants.

RP: *As accomplished as you are, do you really see yourself in that light?*

JF: I was raised not far away from Rubenshuis.

RP: *Quite a neighbour, and clearly an inspiration.*



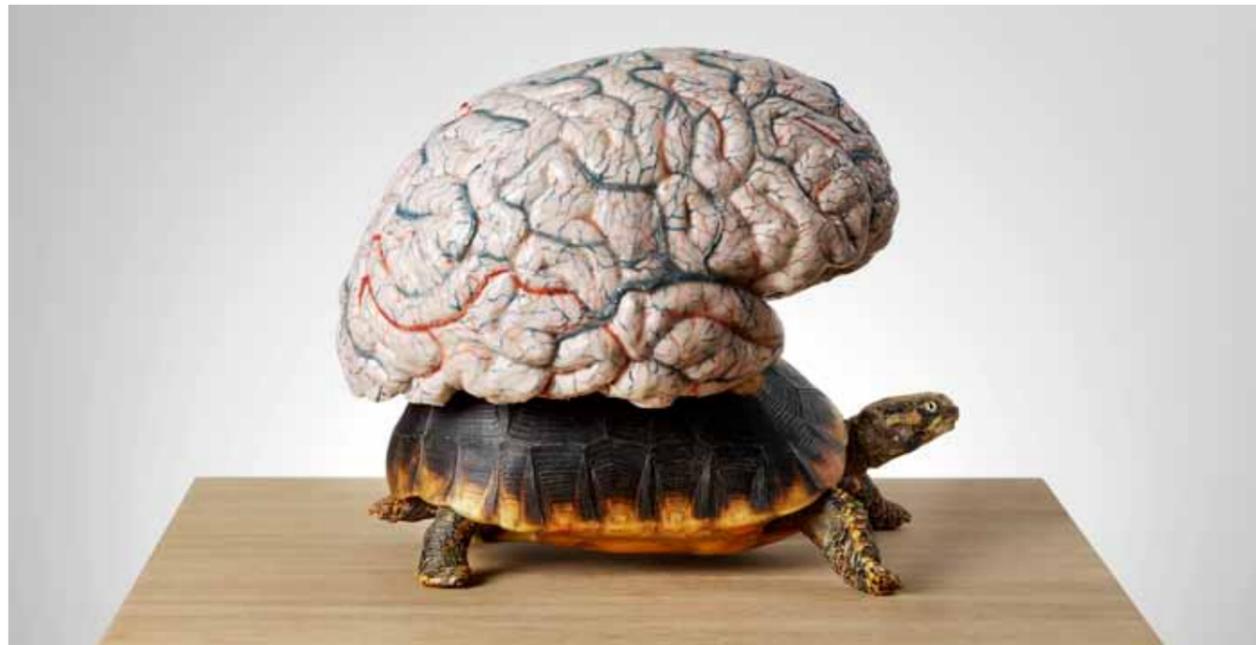
JF: Yes, and I am still learning and taking a lot from the Old Masters, like Van Dyck, Rubens, Jordaens and (Hieronymus) Bosch; from whom we have this incredible painting tradition, and I see them as very Contemporary painters. For example, when I am working with my theatre company, and deal with the lighting, I always go back to the light in Rubens paintings. To the museum works, and of the way his studio made different spots almost, of the Baroque. And the way I was working at the Louvre, Paris. I was the first living artist to have an exhibition at the Louvre; and there were these works by Hieronymus Bosch in dialogue with my work. And I saw Bosch's Ships of Fools, very impressive and equally very imaginative.

Bosch was a famous painter in his day attacking power, singlehandedly attacking the Church. Some of the Old Masters were more contemporary, much more avant-garde than artists today. So I do see myself as a dwarf in a country of giants.

^ Jan Fabre :
The monastic performance (2018), detail

> Jan Fabre :
The monastic performance (2018)
Material : Jewel Beetle wing-cases on dibond
Size : Approx 398 x 241 cm without frame
Photographer : Attilio Maranzano
Copyright : Angelos bvba
Medium : Sculpt





RP: I am by education a Modern and Contemporary art historian/critic, but have in recent years become consumed by the Old Masters, and of the strength of painting in a moment when the visual was as important as the word. It is interesting as a Contemporary artist, and of course it has to do with your circumstances, of Antwerp and Belgium, that you always do refer to the past.

JF: Because these are my roots. There is avant-garde with old traditions. It is by knowing those traditions well (that we understand where we are much better). I studied the Old Masters, my father took me between ten and fourteen years of age to Rubenshuis to sit and diligently copy some of Rubens' original drawings. And he took me to the zoo to paint faces of animals, and the faces of humans. So I was raised knowing where things were coming from.

