

Commedia (Le voyage à Nantes)

Jenna Darde

Maen Florin - Courtyard of the Hôtel de Châteaubriant, also known as the Hôtel de Briord

Built at the end of the 15th century, in the heart of the city of the Duke of Brittany, the Hôtel de Châteaubriant is one of the most important aristocratic hotels in Nantes. Known alternately as the Hôtel de la Papotière, Hôtel Becdelièvre and Hôtel de Briord, the building was rebuilt in the 17th century and underwent major alterations until the 20th century. The building was acquired by the City of Nantes at the end of the 19th century and was home to the École des Beaux-Arts from 1904 until 2017.

Since 2019, it has been home to the Nantes and Nantes Métropole Heritage and Archaeology Department.

Maen Florin is a sculptor. She studied sculpture at the Royal Academy of Arts in Antwerp, the Saint-Luc Art Institute and the Royal Academy of Arts in Ghent.

Since the mid-1980s, Maen Florin has been sculpting in a variety of materials, notably bronze and plaster. Since 2015, she has focused particularly on ceramics, creating monumental pieces in her studio in Schelderode near Ghent in Belgium.

Human representation is at the heart of her work, she conceives marginal characters, often made up from sources from different bodies and personalities, different historical periods such as the Commedia dell'arte, references to ancient works or tutelary figures in art.

"Playing at being human", as the artist proposed in the title of one of her most recent exhibitions, is precisely the sentiment she seeks to convey in her characters. "Maen Florin's sculptures are archetypes of a world that she sees as an immense stage on which the human comedy is played out" (Nancy Casielles).

Her figures often appear suspended, melancholy, in introspective apparitions. The artist tries to capture deep feelings in the expressions on their faces. As the artist points out, "When you look at a face, a whole life appears". You can imagine the life and feelings of the character, their torments, failures and hopes.

Le Voyage à Nantes invited Maen Florin to present a group of works representing four of these characters: Performer, Whitewashed, Soutine and Black beard.

As if they had penetrated the intimacy of the city, in the courtyard of this former private mansion, directly on the ground, the sculptures appear like the ghosts of a bygone era, their faces recalling a past that we cannot really determine, while the strength of their introspection gives us the desire to approach them.

These larger-than-life ceramic heads are shaped directly from clay and painted with glaze. Maen Florin gives these human representations a distorted and distressed appearance. The expression of each of the figures is different, but they share the same tumultuous tranquillity and icy facial expressions.

The heads are not portraits, but archetypes. Melancholy lurks behind their closed eyes; they are the ambivalence of our position in the world: monstrous and beautiful, strong and fragile.

Maen Florin was born in 1954. She lives and works in Schelderode near Ghent in Belgium.

Jenna Darde, 2023