



Lotus, 2013  
plaster, 200 x 200 x 387 cm  
photo: Jeroen Mylle

# Praying for Deep Psychology

## Johan Tahon

by Arielle Bier

**Arielle Bier:** You studied at the Ghent Royal Academy of Fine Arts. What was your experience like at school? Did you have any mentorship relationships that guided your work as an artist?

Johan Tahon: When I was fifteen years old, I went to a local and rather professional academy in Belgium. You could take classes there on the weekends alongside whatever other schooling you were doing. My greatest influence was the contact I had with this one sculpture teacher. He was a very strange man, intelligent, quiet, and philosophical, almost like an ascetic in a spiritual way. He taught me a lot about materials. He had an impressive love for sculpture, as if it almost had some sort of spiritual or religious importance without the need for a church. This made a great impression on me. I had never had that feeling before. In my home there was no interest in anything like art or dirty things like clay. That's how it started. I started to make plaster sculptures in his class. He taught us about classical sculpture, about Rodin and Bourdelle, and also about the minimal art of Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt. It was very deep and interesting starting from a young age. I went on to high school art studies and after that I obtained a Master's degree in sculpture, but I never found the same sort of essential love for sculpture as I found with this teacher when I was very young. It's still something I have questions about for myself — it's a mystery to me how this could be possible. It's some kind of truth outside of reality. As you know, there is no real answer. It's just a longing for something, working in some direction without getting a lot of answers. That's the way it works. It's some sort of mystical way, and I love that.

**AB:** Your work is often compared to Wilhelm Lehmbruck and also Alberto Giacometti. What is your relationship to these two artists?

JT: Lehmbruck is absolutely my favorite artist. I feel the same sort of language in his work. There's a longing in it. There's also a drama in it that he creates without expressing too much, and without exaggeration. Like a drama that is stored inside, which allows it to be quiet but very intense. With Giacometti, I was very interested in his work when I was younger but it is completely different from Lehmbruck. Giacometti is clearly a modern sculptor. Whereas with Lehmbruck, you could say that what's happening in his work is timeless. Giacometti I can compare to the existential writers of his time like Sartre or Simone de Beauvoir. Lehmbruck is more universal. There's something deeply human in it. You could compare it to Byzantine art or African art. It has more to do with researching the self, looking at things through a psychological lens with the personal experience of space and form.

**AB:** What is your creative process like?

JT: I try to work with something that grows in a natural way. When I started making the first plaster sculptures, it was the only solution for me because it was cheap to make things from plaster and it gave me the possibility to build big sculptures in a completely independent way. I didn't need anybody to help and that offered me a freedom that was good for creativity. These first sculptures became a language. It was some sort of language with symbols, like an internal language that was starting to speak. This was really wonderful for me to experience. On one occasion I entered my studio in the morning after a late night of work, and I had the feeling that the

sculptures I saw with fresh eyes had been made by somebody else. This feeling was wonderful. I think that good art has more to do with the human unconscious than with human consciousness. When you get in a flow of working, it's possible that there's a language in yourself that takes over and starts making sculptures from another place that's not a rational place.

As a sculptor, I like the idea that artworks can be with people at the moment when they need it most. That people can reflect on the objects, that they can place them in their immediate living space and have a conversation with them, even without words.

This world is full of humor. This world is very full of fleeting impressions. I'm more interested in the things that last. For me, it's important that the sculpture functions in a vertical way, that it's alive or gives the impression of being alive, and that it is there at the most crucial moments in your life. It's there when there's birth. It's there when there's death. It's there when there's crisis. It's there also when things are good and you are thankful. In that way, you could say it has to do with very deep psychology but it also has to do with some sort of religious aspect without having a church. This is the language I need personally and I hope that it can be of use to other people too.

**AB:** Can you tell me about your experience of materiality? You also work in bronze, polyester and ceramic. What is it like to work with these different materials and how does it change your work?