RP: And with regard to where we are now, in this former cloister Church of the 15th, 16th century, how does it feel to see your work stand up as evidence of our endeavour to communicate notions of faith and love? Those ideas I assume will always be present in our lives.

JF: I have worked on this particular series of works for two, almost three years now, and then I came back from another country, because I was preparing a major exhibition of works in Sicily, Palermo. I came back to my studio here and installed it, and came inside and had a feeling of 'wow' it is good. I am happy. Because two years in your studio, I was working on it, and the time goes, and during that time you think it is okay, but of course it takes on something incredible when installed here. It literally took my breath away the first time I saw it here (with the lighting as it is).

RP: And is context, the Church, everything?

JF: Yes because the works reference the original paintings, and the works are entirely about the location too. For example, of the three panels, the middle panel 'Het mystieke contract' or The Mystic Contract (2017), tells the life of Rubens and the marriage of St. Catharine (1628), but at the time was also presenting the Jewish community in Antwerp of diamonds. At the time if you would take a diamond away, people would disappear. Then to the left of Rubens central panel, 'Het

"It was an honour of course, when they asked me to follow Rubens, Van Dyck and Jordaens. It is an honour, but you always stay a dwarf in this country. I am a dwarf working between giants."



< Jan Fabre
The universe carried by a tortoise, 2014
Silicon, pigment, metal, stuffed turtle
31 x 22,9 x 31 cm
Private collection

^ (Topmost) Jan Fabre
Holy Dung Beetle With Walking Stick
2012
Silicon Bronze

^ Jan Fabre
Hand holder for the silver cabinet
1978-79
Plastic and metal
7.5 x 16 x 10 cm
Private collection

monastieke optreden', The Monastic Performance (2018), referencing Van The Ecstasy of St. Augustine (1628); is a Contemporary scene, a Bono character, and the suit he is wearing is a reference to a famous fashion designer, who makes suits for Bono, for his world tour. So the work is about performance, because a lot of great singers perform here. And finally the right panel originally by Jordaens, the old Apollonia (as The Martyrdom of St Apollonia (1628), was a most famous work in the 17th century, because everyone would come here to place money at the foot of the painting to try to alleviate tooth-pain.

RP: Really, they worshipped the painting in that way?

JF: Yes, they would place coins and pray in front of the painting, in order to buy off their tooth-pain. A powerful painting at the time. You could say it represents a woman like character, liberated. A Tiny (Tina) Turner almost, who is riding a tooth. Her sacrifice is that she offers her voice. You will also see a recording studio with an arrow going into the red. So this is at the same time a performance place, a recording studio, and a place where people with money meet to make contracts and business.

RP: You allude to so many references that you not only illuminate our understanding of your works, but also begin to unravel the dynamism of the original altarpieces by Rubens, Jordaens, and Van Dyck. In terms of arriving at these particular motifs as the emblems for your own fantasies and fables, how long did it take to decide those?

JF: For almost two years I made a series of collages, which are as important to the process, and my gallerist for almost thirty years has them. For every panel I think I make sixty collages and drawings, and it was always the same, with the collage slowly becoming more and more essential, until in the end I had one collage for every panel that I thought was the language, of the symbols and metaphors, that I wanted to use. And then it took me years to physically realise these panels, because it is all done manually. Step-by-step, the scarab of the jewel beetle is like painting with light, of gluing them in a way of getting movement and light reflection. Creating this bluish, goldish, orange green.

RP: So essentially the works are concerned with light, in a way that light (literally and metaphorically) and religion were the principle factors in the 17th century?

JF: Essentially they are mosaics that alter with light.

RP: So you can see the altarpieces, as they essentially are now, in daylight and now, as we see them shrouded in darkness, and witness very different works.

JF: Which is to do with how you move between them, as well as the light.

RP: And are you supported by a team of assistants for a work of this scale?

JF: With regard to the altarpieces, I had ten assistants who made up all of the backgrounds. With all of the drawings I made them myself. So I am assisted for certain parts of the process.

RP: In terms of your wider practice, you appear to have an incredible ambition and attitude towards conceiving of creating works by a multitude of methods and mediums. How does that come about, this motivation to think entirely independently?

JF: I have been doing this for forty years, I am always on my knees for beauty, and always choosing the best medium for the idea that I have. Which means sometimes I am writing a text, or making a sculpture, and two days I had a major exhibition open at the Leopold Museum



in Vienna (Stigmata, Actions and Performances 1976-2016), curated by Germano Celant; with all my preparatory research from the last ten years. And there are marble and bronze sculptures, movies, photographs, drawings; all of which are addressing the theme around the most important organ of the body, the brain.

