

## Clémence van Lunen behind the curtain

To sculpt a curtain, or a drapery is the easiest of things: you just soak a piece of cloth in “barbotine” (clay diluted in a large quantity of water), then you let it dry after shaping the pleats you want and then put it in the oven. This is more or less what Rodin did for his *Balzac*: first he represented him naked, as Leon Battista Alberti recommended during the Renaissance. According to him, the cloth only finds its real shape on the body supporting it. He then covered him with a dressing gown identical to his own - ordered from the writer’s tailor – soaked in liquid clay or perhaps plaster. The advantage of this procedure is that the cloth becomes an armature and the pleats are easily shaped.

When Clémence van Lunen hears this, she rolls her eyes and looks like she pities you... just a little. To start with she doesn’t use the armature. *“That’s the problem with ceramic. When you cook it, it shrinks. If there’s metal inside it, assuming it resists temperatures over 1000°, the clay will crack. So, no armature!”* At the risk of seeing the clay collapse under its own weight? *“That has often happened to me. A wooden support collapsing during the drying process, for example, or a base that is still damp and you work the material too soon: everything falls apart. Often, when that happens, I have to work on the piece again and give it a new direction. I either use it... or not.”*

Nevertheless the subject is somewhat surprising. You can imagine Salome without her veils but seldom the veils without Salome. Except at the Rodin museum where *Balzac*’s dressing gown’s plaster casts are kept, without Balzac in them... During the 1970’s Robert Morris’ pleated split felts, or to be exact, gravity did it. Those of Josef Beuys sometimes experienced a similar destiny. At the Centre Pompidou, Charles Ray showed a pile of clothes on the floor (*Clothes Pile*, 2020). The sculpture was made of painted aluminium, but seemed more appropriate for a laundry basket than a museum. They were all heading towards the “emancipation” of the drapery. With Clémence van Lunen’s series “All About Curtains”, we go one step further.

*“It started off as a challenge. A friend dared me to make curtains. I thought the idea was stupid, completely anti-sculptural. They seemed*

*to me to be just bi-dimensional, not three-dimensional. All the curtains I found in the history of sculpture, were bas-reliefs. That to me was a good enough reason not to do it. In the end, I took up the challenge and little by little I got caught up in the game. Not only that, I found another very exciting challenge : instead of rising from the ground like an honest sculpture, a curtain must look like it's hanging. It was not built up, it was falling! I was captivated by this idea, and that is how I made several sculptures to be hung on walls, in order to get rid of the base. I also had to convey the impression of movement which the subject requires. A curtain is not something static!"*

*"I looked at a lot of art history, particularly the stylised draperies of icons. I was also very influenced for this series by Roman and Gothic sculpture in particular, and especially by the portal of the cathedral of Trogir in Dalmatia (ex-Yugoslavia) attributed to Master Radovan. I've seen other wooden ones, where the folds are carved with a large gouge with a freedom you do not see in the rest of the statue, this encouraged me to work, not with clay coils, like a potter would, but in the mass. I carved the block of clay, which looked like a stone wall at the beginning, more or less the height of a wardrobe, like a stone car sculptor would do. I take away rather than adding and putting on top. I cut, I empty, I stick back... The advantage is that, right from the start, you "travel" in the whole of the work rather than watching it grow step by step." The bronzes are casted from a block of polystyrene which has also been carved in the mass. The disadvantage in their case, is the accident, the collapse is not possible.*

Nevertheless, she makes preliminary mock-ups, hundreds of small curtains that will help her find the rhythm, the life she will give to the larger formats, without the burdens of technical problems, particularly those of the weight. *"Contrary to my reluctance at the beginning, I discovered the great wealth of this theme. The possibilities are endless, with or without suspension bars, with supporting bases, tassels, frills... There are those that need high technical skills and others almost none."* Those that look like overcooked cannelloni – *"I like it when my sculptures are a bit silly! Discouraging a theoretical approach, an in depth study, it forces you to look at the*

*shapes...*” Rembrandt’s Slaughtered Ox or the Ku-Klux Klan’s characters painted by Philip Guston, and others that have an absolutely orgiastic aspect. “*The more I make, the more I want to make, and a lot crazier if possible...*”