JT: In recent years, I have made more and more ceramic pieces. This is related to being in Istanbul where I have worked for five years. I have a good gallery over there that provided me with

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the possibility to work in Iznik (Nicaea), which is a historical place of ceramics. Working there, I’ve reconnected with the history of ceramics and started making more white sculptures. It had something to do with my background in plaster sculptures and then realizing a new way to work in white ceramics. These white ceramics have a lot to do with fluidity. Working in ceramic offered the possibility to make the illusion of something fluid running over a figure. This gave the work a ritual character. There is also a similarity to the lingam in India, which is used as a fertility ritual. From the moment that fluid white glaze was put on the sculpture, a deeper dimension came on the work. It was like a feeling of time, a feeling of something that happened on the figure and was fixed on there forever. It added a sensual part that was not there with the plaster sculptures. With the fluidity, all of a sudden there was something almost sexual.

**AB: The white-washing and the dripping adds a really dreamlike and ghostly quality to the work that you are producing. Do you yourself also believe in spirits?**

JT: No, I don’t. But what I do think is that it can work in a symbolic way. I love the psychology of Carl Gustav Jung. He was very broad in his thinking. His ideas deeply influence my work. He could go from shamanism over alchemy, to Christianity to Buddhism. Once I entered my studio after making a big sculpture and it appeared as if it was a ghost. It had the appearance of being a very big, white figure like an archaic white giant. Maybe something in my unconscious thinks about things like ghosts or makes it look like that, but it’s not that I believe in them actually existing.

**AB: In your work you also deal with questions of the unknown, which can elicit a sense of fear. What are your ideas about fear?**

JT: I don’t know if it’s genetic or if I have some sort of trauma, but fear is definitely a part of my life. This is why I make sculptures. I have to make things that I can hold on to. Something that I can touch, which is there in reality and which is absolutely stable. For me, the unconscious is the most interesting language that exists and it was an important lesson to learn that the unconscious is not there to hurt you, but that the unconscious is a necessary language that makes you a better human being and makes you live more intensely. If a sculpture can make a connection, or an artist or a writer can make the language of the unconscious visible in some way, or can make it possible that you can touch it in some way, then I think you are doing important work. People have to talk more from the unconscious. People have to connect more and have to trust more. I think there’s a solution there in the long term in trusting your unconscious, and in trusting the unconscious of others. That’s something we’ve lost. We’ve lost religion. We’ve lost rituals. We’ve lost everything that has to do with the unconscious and the necessity for symbols. It was taken away. This makes us very poor in a way.

**AB: Your work often communicates mournful feelings. You’ve been quoted as saying, “the foundation of my sculpture lies in a painful but everlasting desire.” It seems as if you’re capturing and encasing an experience of pain**



Grigory V, 2012  
glazed ceramic, 47 x 47 x 95 cm  
photo: Jeroen Mylle

Left page  
Manresa, 2014  
plaster and wood, 39 x 50 x 130 cm  
photo: Gert-Jan van Rooij

## “Everything that is exaggerated and everything that is not needed can be taken away.”



### in your sculptural work and I wonder how necessary you think pain is for understanding the human condition?

JT: It's very complex to talk about pain. You can start to reflect on your own pain and doubts and so on, but you have to be very careful about it so that it doesn't become theatrical. If there is real pain, you don't try to make the pain, you try to get away from the pain. You make something again which helps find a balance. A figure or an object has to be something fertile. For example, it has to be a counterweight for depression. Things work like that in my studio. I know very well what pain is. There's no real reason I guess. Maybe, if you make a family study, you can find some traumatic moments, but who doesn't have those? Sometimes you think about pain being a part of life and you think about accepting it. In the arts, pain can also be a point of energy and a starting point for creativity. Why should you need to find solutions if you are happy all the time? Then just be happy. I think it's great if people can be like that. I would love to be like that. But if you are not, you have to find solutions. You have to get through life. You have to get through the day. That's how it works for me. It's a psychological need. I can recognize it in other people too. I can recognize it in writers. I can recognize it in Baudelaire. I can see it in Rilke. I can see it in Lehmbruck. Lehmbruck was a master in making a sculpture that has to do with fear and has to do with trauma but stays elegant and stays positive in a way. He found a way to carry the pain with strength.

