

# To Cut Your Own Flesh

RAJESH PUNJ

*If art is a reflection of an artist's psyche, then Belgian born, Paris based Johan Creten's spirit appears as much enamoured, as it is effected by a more corrosive vision of beauty. In-situ it is as if his coloured ceramics are slowly hemorrhaging, for all the imperfections that enter into our conversation. And rather than seeing them as a series of static objects in space, Creten intends for a creative catalyst that changes the intention and appearance of his work over time. Offering up contemporaneously edged ceramics that he explains as laced with impurities. Whereby Creten's sculptural works appear fractured, likely at any moment to discolour and decay into shadows of their former self. Seeing in the ceramic work La Cible du Diable I 2017 "A stain that can be likened to that which encroaches on a frail piece of fruit, or on our skin, when we have those markings that denote age. How does the work start to disintegrate, and what can we do to reverse that?" And by burdening his works with such blemishes, Creten engages with a level of honesty akin to the ugly and inevitable changes that challenge our very wellbeing.*

## An interview with **JOHAN CRETEN**

In a gallery setting far from entirely existing as artworks, these objects pose from their plinths, as though individuals shaped as much by their bodily beauty as they are possessed by Creten's politics. Entering into his Sunrise/Sunset enclave, Johan Creten's audience are invited to sit at a coloured observation point, Observation point no 47 2017, Observation point no 41 2017 among them, to feel the brightly coloured stoneware beneath them, whilst looking at the works around them for longer than the time it takes to walk into and out of a space. Suggesting, "The hope is that you are anchoring your audience, to look, turn around while they sit and see the works in a different way. And I think today one of the greatest luxuries is time, and one of the most difficult things is how to look at things, how to clam down enough to look at things." Arresting their interest whilst altering their vantage point, Creten wills his audience to want to engage with the manipulated materials placed on the floor and walls of the gallery. To which the artist has added transparent curtains, 'veils' as he refers to them, as though an attempt to engender the space as something more private. Explaining "these curtains are veils, the word 'veil' today is a taboo word, not only in France; it is a taboo world worldwide. Whereas for me the veil is also the secret." The covering of oneself, and the partial concealing of a public space, is as much about deciding and denying exposure, as it is of body politics. Which is further explored in the artist's appreciation of colour, as not only does it come to illuminate the pigment and palette of his works, but also determines his own deliberate way of dressing.

Rising from his observation point, Creten claims, "Colour is dangerous, today there is a lot of colour on instagram, and so many artworks are produced with the intention of them becoming images, because colour and images have become a kind of currency. But with clothing everything is black, and that scares me a little, in the sense that when I first came to an opening at (Galerie) Perrotin, everyone was wearing colour, and now we are in a world where all the girls wear black. Because black negates itself from the world, and when I wear colour I take a position, and I put myself outside the norm."

Applauded for his seizure of ceramics, making it (as much as American Sterling

< Johan Creten  
Portrait of the artist, 2017  
© Claire Dorn / Courtesy  
Perrotin

Ruby) of the moment, Creten sees it as a choice medium for letting go, and of surrendering himself to 'the process'. By which he introduces a chance element to the work that otherwise might not have occurred. A foray into the unknown, or as Creten says of its looser liberty, "What I loved about ceramics is that the final gesture is beyond my control." Unlike painting, by which Johan Creten originally came to art, he sees ceramics as more malleable, as its enabling him to manipulate the material to the point at which something reveals itself. An epiphany for the artist, as he explains, "I have always loved working in ceramics in the sense that I can create unique objects. With each one of these there is only one, and that is not something you see with contemporary art. A small miracle takes place when a work comes out of the Kiln, because you can say 'there is somebody' there." Whether being overwhelmed by the scale and material strength of a work like *De Gier* (the Vulture) 2017, or the intrusive intimacy of *Vulva* 2017, Johan Creten engenders his works with a cannon of motives and emotions, as everything appears ready to succumb to symptoms of sadness and sorrow.



