

An art of vitality

With her frank and determined gaze, strength of character and openness to anything different or unfamiliar, Clémence van Lunen immediately attracts attention. With informed conviction she assesses all that goes on in modern art, non-Western art included, impressive in her intellectual curiosity and her receptiveness. It is the result of a journey that took her very early into the practice of craft skills, the result also of life-enhancing encounters and a bedrock independence. Her development as an artist began under the guidance of the Belgian sculptor Michel Smolders and continued with Etienne Martin, her teacher at the School of Fine Arts in Paris. It has been punctuated by as many highly physical episodes as there were dream-materials/media to be made use of, since she has never been afraid to confront matter, whether working stone directly in Belgian quarries or sawing up tree trunks in Japanese forests under the exacting direction of Shigeo Toya, that great contemporary master of the sculptural metamorphosis of wood.

Any form created by Clémence van Lunen takes its rightful place in the category of "mutants". In the period 1994-1998, her first monumental works in wood already spoke of an exacerbated growth of vital forces, as much those of nature as of the body. Generously they circumscribed a space in which the viewer could approach and confront the nodosities of the sculpted form (the interlocking trunks setting up a series of wavelike movements capable of dispelling their apparent inertia) which highlighted the expressive similarities between the creeping expansion of a rhizome and the convulsive suppleness of a dancing human body. At the dawn of the new millennium, still seeking that expressivity of form in movement, Clémence chose industrial materials as being better suited to the flexible structures she then envisaged. She studied, for example, the cavernous inside/outside of a swollen body in black rubber (*Entraille, Invertébré*) and all the different ways of folding translucent PVC around a column of air (the set of *Lucides*). The most surprising monumental figures of recent years use metallic mesh, in the artist's hands becoming intractable clouds, explosions whose bristling surfaces derive their warlike

virulence from the graphic fantasy of Japanese science fiction manga comics.

Although she likes to work with what might be termed the "soft", Clémence van Lunen is constantly concerned to ensure that her expanding *Petits Monuments* do not lose their balance, ultimately remaining upright by the steely grace of their tips and the logic of their many vertical connections, rising in tiers around an invisible axis. Her light textures take their disturbing strangeness from the cellular and organic world, in the way that some visionary architects of modernity have approached it, setting up ghostly echoes of the dynamic curves of the Einstein Tower built near Potsdam in Germany by the Expressionist architect Erich Mendelsohn in the early 1920s. Their lobed structures doubtless also owe something to the fantastical art of the Catalan Antoni Gaudi, in a similar colour-driven approach to the natural growth of forms that the famous builder managed to transcribe in the most varied materials, from the wrought ironwork of the gates and balconies of the Casa Mila to the ceramic fragments that top the many chimneys and roofs of the Park Guëll. At the same time as playing with light in metal mesh, Clémence van Lunen works in enamelled terracotta on a repertoire of mini-architectures which seem to perch on stilts (*Foraminis*, *S.F.*, etc.), or untamable sexed forms constantly hesitating between bio- and anthropomorphism (*3D*, *Agelaside impudique*, etc.). They mark the beginnings of an artificial ceramic landscape that the artist goes on to develop in her Indian and Chinese works.

For of course we had omitted to say that Clémence learnt how to turn pottery early on, in a village in Extremadura in Spain, and returned to the region from 1991 to 1993 on a grant from the Casa Velasquez, working with potters from Almeria province. It was they who truly opened the door to the world of ceramics for her and, having entered, she then went in search of its extra-European roots. In 2003, during a journey to India, Clémence became fascinated by the popular art of the traditional Gujarat potters in the Delhi region. On her return to France, she said that she wanted, like them, to "make the clay dance" and found at Rairies Montrieux near Angers the technical resources which allowed her to create a sumptuous series of sculptures

that play on the fertile mobility of terracotta tracery enamelled in vivid or pointillist colours, all capering equilibria and creamy superpositions, inspired by the richly decorated façades of Hindu porches. The idea of confronting the myth of the life force symbolised by the Oriental dragon in sculpture was doubtless already germinating.

Clémence's experience in China turned out to be decisive in that regard, taking the form of three visits that included two periods as artist in residence at a recently privatised former state factory at Jingdezhen, the emblematic city where Chinese porcelain was produced in such abundance, especially the "blue and white" style once so fashionable in Europe. But it was not so much that which drew her as the long-standing tradition of imitation among Chinese potters and their astonishing skill at transposing other materials into ceramic, whether the effect of wickerwork or an object made of wood, bronze or bamboo, the veracity of a vegetable or the realism of an insect on a flower, in short everything that, in the 20th century, mass marketing and the globalisation of a Western taste relentlessly given over to the moderation and proportional rigour of the "Modern Mind" helped to relegate once and for all to the category of kitsch. In Paris, Clémence was already doing her best to reconcile trips to Guimet and Cernuschi with amused discoveries in the bazaars of the Chinese quarter – she makes no secret of her fondness for the cheap green and gold dragons to be found there –, noting in passing a constancy in stylistic typologies, even if changes in artistic intention, fickle tastes and economic imperatives have lowered the standards of excellence.

