

Maen Florin's strange paradise, inspired by Gauguin

Guy Duplat

Art Iselp crowns the sculptor of large hybrid ceramics.

At the Iselp in Brussels, Belgian sculptor and ceramist Maen Florin (b. 1954, lives and works near Ghent) can be seen in a fine monographic exhibition entitled Strange Paradise. (lives and works near Ghent).

We have already had the pleasure of discovering her work in recent years. Again this summer, she was invited to take part in the Voyage à Nantes, an artistic festival that takes over the city for two months. She occupied the vast fountain on Place Royale in Nantes, transforming it into an oceanic fantasy, with some twenty colorful hybrid creatures. Her large, colorful ceramics can be seen again at Iselp, which places them in the context of her artistic career.

First of all, we recall all the little hybrid creatures she created from 2007 to 2015, made from a variety of collages. Large dolls often designed around children's mannequins. They behave like autistic people, enclosed in their own world, facing a wall, folded in on themselves, or encased in plastic. Mutants in the age of artificial intelligence, trying in vain to communicate with us, and which we noticed at the Teen Spirit exhibition at BPS 22 in 2022.

Writer Stefan Hertmans described them as "the little hunchback inside us". Creatures at once moving and frightening, tender and demonic.

In the same spirit, Maen Florin had created a very large sculpture in painted bronze, weighing two tonnes, Benjamin, a giant child of 3 m, sitting, eyes closed, with donkey ears, which she had placed in a Wenduine wood for Beaufort.

The power of ceramics

In 2015, she discovered the power of contemporary ceramics and created a series of large melancholic heads. One of them is placed in front of Iselp, on Boulevard de Waterloo, in an 'oculus'. At the exhibition, she hung several heads like trophies.

With the time spent in confinement and the renewed need for a link with nature, she began to create large ceramics. They form exotic polychrome trees with immense fruits, inspired by Gauguin in Tahiti and the Marquise Islands and by Bosch's gardens. A Garden of Eden. On the floor, she has added giant fruits, 'forbidden' fruits with sexual connotations.

If her 'dolls' and heads were still imbued with the dark side of our subconscious and our fears, her latest sculptures take us back to joyful dreams of paradise. We discovered them in 2022 at the Aardenburg Festival, near Knokke. She placed them in the superb church, surrounding some very moving Pietàs inspired by Michelangelo's last unfinished sculpture, in which an angel tenderly surrounds dead bodies. One of his Pietàs welcomes visitors to Iselp. In his ceramics, we see a constant hybridisation between the human, the animal and the vegetable. We are not defending nature," she might say, "we are nature.

The excellent musician Catherine Graindorge has prepared music to accompany the exhibition. And an impressive video (made with a microscope) by Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril

Jo- hannessen takes us on a journey to the living heart of the brackish waters of the Norwegian fjords.

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Maen Florin, Iselp, 31 boule de Waterloo, until 2 December, Tuesday to Saturday, 11am to 6pm.