And then I opened, two months ago at CAAC, Centro Andaluz De Arte Contemporáneo, Seville, Spain, a big exhibition about my performances; all of my solo performances. Not my theatre work, but my performances, of which there are over ninety solo performances since 1977; which was again curated by Germano Celant, who made Art Provera famous. I am a Contemporary mystic. I live for my work, it makes me joyful, and gives me energy.

RP: It is this confidence that appears to best explain why you have been working for so long, and so successfully. Have you always had that 'I can do this' mentality?

JF: No, no, there was always a lot of doubt also. But the real drive, the real motivation for me is curiosity, pleasures, and of thinking, and of doubting.

RP: And in the same light, are you always for new materials, new mediums that best encapsulate an idea.

JF: Yes of course. For example the exhibition I have currently in the South of France, at the Maeght Foundation, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, My Nation: The Imagination; and there when you look at my work over some forty years, the subject and the object was always about the body. And of course I researched human blood and water in the body, the skeleton, the organs, and the skin. Also the panels here at AMUZ, are themselves a kind of skin. And I have spoken with scientists and neurologists, because the brain is worth investigating. So my life as an artist, as a servant of beauty, has always been about my curiosity, and the pleasures incarnate.

RP: And do you still feel that you have that same level of curiosity that originally rose from within you, as a boy, at Rubenshius, and later as a young artist performing in the 1970's, and into the 1980's?

JF: I always say, 'It takes a lifetime to become a young artist'. I feel much freer now than when I was an artist of twenty-five or thirty.

RP: And that obviously has to do with your being successful, and being able to make choices, of scale and material, which by definition encourages greater ambition, greater goals.

JF: Yes because some of the works I am producing now are made from models and sketches from twenty, thirty years ago; original ideas that I knew when I got a chance to realize them, I would want to do so.

RP: So you really kept faith in your younger self, and in your ability to translate those raw ideas into complete works now.

JF: I would look back through my sketches and models. At Fondation Maeght, you will see models there from forty, fifty years ago, which might have taken ten years to realize.

RP: But do you keep absolute faith with those original ideas of the 1970's and 1980's, or are they subject to your greater ambitions now; and to the desire of being able to create anything?

JF: Everything is always about a transformation. A metamorphosis, like myself, we are always in a state of transformation, no? And for me my work is also about that, about a condition of constant transformation and chance.

RP: Are there then a particular series of ideas that you refer to time and again, in the same way in which you talk of metamorphosis? Essentially as much as your work appears driven by a cannon of creativity, are they born of simpler sentiments and sensations? Of faith, of beauty as you refer to it, and chance?

JF: Yes I think the base of everything has always been that I write everything down, and at night I write as much as I draw, without a mobile phone or a computer. And when I am writing for me it becomes logical. I am writing, and drawing - making sketches, going back to writing, as the basis for everything.

The other two things that recur in my work are the human body, through my performances, and the animal. The work is entirely about going from, or the metamorphosis, from the animal to the human, and of the human to the animal. Because I think animals are incredibly intelligent, and we can learn a great deal from them. So they are the two constants in my work, in my life, in over forty-five years of being an artist. Of drawing and writing, and a steadfast fascination for humans and animals, as a celebration of the force, power and vulnerability of humankind.

RP: And do you exhibit your writing and drawings? Are they available to the audience in the same way that your performances are?

JF: Yes, this afternoon at three o'clock we will go to my opening at Rossaert, in Nosestraat; my gallerist for thirty-one years, they are showing some of the collages and sketches for these altarpieces.

RP: So there is this perplexing contradiction

< Jan Fabre
The extatic Recording (2018)
Jewel Beetle wing-cases on dibond
Approx 383 x 244 cm without frame
Photographer : Attilio Maranzano
Copyright : Angelos bvba
Medium : Sculpt



between the ideas, which appear ephemeral, and the permanence of your choice of materials; how do you explain that?

JF: Yes because I make a great deal of work in marble and bronze, and I made the first pieces in Noir Belge, Belgian black marble. There are only caves in the world with that kind of marble that are both found in Belgium; in Namur and Wallonia. Six hundred meters deep, and it is where you can find the purely black marble. I made one work, over two years that is now at the Fondation Maeght, in France.

RP: *It must be that you have many works on exhibition at one time?*

JF: Yes, I have five or six major shows going on at the same time.

RP: *And is that possible for you, the conceiving and making of works, alongside the logistics of providing works to all four corners of the world?*

JF: No, because for example the show at Fondation Maeght that opened two days ago, those works came from many different International collections and museums. The MAXXI and Fondazione RomaEuropa exhibition from two years ago in Rome, is now touring. And on the 6th July I am opening a new show of movies in Palermo and Agrigento; and also at

Fondation Maeght, where I have one new work, and I will bring teams or groups of works together, together with a new creation.