And yet the three *Dragons* that the artist conceived in China have no family connection with the local production: rather, they are an attempt to transpose in the round the rippling circumvolutions of an ancestral Chinese motif, in architecture as in painting, capable in an identical graphic synthesis of describing the movement of clouds and an undulating dragon's back, the shifting presence of spirits and the agitated flow of a stream. From elements turned then distorted, bound in clay strips that serve as joints to long, fashioned stems, "her" Chinese dragon is a vigorous sinusoid without head or tail, but rather stumps and bony limbs whose syncopated wriggings suggest the multiple fireworks that the glossy animal could well smother (or

merely delay), as though the artist were seeking to stop it from fulfilling its festive duty, namely to crackle...

During her first residence at Jingdezhen in 2005 Clémence plunged eagerly into the dizzy delights of imitation and interpretation in the Chinese manner, moulding into the noble porcelain offcuts of industrial materials like bulgomme, nylon nets and plastic packaging that had no value other than their malleability. She drew her inspiration from porcelain receptacles in the form of rococo gardens or artist's palettes with bronze brush-rests shaped like lucky frogs spewing golden coins. In her incongruous way she builds a bridge between the ordinariness of a piece of bulgomme brought with her from France and the rich history of local decorative exuberance. In that, she is a little like the great Renaissance potter Bernard Palissy, who moulded from life a rustic bestiary in enamelled faience for a planned "grotto" commissioned by Catherine de Médicis for the Tuileries, drawing inspiration from the high-relief ornaments showing mythological scenes much favoured by Italian and Flemish gold- and silversmiths at the time. Moved by the same desire to transfer the fruits of the imagination from one material to another, Clémence van Lunen uses Chinese porcelain coated with a fine, sea-green enamel which she then glazes a metallic pearl-grey, giving her series of *Chinoiseries* the precious look of mother-of-pearl and blurring their outlines to captivating effect. *Breloques* and other "table" sculptures take on the aspect of tangled coils of textile pricked with buttons, shells and various types of seaweed, sown too with a few objects that might, according to the observer's fancy, be acorns, tassels or the glans of a male organ. In their impetuous mutability, these "rockeries" seem to be marine concretions, shining and clear as opals, attractive at first sight like a jumble of lace and braid, but ultimately as murky as a marsh.

The artist's most recent works are in biscuit porcelain, made during a second residence in China in the summer of 2006. They show off the extraordinary whiteness of their local paste, which can almost bestow a marble effect on these small-scale sculptures, realised with truly remarkable refinement. The series is entitled *Microcosmos*: its complexity of interpretation owes as much to its singular territorial

virtues – islets of a tropical nature whose heart-pinching hybridity is barely maintained in the folds of a miraculous autarchy – as to their ambiguous psychological allusions, discovered simultaneously and discomfiting: the carnivorous universe of these conglomerations of roots and turgescient bulbs literally leaps out at the observer, unleashing the plastic representation of a disconcerting and juvenile sexuality, a concentrate of regressive humour and all sorts of other odds and ends.

Over the years Clémence van Lunen has thus developed an opus of "high curiosity" (to use a term sometimes applied to the diversity of collections assembled by connoisseurs with tastes as eclectic as they are refined): rare objects whose identification remains deliberately vague, intended to delight as much as to alarm, insofar as they constantly seek to unsettle us. As disturbing as they are attractive in the metaphors they conjure up, these sculptures inspire sympathy mingled with trepidation, displaying a certain filiation with the work of the American sculptor Peter Soriano, described by Tristan Trémeau as "too nice to be true".* It would be interesting to explore the existence of similarities of intention between the work of Clémence van Lunen and Soriano, although she is not as attracted as he is by forms of industrial origin or derived from the ordinariness of worlds that, with him, are very specifically "modern" (sports design, game design, ergonomics). On the contrary, Clémence van Lunen says she wants to "joyfully shake that modernism's universal certainties", preferring to develop her exploration of the plastic from creatures of her pure imagination that have their origin in intimate fantasy or fairy tale. Steering a path between educated taste and the secret wellsprings of her intact and almost childish fascination with the excessive, Clémence van Lunen acutely plots how we consume artworks while continuing to be amazed by gratuitous and vertiginous profusion, when our age has imposed the dictates of a rationalism in which pure line, functional sobriety and easy comprehensibility win out, albeit through the head, not the heart.

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* The title of an article published in Art Press, No. 273, November 2001.