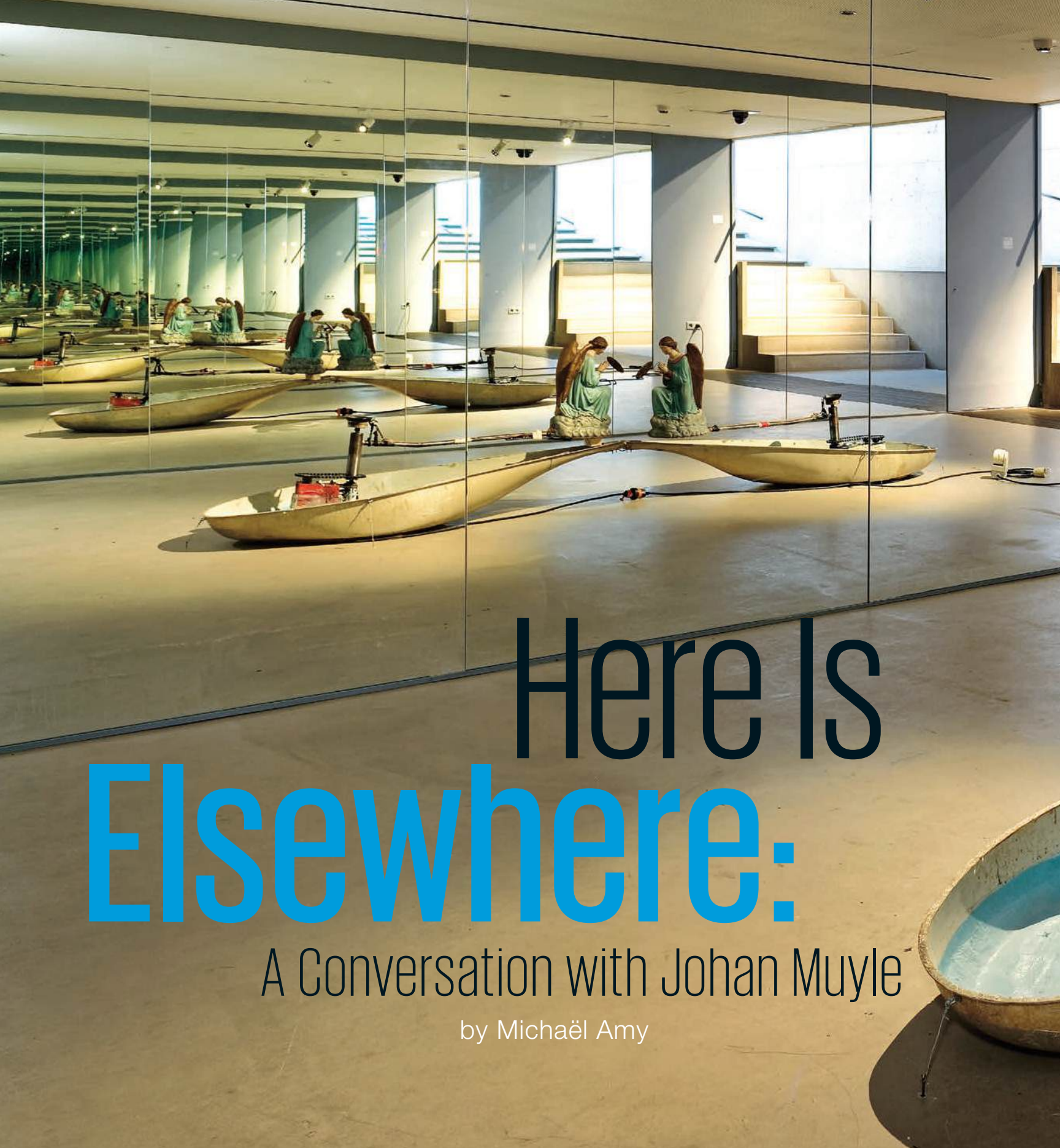


Here Is Elsewhere:

A Conversation with Johan Muyle

by Michaël Amy

BLAISE ADILON, © JOHAN MUYLE

***Angel & Angelo,* 1992.**
Shell of lights from the Berlin Wall, painted plaster statues, motorization, mechanization, and electric bulbs, approx. 3 x 0.7 meters.