RP: *So there is an incredible overlap between exhibitions and events all over the world. The idea that so many of your works are traveling on your behalf, as symbolic of you.*

JF: I am also touring with my theatre company as well.

RP: *So how do you do it? Be able to write and draw prolifically as you say, create an incredible cannon of sculptures, video works, performances, designing, choreographing, as the material and matter for major exhibitions and events all over the world. Does it*

^ Jan Fabre
The loyal ecstasy of death from series "Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas" Detail, 2016
Jewel beetle wing-cases on wood, 227 x 172,2 x 8 cm
Courtesy: Deweer Gallery, Otegem, Belgium

> Jan Fabre
The loyal ecstasy of death from series "Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas", 2016
Jewel beetle wing-cases on wood, 227 x 172,2 x 8 cm
Courtesy: Deweer Gallery, Otegem, Belgium

become an endless exercise to deliver, or are you still in control of what we consume of you?

JF: For forty years, because I love it, I like what I do.

RP: *You have the most incredible job in the world.*

JF: Yes that's true. Essentially, that's what I am saying; I am a Contemporary mystic, because the mystics worked out the idea of happiness over suffering.

RP: *Of beauty and happiness.*

JF: But beauty not as make-up, not only as an aesthetic principle; for me beauty is where ethical values and aesthetical principles go together, that is beauty. Because when it is only about aesthetics, it is make-up.

RP: *Going back to where we are and why we are here, did they, the Old Masters Rubens, Van Dyck and Jordaens among them, did they have the same kind of ethical aesthetics about their work?*

JF: Yes of course, that is what I am describing with Hieronymus Bosch. They (the Old Masters) were incredibly impressive in their day, and they used a lot of imagination and irony.

RP: *Clearly inspirations. Do you look to other artists, performers and choreographers of the Modern period*

as an influence, or are you entirely devoted to the past as an influence on your present?

JF: No, no, I am more interested in the classical Masters, and by science. I worked together on more than one occasion with the Italian neurophysiologist Giacomo Rizzolatti. The inventor of mirror neurons, and he proved through the discovery of neurons, of imitation and compassion. As an accomplished scientist he has inspired me, because in science there are always a lot of new leads; and then at the same time I have great interest in Belgian artists, a fantastic generation of artists of my generation, a fantastic generation including Luc Tuymans, a great painter, Michaël Borremans, and Jef Geys.

RP: *Antwerp is clearly as active in the arts as it was in the 16th and 17th century, and that artists like you and Luc Tuymans, whom you mention, live and work here, is testament to how important history and heritage are to the evolution of art and the avant-garde. Thus whilst devoted to the dead, those artists that have long since departed, do you feel like you influence your contemporaries, and they you?*

JF: No, we are all quite individual people. In the writing world you have Hugo Claus, Stefan Hertmans, Amélie Nothomb, among others. So we have a fantastic wealth of writers and visuals artists in this country. A small country, but you have to look at our history; and how





we have been influenced by the Spanish, by the French, by the Germans, and the Dutch; and of how all of those occupations encouraged a deep revolt, as much as a susceptibility in the arts. That is still particular to Belgian and Flemish art today.

RP: You can only be overwhelmed by this city. Not only for its incredible past; illuminated by the likes of Peter Rubens, Anthony van Dyck, and Jocab Jordaens; but also for its Modern history; there are René Magritte, Maurice Maeterlinck, Victor Horta. And of its contemporaries; playwrights like Herman Brusselmans, Eric Emmanuel Schmitt, and Tone Brulin. All of whom, Old Masters, Modern and Contemporary, have demonstrated a very Flemish appetite for investigating the senses as you do.

JF: Fantastic, and we have a fantastic pop scene, fashion designers.

RP: A joy to have so many elements in one remarkable city that appears to be, unlike a particular man or movement, your greatest inspiration.

^ (Left) Jan Fabre
 L'uomo che sostiene la croce
 Bronze and silicone, 377 x 150 x 48 cm
 Linda and Guy Pieters Collection, Belgium

^ (Right) Jan Fabre
 The man who gives a light, 2002
 Silicon bronze, 77 x 165 x 65 cm
 Linda and Guy Pieters Collection, Belgium

> Jan Fabre :
 The mystic contract (2018)
 Material : Jewel Beetle wing-cases on dibond
 Size : Approx 566 x 398 cm without frame
 Photographer : Attilio Maranzano
 Copyright : Angelos bvba
 Medium : Sculpt