People think that a curtain is made to conceal, to hide. On the contrary, sometimes it is there to reveal something. It is the case of the one Hans Holbein painted in the background of the *Ambassadors*: on the far left at the top of the painting, he gives us a glimpse of a small crucifix. In this way, Christ is better highlighted and the iconographic analysis of the work results from it. It also reminds us of the competition opposing Zeuxis and Parrhasios recounted by Pliny the Elder. Both their paintings are hidden behind curtains. Zeuxis unveils his in front of the jury, it represents grapes so perfectly imitated that birds come and try to eat them. Parrhasios does not touch his curtain. When the jury gets eager to see the painting behind it, he answers that the painting, is the curtain. He did not fool birds but human beings .

Because, if a curtain hides, or reveals, Parrhasios and Clémence van Lunen’s curtains show nothing but themselves and when they are unveiled it is just to show their interior. In her own way she also tries to fool the jury: sometimes we wonder if it’s not just little flexible, how it stays in place, if we could unfold it... This was the idea developed by art historian Daniel Arasse in his book about Vermeer <sup>2</sup> : the curtain lets us see (believe) that there is something we are not seeing. And since her curtains have a life of their own, it is not surprising that the series has evolved, the original form of the fabric tending towards more organic aspects, the fold and the waves sometimes looking like tentacles.

[1] « Zeuxis' contemporaries and emulators were Timanthes, Androcydes, Eupompe, Parrhasios. The latter, it is said, offered a fight to Zeuxis. Zeuxis painted grapes with such realism, that the birds came to peck them; the other brought a curtain so naturally represented, that Zeuxis, all proud of the birds' sentence, asked that the curtain be finally drawn to show the painting. Then, recognizing his illusion, he admitted defeat with modest frankness, since he had only deceived birds, but Parrhasios had deceived an artist, who was Zeuxis."

Pliny the Elder [translation by Emile Littré], Natural History, XXXVI/5.

*“It is essential for me to have fun! That’s why I do series: when I feel that one is coming to an end, I start something else, even if at the beginning it is horrible or stressful because I have to start all over again.”* Ironically, her problem is her very high technical expertise. Her virtuosity is scary. It scares her. So she likes to put herself in danger, or work with others who will take her out of her comfort zone. This is how a friend from India, living in Goa and wishing to remain anonymous, came to decide with her about issues concerning the glaze and the enamels that will be affixed to the sculptures. Rather like cartoonists who have specialists to colour their works.

*“She keeps telling me that I have really bad taste! So I just let her get on with it. What’s great is that she doesn’t see the volume or she doesn’t even bother. Her proposals are completely different from what I would have imagined. But she is a great colourist and the results are very surprising to me. I see pieces coming out of the oven that I don’t recognize. And if I do not like them, well, we cook them again! As many as ten times if necessary.”* The proposition is daring, because the colour, more enticing, always wins.

It is an old debate, between « poussinists » and « rubenists » for example, or between Florence and Venice. It is also a question of perspective: two squares with perfectly identical surfaces will look like they have different sizes depending on whether they are painted in yellow or in blue.

Matisse, in his own way, solved the problem by cutting directly into colour, with his cut-out papers. The Indian friend is also involved in the patina of the bronzes. Clémence van Lunen insists on that, referring to tradition: in the Middle Ages, when the sculptures were polychrome and crafts very separate from each other, the sculptor who carved was different from the one who painted. She adds, with a large smile: *“this is also my post-modern side. I work with an assistant, for colour only!”*

However, sometimes the sculpture's occupation of the space allows it to dominate the colour. When she started, Clémence van Lunen had the feeling that her curtains were too small. But the density of the clay or the bronze, enables them to fight both against the void and the enticing irradiation of the glazes. And, ironically, their two-dimensional appearance, a priori, leads the artist to take great care of what she calls the « back », that is the reverse of the curtain. *“The back, less controlled than the front, is often more interesting for me. The artist Juliette Agnel, who was kind enough to shoot the pictures for the catalogue, told me that they reminded her of the back of Matisse's bas-reliefs, perhaps because of their ruggedness.”* In fact, the most surprising and most joyful thing about all this, is that Clémence van Lunen's curtains, despite the somewhat conceited references I outlined before, don't look like anything else we know.

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