

JOHAN TAHON – cutting loose

A room in his heart is ice cold. It will never be warm. Yet this is the first time in twenty-five years that sculptor Johan Tahon has felt at ease. The oeuvre soars, he has found domestic happiness and Rammstein's Till Lindemann writes poetry inspired by his work. 'Gosh, who would have thought that?'

Jelle Van Riet

In sculptor Johan Tahon, I feel as though I'm looking at a vision of a primeval man: a giant with an unkempt mane and palms like coal shovels – ready to kill a boar with his bare hands, to rip it open, cursing and sighing, before tearing out its bloody heart. But in each of his quiet, fragile sculptures I see the error of my thinking reflected back at me: these works have been created in the skilled hands of a fearful and sensitive mortal, in whose large body there beats a heart that is not much larger than a pea.

Sculptures by the frightened giant of Munkzwalm can be seen over the course of the next ten months at the Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht. The exhibition *Wir überleben das Licht* [we survive the light], which opened recently, is a solo presentation with all the character of an intervention: Tahon's sculptures claim their place amidst the permanent collection. Or more accurately, between the works that he has specifically chosen, because the museum boasts many large wings and impressive holdings. But it is hard to imagine a better gallery for his sensual, amorphous and hybrid creatures in plaster, ceramics and bronze than the one dedicated to the collection of medieval wooden sculptures.

'Medieval art, and especially work by the Maastricht sculptor Jan van Steffeswert, moves me to my absolute core', is how Tahon explains his choice. 'They lay bare the roots of our culture. Back then, people expressed their spiritual devotion through art, which imbued objects with a social and ritual dimension. Perhaps I'm romanticising the Middle Ages, it's wholly possible, but I think of this period as being extremely authentic and it's also where I find the examples I need. You can't imagine how grateful I feel, now that my sculptures are here, in the vicinity of these masters, my heroes since childhood. It feels like coming home.'

Tahon leans back: 'I feel at ease, which is new for me, and my sculptures also seem strangely appropriate here. As though they have a familial relationship to the historic masterpieces. Thanks to the materials – the white plaster versus the wood – the iconic works are not rebuffed, but a gentle, harmonious interaction is created. Even so, I didn't make any of the sculptures with the idea of establishing a thematic or iconographic link to the medieval art. I did think about going in that direction, but only fleetingly, before I realised that it would lead me away from my truth. I decided to stay true to myself in the hope that it would work, and it does work. I'm amazed at how well it works.'

No wonder you feel at home here: your studio, which for you is like a womb, was reconstructed under the eaves of the museum.

'Right! And it's where I feel safest, lovingly surrounded by my friends-fetishes. Nowhere do I feel safer than in my studio, away from the world I mistrust. It's where I can do what I *must* do: create objects and try to reach the truth, just like Goldmund in Hermann Hesse's historical novel *Narziss und Goldmund*. At a certain moment, the artistic Goldmund feels a compulsion to make the ultimate sculpture: a statue of the Virgin Mary, which corresponds with both his faith and his time, the Middle Ages. With all his heart, he wants to make that one image and then abandon his metier, and he succeeds in his intention. The most moving thing about this passage is the truthfulness of Goldmund's desire: he is not after a career or money, he wants to complete himself through an object.'

And you'd like nothing more than to make the ultimate Jesus, isn't that right?

'I'm still waiting for the commission from above.' (laughs) 'Of course, I know all about the longing to create the ultimate image. It's what keeps me inside my studio walls, and allows me to focus, like a monomaniac, on making real sculptures out of natural materials: to give the sculptures the opportunity to emerge. The space outside is too vast, the possibilities too limitless – not only for me, but for everyone. My antidote is to retreat. I crawl into my hole and open myself up to what, hopefully, will be a moment of grace. But beware, perfectly finished sculptures don't just fall into my lap, you know. It requires hard work. I have to make myself fall in love, I need to love the studio, the materials, the processes, the ritual of lighting the stove in winter, and so on. And then I wait until the right object grows beneath my hands. When that happens, I feel very grateful and happy.'

Unlike you, your sculptures go out into the world. They've even touched the musician and poet Till Lindemann, frontman of Rammstein, who has written poems inspired by your work.

'Gosh, who would have thought that?' I owe this collaboration to *Zoo* magazine, a German publication that is always seeking unusual crossovers and has enough contacts to make them happen. Bryan Adams is a co-owner, say no more. Apparently, they thought that Till and I would be a good match because they made us a proposal that aroused Till's interest as well. If I had any doubts, and I did have them, then they went up in smoke at our first meeting. The person I encountered was extremely warm, a man who doesn't follow the rules of decorum, and with whom I could immediately enter into a deep conversation. It's not for nothing that Till calls his poems about my sculptures 'a visible bridge between two tormented souls.'

I assume you're now a fully paid-up member of the Rammstein fan club?