### AB: You often speak of the subliminal. How does that feed into your work?

JT: My days look the same. I start in the morning by waking up and trying to be positive. It is very difficult to find your energy every day and believe in what you do, even if there is no immediate result or understanding from other people. You still have to continue. It's a feeling of having to do something. There is no choice. I spend my mornings reading and writing, finding creativity in other sources. Then I eat at a restaurant and go to work in my studio. I may work on six or seven, or even more different sculptures at a time, often in an impulsive way. When you start working you feel the reality around you, and then you start forgetting the reality around you and other things start to happen. Then creativity starts taking over and it's so wonderful. It stays a mystery to me. If I'm not making studies on paper and producing numerous images, then something else is actively working in my mind, like dreaming at night. I also think that dreams are more intelligent than I am. In the morning I say that I have been to places or experienced dreams, which are completely impossible in real life. Dreams are their own form of intelligence.

### AB: Are there any specific works you've created directly from dreams?

JT: Some of the vertical figures and other forms resemble images I see in my dreams but it's not so direct. Though, a few years ago I had a show at the Gerhard Marcks Museum in Bremen and there I asked the director how he got interested in my work and why he invited me and so on, and he answered, "I dreamt forms and I dreamt beings like you make them." For me, this was a very interesting and bizarre compliment. It was one of the most honest compliments. It's difficult to talk about. But still, I have to say that it's not cool what I do. I'm not living some sort of esoteric life in some sort of bizarre, subconscious, supernatural way, absolutely not. I'm as simple as can be. I drive a car and I buy all sorts of things. I watch the movies everyone watches. But at the same time, and for me everyday, I have to go there for a while. I hate to use these words, but it's some sort of praying I think. Something in me needs to contemplate for a few hours a day. If there's no church, then I think something in me found another solution.

### AB: Would you define yourself as a religious person?

JT: I would love to have religion, but I don't. When I worked in Istanbul, I had the opportunity to go to dervish schools to visit the Sufis. This touched me a lot, but it's so impossible for me to become religious. We grew up with a critical attitude. We were taught in a critical way about God and so on. It's time to find a new religion for our times. That's why I choose to use the word unconscious. It is more universal. It has more to do with all people. I think working from the unconscious is the right way to start over again.

### AB: As a figurative sculptor you often work with the representation of human figures and forms. However, I noticed that in your work there is a repetition of other forms that are also geometric like elongated limbs, spheres, or punctured holes. Do you have specific associations with any of these shapes?

JT: My elongated figures have a lot to do with sculptures of the Middle Ages or Romanesque church sculptures. It's sometimes even considered Gothic in a way, but not the kind of Gothic we think about today with young guys wearing black. It's influenced by the Gothic style of the Middle Ages. It also has to do with icons and Byzantine art. In a way, it's also my history. It's the history that is the foundation of Europe. Elongated figures are what you get when you take away as much as possible from a human and you try to strip it down to the essentials without coming to the point where they become a skeleton. He's still alive, but it gets close to that point of death. Everything that is exaggerated and everything that is not needed can be taken away. In the psychology of Jung, they talk about the vertical force. They talk about everything that comes from the horizontal earth and grows up vertically towards the sky. This is

also what human beings do. This is what plants do. This is perhaps the same thing that I want to achieve in the vertical sculpture.

### AB: What are you reading at the moment?

JT: I'm interested in archaic—mystical things like Jung's writings and the combinations of religion and psychology. Now I am reading a lot about Meister Eckhart. He was a Christian thinker from the Middle Ages, but if you read his texts now, you see a resemblance with Sufi Mysticism and Zen Buddhism.

### AB: Can you also tell me about the projects you are working on at the moment?

JT: For the moment, I'm thinking about a ceramics project that will open at the Bonnefonten museum in Maastricht in October. It's a very important show. I'm glad that I can be a part of it because it's about the most important contemporary ceramics. The show is called *Ceramix — Ceramic Art from Gauguin to Schütte*. For me, it's great because I get a better audience in that way. What is also good about the show is that it will travel and be in Paris afterwards. Then, I'm working on a solo show for Galerie Dukan in Paris for December.

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Manresa, 2014  
glazed ceramic, 30 x 43 x 70 cm  
photo: Gert-Jan van Rooij