^ Johan Creten (Top)  
*I'm Abendrot*  
© Claire Dorn / Courtesy Perrotin & Johan Creten

< Johan Creten (Top)  
*The Price of Freedom, 2015-2017, Sculpture, Patinated bronze, lostwax casting, 145 x 194 x 59 cms*  
© Creten / ADAGP, Paris 2017  
© Claire Dorn / Courtesy Perrotin & Johan Creten

< Johan Creten (Below)  
*View of the exhibition Sunrise / Sunset, Perrotin Paris, January 10 – March 10 2018*  
© Creten / ADAGP, Paris 2018  
Photo : Claire Dorn / Courtesy Perrotin

**INTERVIEW:**

*Rajesh Punj: Can you begin by explaining these coloured based works that appear throughout the show?*

**Johan Creten:** The thing is you see all over the show these *Observation Points 2017*, and the idea is that you are invited to sit down. I first used these for a show at CRAC, Sète, which you have the catalogue for. And the idea relates to something I find fundamental in museums, that of the benches. Because the bench or seats are where you can sit down, and with the urgency to keep moving, even if I can get your attention for ten seconds more, then I win. I have also placed them in groups, in the sense that possibly you will sit with somebody you don't know, or you sit with a friend. And the fact that you consider a work in a different way from how you look at instagram, where today we see a work for less than a second, is part of what I am seeking. The idea is that you sit at these observation points and you look, and 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.

*RP: Yes of course.*

**JC:** And then there is colour and there is shape, because in fact the shape of the object comes from the harbour. These are boulders that would have heavy ropes attached to them from mooring ships, and at the same time they have the same shape as a traditional upturned base for a classical sculpture. So they become a base for us as the audience, and the last thing is the word for these things in French, which is *bite d'amarrage*. For which there is a little joke in the sense that the word 'bite' is 'dick', so you are sitting on a big dick. But that's the joke, so the idea is also with *bite d'amarrage* that this is the anchor that is entirely stable.

*RP: So you are attempting to anchor your audience, do you feel that?*

**JC:** The hope is that you are anchoring your audience, to look, turn around while they sit and see the works in a different way. I think today one of the greatest luxuries is time, and one of the most difficult things is how to look at things, how to clam down enough to look at things.

*RP: And do you feel that time has been reconstituted, when you refer to instagram, and other social media?*

JC: I 'do' instagram, I love instagram. I am very active on instagram.

RP: *Maybe we are not precious enough with what we look at?*

JC: I think that we use, see and send images so fast that we tend to look at things much more on the surface now. We even see that in the way art is made today, a lot of it is made just for the image, and functions more as an image than as an object. So a sculpture as a sculpture already has the difficulty of how it is seen and exists in space. For example if I send an image of a sculpture to an assistant, sometimes the assistant doesn't recognise the piece when she sees it in the flesh, because she saw it from the back and not the front. And the idea that a sculpture escapes you through its multiple angles suggests that today we should still consider to go to a place where you can look at things, and see and experience different textures; to see how a work changes as you change position, of the physical thing in space. Does that make sense to you?

RP: *Yes it does, I find it incredibly interesting. It is something I think about a lot, the idea that the audience need on occasion to 'invest' time in a work of art. In seeing a work, in experiencing it for its physicality and form; whether it be a sculpture or painting; and of the sensations that come with that.*

JC: But if you say 'invest' time, it means that it costs something. Whereas I think the idea is that it is a 'joy', so how to turn it into something else.

RP: *It is interesting, I say the word 'invest', in light of how our time is divided up, and has become recognised by industries and institutions as a commodity. They have 'our time and attention' they are likely to be saying to themselves. Moreover even 'abstract' or recreational time has become the breeding ground for entrepreneurial ideas.*

JC: So you see already after five or so minutes we are talking about the politics of time. The whole thing is that 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 like this one brings you to those ideas. So that is one of the major ideas throughout the show. Some of the works are very dramatic, there is a particular ceramic work I started a few years ago now, called La Vierge d'Aleppo 2014/2015, The Virgin of Aleppo.

RP: *I see.*

JC: When you put a title on something it becomes an even more dangerous object, and if you notice in the show I have placed see-through curtains against the windows, and you as an art historian will say 'Oh yes curtains' and you 'cligner', you see something and you?