Belgian artist Johan Muyle found his voice 40 years ago with *La Modification* (1984), an aptly named assemblage sculpture that borrows its title from Michel Butor's celebrated 1957 novel. Consisting of a recliner attached to ropes and nooses, with a crate suspended between bicycle wheels placed behind, the entire ensemble evokes an instrument of torture or execution. This grim assisted readymade may echo Dadaist or Surrealist practice (and the spirit of Kienholz at his best), but Muyle's intent runs deeper than provocation. His frequently motorized assemblages and cryptic performances create enigmatic and often unsettling allegories that burrow down into the state of the world and the contradictions of human nature. The range of themes, ideas, forms, and sensations that he has explored through his collection, assembly, and modification of objects is astounding. And yet, no matter how dark the subject, he adheres to his humanist faith and never loses his questioning spirit or his interest in people—their beliefs, rituals, images, and stories—producing work that simultaneously mirrors and transforms the real world.

Michaël Amy: Around 1984, while painting was still all the rage, you decided to focus on sculpture. Why?
Johan Muyle: At the outset of my career, I took on painting. Very rapidly, I was challenged by the limits of the support and the constraint of having to choose between figuration and abstraction. Having to confine a metaphysical question within a window embrasure seemed constricting, and I didn't see how I could be satisfied with that option. Sculpture seemed closer to the reading of the world that I wanted to present because it compels one to navigate around the work, or to immerse oneself in it in the case of installation, to multiply the points of view of an *image*. It necessitates the submission of one's body to that multiplicity of viewpoints in order to understand the meanings embedded within it.

MA: Did the radical interventions of Marcel Broodthaers and Panamarenko, which drew attention to the Belgian art scene, inspire your shift?
JM: Panamarenko, undoubtedly. I met him several times at his studio/dwelling in the mid-'80s. I co-opted his statement: "I make myself by making my art," as well as his singular attitude. I recognize the importance of Broodthaers but stand at a distance from his writings and poetic formulations.

MA: You rejected traditional Western methods of sculptural production (carving, modeling, and casting) in favor of the readymade, which always joins other objects in your work by way of assemblage. The found object, dear to the Dadaists, Surrealists, and Nouveaux Réalistes, experienced a renaissance around 1980 in the work of Guillaume Bijl in Belgium and Jeff Koons in the U.S.
JM: The found object fulfilled my expectations. Around 1985, after several street interventions in the Situationist vein, I wasn't sure what I wanted to accomplish. I

OPPOSITE:
***L'homme aux mains de femme,* 1986.**
Wax mannequin, clothes, cane, and camera box, approx. 1.8 x 0.9 meters.

THIS PAGE:
***I'll never look into your eyes,* 2017.**
Academic casting in plaster, bamboo, neon, mechanical system, electronic system, transformer for neon lights, electric bulb, boat model made in Madagascar, and blind cane, approx. 2.1 x 0.8 meters.

OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE: MARC LANDER, © JOHAN MUYLE

had produced several assemblage sculptures that sprung from fictive scenarios. I had also made an object inspired by a news item about a man who had constructed a device consisting of a camera attached to the end of a walking stick, which he used to snap photographs under women's dresses. Around the same time, I had purchased a wax mannequin that strangely resembled my father. Once back home, I was disappointed to find that it had female hands, something I had overlooked at the store. Those two distinct objects stood at some distance from each other in my studio until the day I slipped the walking stick into the hand of the mannequin. *L'Homme aux mains de femme* (*The Man with the Hands of a Woman*, 1986) was born, becoming a metaphor for the questions I had as an adolescent regarding the furtive glances that my father directed toward certain women who weren't my mother.

MA: You have developed a formally and thematically varied body of work, but you did not embrace abstraction. Why?

JM: I always aimed to keep what is human at the forefront—establishing a link with it, finding a poetic tenor while playing with representation. I can understand that, after one or the other of the great wars of the 20th century, experimenting with formal language would serve to thrust barbarism off the stage. But I am a child of the '60s and '70s and was never directly exposed to the unmentionable. This allows me to maintain a distance, which is required to take on the questions that engage me. I was a burgeoning artist who admired conceptual strategies but for whom such an approach amounted to, by my time, a thing of the past.

MA: The ready-made objects that you select are whole, not fragments. Each one is immediately recognizable as an object, or as a representation of something—for example, a found statuette depicting a saint—so, your sculpture is figurative. Could you explain your approach?

JM: Dadaism and Surrealism sought to preserve the semantic integrity of objects, thereby aiming to surprise, upset, and question the status of the work of art as it was perceived at that time. By bringing two objects together, I seek to generate an induced meaning, which comes about by way of adjacency. Place a revolver within proximity of a blood stain and one reads a murder into the juxtaposition. Disassociate the elements, and the induced meaning vanishes.