'I primarily came to the music through *The Matrix* and *Lost Highway* by David Lynch and I've been mesmerised by Rammstein's power and originality ever since. Last year, at the invitation of Till, I attended my first Rammstein concert at Graspop. It was fantastic, and not only because of the band's overwhelming power and the crowd's total surrender, but also because the performance was surprisingly deep. It reminded me of Brecht's theatre. The most intense moment came when a deathly silence fell, and a dazzling light was projected across the audience. It was as though you were looking directly at the sun, only it wasn't the gates of heaven that opened, but those of hell. It was a disorientating, almost hallucinatory light. A Peter Verhelst kind of light: white and archaic, like a vision.'

Peter Verhelst has also written verses about your work, and on more than one occasion. What makes poets like you so much?

'At work in my studio, I reach places that feel, as it were, as though they are pre-human: consciousness is entirely lacking and also, therefore, language. It feels like I haven't been born yet, that there are no other beings. The only thing that is exchanged in this primal place is emotions. It's like an infatuation, a twilight zone in which you feel incredibly attracted to something existential, something primeval and cosmic. Well, the journey beyond the subconscious is, of course, in my work and I think that certain people can see and feel this and want to do something with it. The poet is trying to articulate the unspeakable, and so he also searches for words with my sculptures, which are devoid of language.'

It sounds like transcendental meditation: turning the mind inwards so that you eventually move beyond all thought?

'That's not a club I've joined. But yes, whether you call it meditation or praying, because a pure prayer is a compressed desire: when you focus on something higher and open yourself to the incomprehensible. In any case, I feel the proximity of a soul. The same soul that primitive tribes gave form to via totems and fetish objects, and which the medieval sculptor also tried to visualise. That is what good artists do, and everything else seems extraneous. I'm sick and tired of this day and age, and the politics and the commerce. Reading a mystical text, on the other hand, is totally refreshing. And admittedly, a treatment from my physiotherapist also has the same effect. She spoils me rotten, so much so that I'd be crazy to try and stretch my own back with the cow and cat position.'

Yoga, however, is also an invitation to let go and to ground yourself.

'Being grounded, that's what it's all about. Finding peace. Your place. In fact, I am constantly creating moments in which to feel grounded, and the object is nothing other than a grounded protuberance – a totem – facing the sun. This is the essence of life. That I can do all this, free of professional burdens, is thanks to my wife Eva. She deals with all the practical, organisational and administrative hassle. It's an invaluable role, because the paradox is that the more you work and the greater chances you get, the more complicated it becomes to protect the free zone in which the objects are created. Growth is good, but deadlines are the most toxic poison imaginable. They literally make me ill.'

Don't you simply need a pair of skilled hands to make these sculptures?

'Tactility plays a *very* big role, because every sculpture begins life as soft, malleable clay – which is wonderful to the touch! Sculpture is all ritual, eroticism and sensuality. The pouring of glaze over a ceramic work, for example, is a ritual that is filled with sensual pleasure. I'm always curious to know how the work will emerge from the kiln, and to see what the drips from the glaze will look like. I remember how, in India, they poured milk over the *lingam*, a phallic sculpture that for Hindus and Buddhists is a symbol of fertility and life. My sculptures also look as though milk has been poured over them because the glaze seems semi-liquid. You get the impression that the works are still wet, which is naturally very beautiful. And no, I'm not Pygmalion, the mythological sculptor who fell in love with his own creations. I still prefer the warm female body over my sculptures. But I'm certainly in love with the mystery within the sculptures that I – take note – have made myself. Imagine! But isn't this the proof, if any were needed, of how little control I have over the object?'

Do you find it difficult to say goodbye to them?

'No. When a sculpture is finished – or, better, finished in its unfinished state – I let it go. From then on, others can treat it with love, aversion, indifference or whatever. During the seventeenth century, a Japanese Buddhist monk, named Enku, once travelled from village to village. Everywhere he went, he carved a statue of Buddha and left it behind. Today, his sculptures are among the greatest treasures of Buddhism. There you go, I love that thought. I stay at home, but my sculptures travel in order to fertilise others. Honestly? I wouldn't mind if people just chucked some food into my studio from time to time, and nothing more. A truck load of sculptures in return for food, I think that's a beautiful exchange.' (laughs) 'If Jan Hoet hadn't coaxed me out of the studio in 1995 and pulled me out from under the radar, then I'd probably still be sitting there. I can still see him now, standing in my studio, shouting, stupefied that he was travelling around the world when such interesting work could be found on his doorstep, close to Ghent. Well, it wasn't as though I was waving flags in the hope of being noticed. I was making sculpture as a form of psychological survival.'

No pain no art, says Lindemann. Now that you feel 'at ease', aren't you afraid that your creativity might dry up?

'Don't worry, the taste of horror is still fresh in my memory. I have experienced enough to keep the well flowing until the end of my days. I've just described the descent from the outside, almost like a natural phenomenon, but psychologically speaking, this is obviously the prenatal, preverbal twilight zone. The child is still without language in the mother's womb and yet the impressions registered remain with you for life. If parents constantly smash one another's heads in, it will be registered by the unborn child. Not through consciousness, because that doesn't exist yet, but the child retains everything, which marks it for life. I'm not making any of this up, it's scientifically proven. So yes, there's an ice-cold room in my heart that will never grow warm. Never. I'm insatiable, my need for affection is like a bottomless pit: I constantly want to feel, to be loved, to return to the womb. Perhaps I'm searching for what I could never find in the mother. Because the studio is, of course, a kind of womb, this whole spiritual-religious world is also a kind of womb, and my wife Eva is its embodiment. I've only just realised, very recently, that Eva has invaded my subconscious. Perhaps since the birth of our son, who is also floating there somewhere. It feels like a profound, earthly love and it's very pleasant.'