^ Johan Creten  
La Cible du Diable II, 2015  
Wall sculpture  
Glazed stoneware, highfired  
12 x 62 cms  
© Creten / ADAGP, Paris 2017  
© Gerrit Schreurs / Courtesy Perrotin & Johan Creten

> Johan Creten  
Vulva, Exhibition view  
© Claire Dorn





^ Johan Creten  
Présentoir d'Orange, © Claire Dorn

< Johan Creten  
Brain Drain II, 2015  
Wall sculpture  
Bronze luster on glazed stoneware, highfired  
104 x 77 x 20 cms, © Creten / ADAGP, Paris 2017  
© Gerrit Schreurs / Courtesy Perrotin & Johan Creten

**RP: Blink, look again?**

**JC:** Do you use that expression in English? How do you say to cligner, if you are see something and think of something else? 'Reference' is too heavy a word.

**RP: I think I understand, you see one thing and it triggers or takes you to another situation or set of circumstances.**

**JC:** A lot of my work has that mechanism of reveling or re-energising cultural memories. So for you maybe it is Félix González-Torres, because the moment you talk about the curtain and the wind, you are with Felix. And that way there might also be some sculptural references. But for me these curtains are veils, the word 'veil' today is a taboo word, not only in France, it is a taboo world worldwide. Whereas for me the veil is also about the secret, if I think back historically all of the brides in France were veiled. My grandmother when she took on the 'grand deuil' was veiled; when grandfather died she wore the full veil in black, to commemorate this death. Another work, Aus dem Serail 2016/2017, from the Serail, is a reference to Mozart and die entführung aus dem Serail. Because the veil is actually not a recent obsession, it is not a recent taboo; it is a century old obsession of the west with another world. We have always been obsessed with the orient, as a grand fantasme. As a kind of projection of a lot of exotic dreams, and of the harem and the sultan; so it's not necessarily about it only having a political meaning. I called her La Vierge Alep; the virgin naturally puts it in a different context, because the virgin also works for the Catholics.

What I like is the richness of the glazes of the ceramic works. It takes a lot of work, many pieces are fired and re-fired, and I work on them sometimes for several years until they are ready. I have always loved working in ceramics in the sense that I can create unique objects. With each one of these there is only one, and that is not something you see with contemporary art. A small miracle takes place when a work comes out of the Kiln, because you can say 'there is somebody' there.

**RP: I see it as fundamental that you allow for the process to perform upon the work, and to determine what happens.**

**JC:** I started out as a painter; I have never been trained as a ceramicist. I don't know anything about ceramics. I hate ceramics and the whole kitchen thing; I really hate it. The thing is because I trained as a painter, with painting you are fundamentally in control. There has been a lot written about 'control' and 'liberty' and of the whole history of painting.

**RP: Yes of course.**



JC: But what I love about ceramics is that the final gesture is beyond my control.

**RP: You apply the phrase 'liberty' to painting, but clearly there is a more remarkable freedom to your use of clay, as a material?**

JC: I love it, I don't know why. I need a couple more years of psychoanalysis to understand better.

**RP: That has to do with the creative process; possibly there is a greater liberty in letting go, than all the control in the world?**

JC: Yes, yes.

**RP: Clearly it is a beautiful thing, that moment of abandon.**

JC: I think there is a wonderful thing going on each time, because there are things that sometimes I cannot solve. For instance with the work *Aus Dem Serail* I couldn't solve the skin, and then from the last firing the skin of the veil had a lava glaze, that led to another kind of drawing that didn't exist before. You had the contrast between the naked unglazed clay, and the texture of the skin. And the glaze appears as a veil, because it is a skin applied to sculpture. For me I love that kind of creative process.

**RP: The ceramic works, are they incredibly heavy?**

JC: Some of them have an aluminum backing that requires two people to hang them, which becomes difficult with collectors, because the works can be very heavy. I love to make my life, my dealer's life, and my collector's life, difficult. These are new pieces in the sense that when you see the *Odore di Femmina* pieces, I could have made my whole career just from those flower works, but the thing with this show is that you will see a large spectrum of stories that go from almost conceptual to very expressionist. There is an incredible liberty about it.