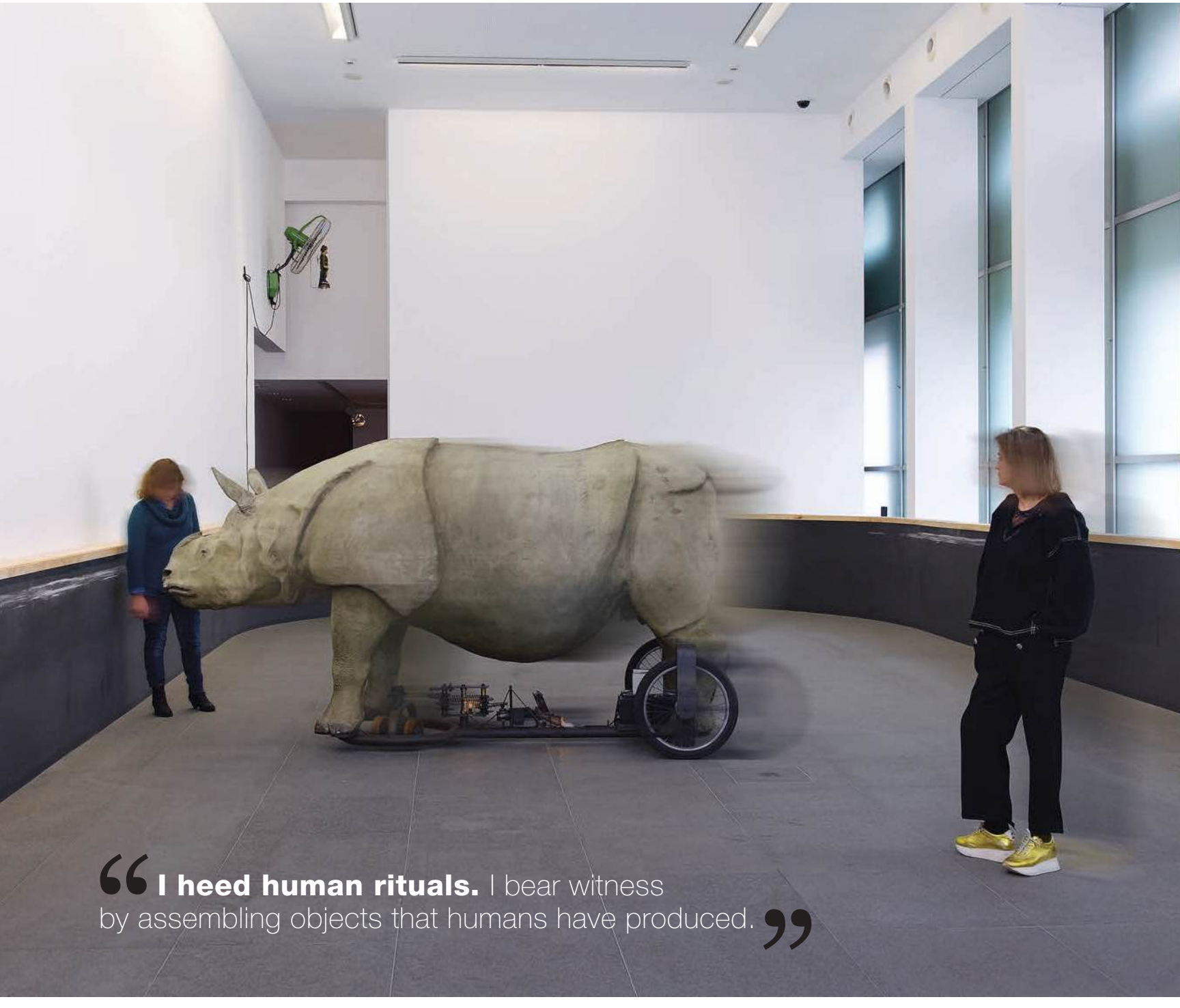
MA: At flea markets and second-hand stores, locations beloved by the Surrealists, assemblage and collage come about almost unintentionally, through the juxtaposition of things.

JM: Juxtaposition characterizes the Surrealist assemblage, for instance, Dali's *Retrospective Bust of a Woman*, but as far as I am concerned, a simple juxtaposition of things will not suffice. The selection process amounts to a fundamental artistic intervention. I am on a quest, and I frequently invent by joining one object to another. If I preserve the scale of each object, setting up these scales in confrontation can generate meaning. A small globe of five centimeters placed on the back of a statue of 40 centimeters unavoidably brings up the figure of Atlas, and all that is tied to that subject. In assemblage sculpture, the quality of the

THIS PAGE:
L'arpenteur (detail), **2022.**
Surveyor's tripod, plaster cast of a sculpture by Constantin Meunier, educational solar system, 220v motorization, neon, bamboo, and cable, approx. 2 x 0.9 x 1.5 meters.