You grew up in a dysfunctional family: in the stranglehold of alcoholism and violence. It's no coincidence that your sculptures are constructed from fragments. Are you still gluing the shards back together?

(Emotionally) 'My God, perhaps my work is a major repair operation? I started making my first sculptures when I was fifteen. I wanted to have something to touch, to be able to cling onto something indestructible, and a teacher gave me the necessary prod in the back. He opened my eyes to things that I'd never previously known: respect, warmth, affection. He even handled the materials with the greatest of care. I can still remember how amazed I was when I saw a sculpture modelled lovingly from a piece of clay. I fell in love instantly, and I'm still in love. This teacher not only honed my talent, but also placed a hand on my shoulder. I was allowed to there, and that's just what I did. I was off. From a piece of clay and other bits and pieces I started to make figures that did what my parents failed to do: protect me. You know, my father once tried to destroy a sculpture that I'd made in Belgian bluestone. When he ran out of steam, the whole terrace had been smashed to smithereens, but my sculpture remained intact. In terms of symbolism,

that must mean something, right? If things are continually destroyed, your mind will eventually become fragmented too, and then you have to try and piece everything back together. Perhaps this also explains my great love for the fragmented man, rather than the shining perfect man.'

In a previous life, you also drank a lot. How did you break the spell?

'I'm the first Tahon for many generations to have stopped drinking alcohol. In my family, the addiction to the darkness and the mantra that it will become a dramatic part of your life was something you were weaned on. And so, you believe it, and soon start playing the self-destructive game yourself, because it's rock 'n' roll to drink and crawl through life in torment. Step by step, very slowly, I tried to let go, which was difficult because the payback for being cured is loneliness – I had to break with my family. The birth of my son has accelerated the process, because in him I see a tiny little Johan. Just being able to say that is the antithesis of self-destruction and something very new to me. I'm still crazy about the oblivion, that was one of the most appealing things about alcohol. I drank whiskey and played music at an almost unbearable volume.'

Rammstein!

'Absolutely! Heavy rock at the right volume can be a form of spiritual intoxication and a good performance is almost like a trip. In the meantime, I haven't touched a drop for twelve years now, because the first flush of intoxication is followed by the alco-hell. God almighty, I smashed my brains out against that door, as I drank a minimum of a bottle of whiskey a day. It's fun when you start drinking, fantastic when the bottle is half empty, but you soon become blind drunk, although I always remained relatively lucid. But then the horrible mornings come, and you have to start all over again.'

But look, you're now a celebrated artist and a respectable man. An honorary citizen of Menen, no less!

'That last honour is the one that genuinely fills me with the deepest sense of gratitude. I'm incredibly proud to have recently become an honorary citizen of Menen, the place where I experienced such humiliation and shame. You have to realise that everyone in Menen knew what went on in our home. I still have a lot to do, but at least in Menen – my 'scorched earth' so to speak – things have come full circle.'

***Sie überleben das Licht* [you survive the light]. And not just once, but time and again, because five years ago, the death of your baby daughter also gave rise to new work. Because when all around you falters, there will always be the sculptures?**

'My large, white plaster figures came into being out of the darkness of my father's death. After the death of my baby daughter, I made *Orb*: a little horse with a human head and spheres on the back. An angel that brings light. On the way here in the car, I was thinking about how many beautiful things have emerged from being forced to confront death. If you lose someone, you think of it as the end. You never imagine that you will resurface, but after a profound period of raw grief you start to process it, and in my case through the objects. Death is obviously the supreme moment when language fails. Trying to give a form to absence through an object is a primordial given. Even the earliest people placed objects in graves as gifts. The substitute object for what is too big for words.'

It reminds me of the child clutching her doll in the midst of all the bombing. But what if the sculptures themselves falter, as in Palmyra?

'Oh, how my heart bled when I saw those sculptures hit the ground. Like many people, I

felt real pain, as if they were actual people, family even. This indicates that something vitally important had fallen: a symbol of our culture and an immense foothold. If the sculptures topple, the benchmarks disappear, and the gates of hell swing open – which means that chaos will prevail. My most important sculpture is *Twins-Zwillinge*, a monument for Hanover. It stands on the site of a synagogue that was burned down on Hitler's orders in 1938. On this charred patch of land, my Ecclesia and Synagoga now stand on a bronze foundation, two identical figures with the shape of a ladder at their sides. They stand apart but are still connected through the Old Testament. They symbolise the apology of the protestant community to the Jewish people for the abominations that occurred with the Nazis. Can you go any further with an object? It's the ultimate meaning of what sculpture can be.'

I think you should go to Palmyra and make new sculptures arise from the debris. You're good at that.

'God, yes, can that be organised?'

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