**RP: And you really have, from what I recall from your previous exhibition in Sète, an ability to move**

**between mediums, a confidence to choose if you like.**

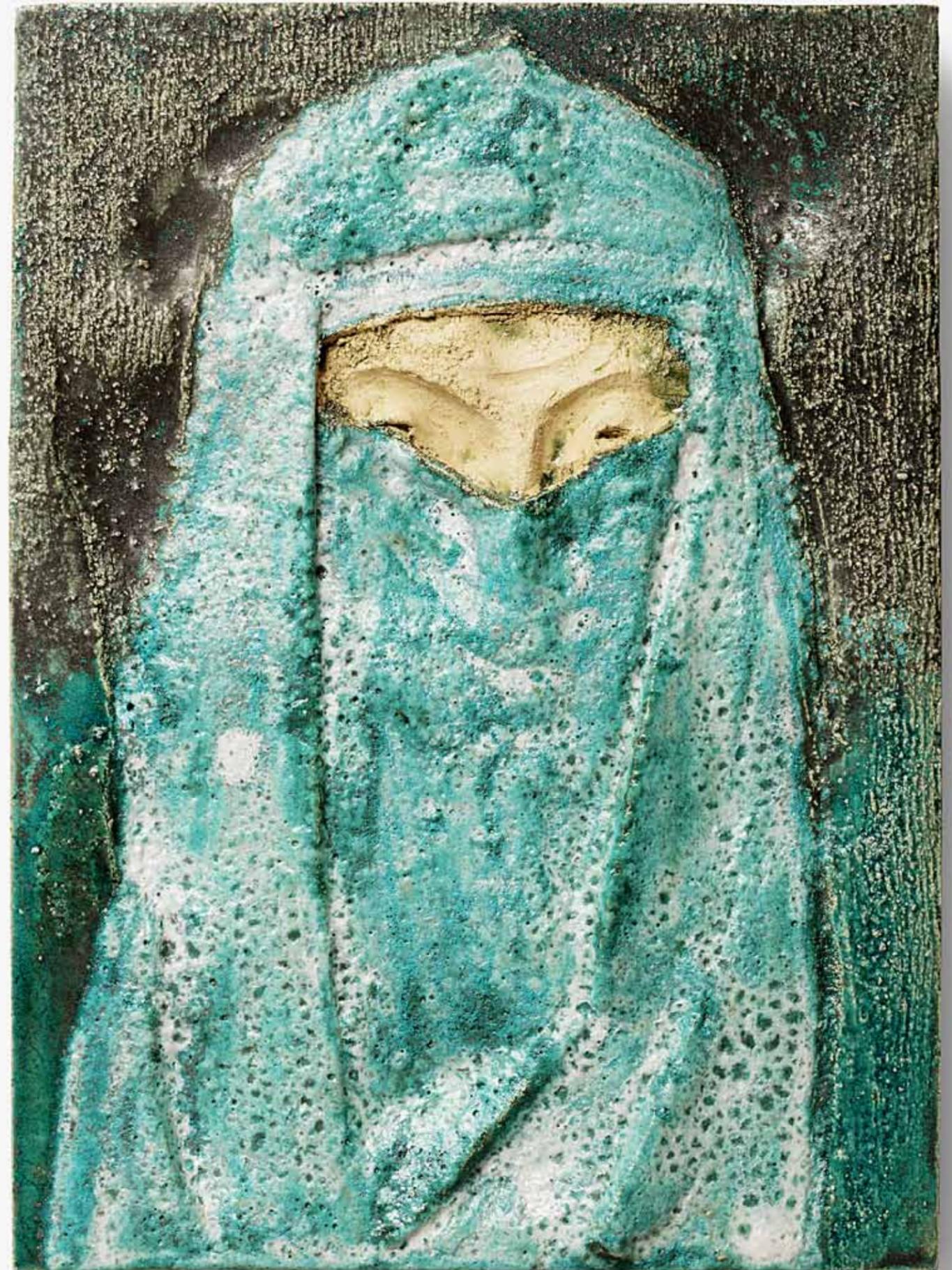
JC: I think of (Sigmar) Polke, Polke had an idea of liberty that you must have as an artist, a 'deliberate freedom'. Which is a very difficult position to take today, again because of merchandising and brand building in the art world. For a long time marketing and merchandising has been bleeding over from the commercial work into the art world. So the thing is that it naturally makes it very hard, because people want to see the same thing, they want to buy the same thing, and to all have the same thing.

**RP: You have talked already about dealers and collectors, well this appetite for the same thing, must make it difficult for you, with each of your works being so unique.**

JC: It makes it difficult, it also makes it challenging, because it demands of collectors a greater level of engagement. Peter Marino, the American architect, has several of my works in his collection. Which is

^ Johan Creten (L-R):  
*La Vierge d'Aleppo*, 2014-2015  
 Glazed stoneware with grog and crystallization aluminium structure, 80 x 69 cms  
*Alte Mutti*, 2016-2017  
 Wall sculpture, Blisterglaze on modelled and insised stoneware, highfired, 89 x 68 x 10 cms  
*The Sphynx*, 2014-2017  
 Sparkling cristalglaze on high fired stoneware, concrete composit, pigment and aluminum backing  
 102 x 74.5 cms  
*The Pearl*, 2016  
 Modeled glazed stonewear, high fired several times  
 80 x 70 cms, © Creten / ADAGP, Paris 2017  
 © Gerrit Schreurs / Courtesy Perrotin & Johan Creten

> Johan Creten, *Aus Den Serail*, 2016-2017  
 Wall sculpture, Blister glaze on modelled glazed stoneware, high-fired  
 89 x 67,5 x 8 cms, © Creten / ADAGP, Paris 2017  
 © Gerrit Schreurs / Courtesy Perrotin & Johan Creten





stimulating in the sense that there are collectors who have collections that have depth, that go deep; and that are eclectic and conscious of their history. But it is true this is a very different kind (of art). So I haven't chosen the easy way for myself, it has never been about taking the easy root.

**RP: But of course it has to be about you determining what happens, rather than the market determining what you do.**

**JC:** The thing is it demands that you take a position as an artist.

**RP: Is that something you constantly have to consider?**

**JC:** I have always produced my own work. So the work *De Gier (The Vulture)* 2017, which is outside, four meters fifty high. I cast it without knowing where it would go.

**RP: Insane or inspired?**

**JC:** Without knowing where it is going to go. So it is a scary position sometimes.

**RP: But that must be when you feel at your**

**most creative, when you are free to act without consequence.**

**JC:** I think yes, it makes you feel more alive, 'to cut your own flesh'.

**RP: Something I should consider, as I need to take many more risks.**

**JC:** I think we all have to. Here, and you will see them throughout the show, are these small bronzes, or *Vulva* 2017. They are cast, polished and then lacquered or varnished.

**RP: I am drawn to the scale of your work. It becomes interesting, the notion of something very intimate against something monumental.**

^ Johan Creten  
View of the exhibition *Sunrise / Sunset*,  
January 10 - March 10, 2018, © Creten / ADAGP, Paris 2018  
Photo : Claire Dorn / Courtesy Perrotin

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Photo : Claire Dorn / Courtesy Perrotin

**JC:** I think that is the beauty of the show for me, to go from one to another.

**RP: And did you determine the 'curatorial' arrangement of the works within the gallery spaces?**

**JC:** Yes.

**RP: And is that something you consider well in advance (months, years) of a show opening?**

**JC:** Yes, the show (at Galerie Perrotin) was almost two years in the making. Some of the works are from the nineties. *Madame Butterfly* 1995 was made when I was working in a porcelain factory in Wisconsin. A work composed of two porcelain baseball bats that have become entirely decorative for the flowers that entangle them. Their colour refers to a particular politics, because a baseball bat has two connotations, recreational and sometimes more ruthless, a weapon of sorts - a phallic armament. I would say, it has become redundant of its original purpose in so many ways, taking on a more unsavoury use. And I have put it next to a work from 1989, when I was still a young artist, *Présentoir d'Orange (Display Orange)* 1989-2017. For which I have used a real orange on a ceramic base.

**RP: So I assume the orange will slowly discolour and decay.**

**JC:** Degrade, or the orange can be replaced.

**RP: What do you wish for?**

**JC:** The whole idea is as (Marcel) Duchamp decided, that everything you take can be sacralised and turned into an artwork. *Présentoir d'Orange* is a piece I made as a young artist, and on this ceramic base the orange shimmers, and almost looks wet with the light. And it is next to the title of the show 'Sunrise Sunset'. Question, why would you bring an orange to a prisoner or a sick person?

**RP: Tell me.**

**JC:** The thing is it is naturally a vitamin balm.

**RP: I actually need something stronger, a whisky as you suggested earlier, to rid myself of this cough.**

**JC:** But at the same time it recalls the image of the sun, in the sense that it is this perfect thing. Also the orange is the incarnation of hope, colour and a 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 as a young artist I was influenced by my contemporaries. Do you know the work by the



German artist Joseph Beuys, Capri Battery 1985, for which Beuys takes a lemon and couples it with a lamp? Maybe you have seen it. Beuys makes that piece, whereby the art object also functions as a battery, for you and for me.

**RP: To rejuvenate us.**

**JC:** To rejuvenate us, yes. So the idea is that a work of art, by concentrating our thoughts, becomes a way of energising our lives.

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

**JC:** I am my best audience, but it is true that sometimes people have said that 'Johan your work is very cerebral'. People tend to find it very beautiful – with regard to the flower works, and others see the work as being very cerebral. And that's where Sunrise Sunset comes into being. In sunset you have the word 'set', also the show functions as a kind of theatre, with a storyline. 'SS', sunrise, sunset, it is also our whole story, we rise and we set. Sculptures rise and subside, empires rise and fall. All of which links with elements from politics as well - and again the glaze is always amazing.

**RP: The colours as you rightly point out for the bases of works like I'm Abendrot 2017, are striking.**

**JC:** You have seen this work Vulva 2017 already, but give me your hand and apply to the crack.

**RP: I see, and the audience are invited to touch the work, as I have done?**

**JC:** I like the idea that they can touch what they see.

**RP: It really takes on a different sensation entirely, very sensual, like a forbidden fruit.**

**JC:** I love the texture of work, that you can also say things by your feel for it, and there are sensations that come just by touching a piece. That's why I find necessary that you can sit down at the observation points.

**RP: With your work there is an element of abstraction to everything.**

**JC:** That's why I say that my work can go from being very abstract, where it is (an abstract painting) between brackets, to works with a lot happening. For instance when you look at a work from one position and you move, you see the under drawing that appears and disappears. And some of these are pieces that I made in Alfred in New York, with a catalogue explaining all the mistakes and forbidden taboos from ceramics. You see 'cracks' and 'blistering', the crack in French is La fissure. It is the fault line. But there is also a link to the material crack, and

another type of more intimate crack, Vulva. And it might be more of a physiological crack that needs to be psychoanalysed, like a plate that has a crack. In French there are more word plays, *fêlure*, when you are 'cracking your head'.

**RP: You are going a little crazy?**

**JC:** You are going a little crazy, yes, or there is something slightly off, something slightly wrong.

**RP: You appear to have an interest in openings and imperfections, not just physical but psychological.**

**JC:** That is just how I am, imperfect.

**RP: I find that interesting in relation to my interviews and writing. Of your interest in the mistakes and imperfections that rule your work, and of how they become significant as a measure of beauty. I mention my writing because I have had this longstanding preoccupation of beauty, and how we define it. Is our understanding of beauty related to perfection? I interviewed Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto, about just that, and he talks about how beauty is far from perfect, and that it exists in the fault-lines or 'cracks' as you call them.**

**JC:** He is Japanese. I just did a show in a ceramics village in the heart of France, where I presented new pieces that I made there, in relation to six early Japanese ceramics. One was a thousand years before Christ, and the others dated from the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. Whereas for the Japanese their whole idea is about 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. So I think Sugimoto's response was clearly culturally driven.

**RP: I think as well it 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:** Unique as opposed to the mass-produced. When I was a young artist, it was all about minimalism, and of conceptual art. I think of Donald Judd sculptures that were not touched by the hand of the artist, that claim a level of perfection that is machine like. I find his works absolutely wonderful, I have absorbed them; but I chose ceramic as an act of opposition to all of that discourse, to say 'no'.

> Johan Creten  
Vulva, © Claire Dorn