OPPOSITE:
L'impossibilite de regner, **1991.**
Epoxy casting of an Asian rhino, metal construction, motorization, electronic system, and 12V battery, approx. 4 x 1.8 x 1 meters.

THIS PAGE: MARC LANDER, © JOHAN MUYLE / OPPOSITE: BLAISE ADILON, © JOHAN MUYLE

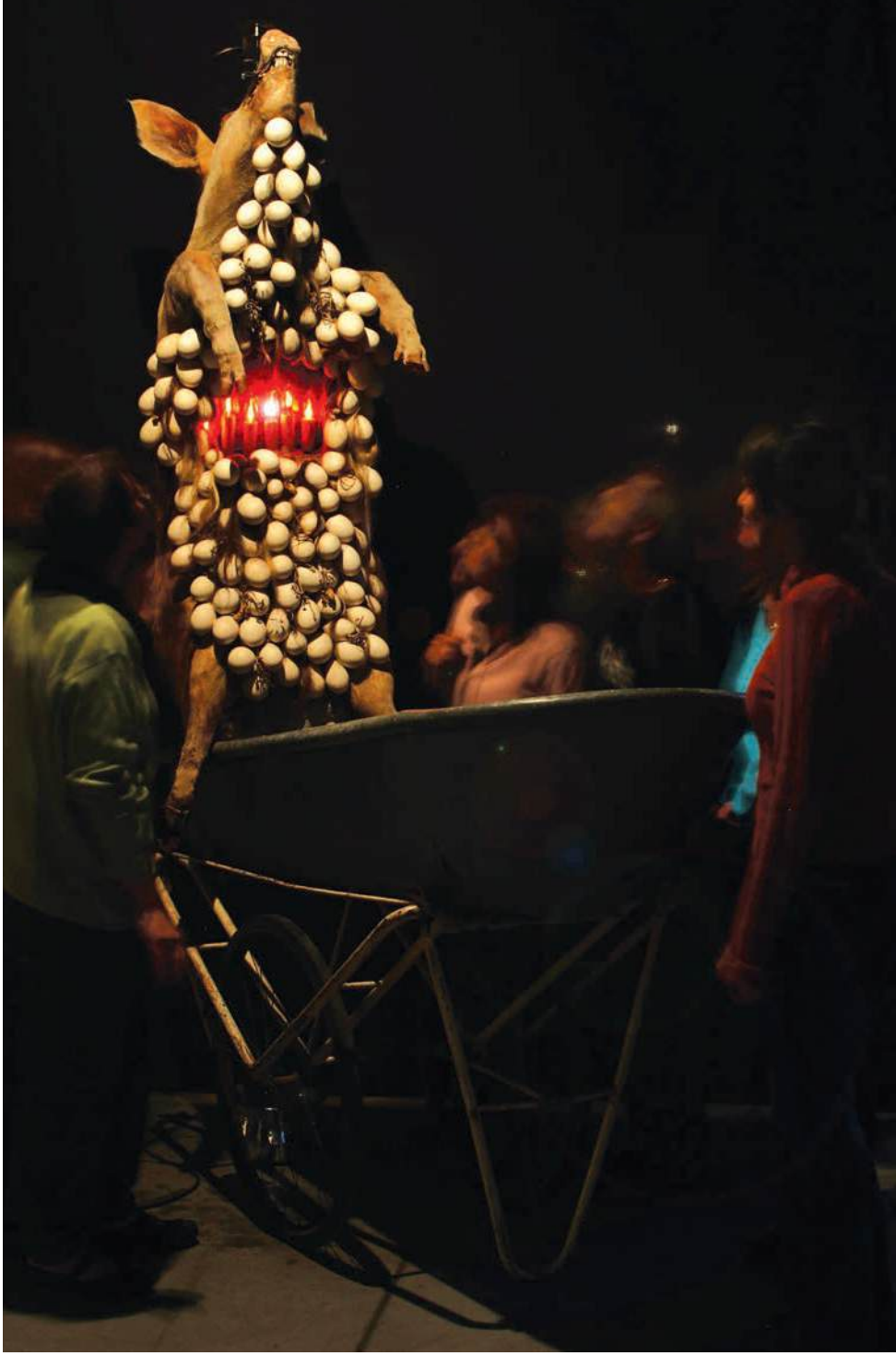


“**I heed human rituals.** I bear witness by assembling objects that humans have produced.”

result is frequently tied to the quality of the connection that is established. One needs to achieve a syncretism of images, an assemblage that questions established connections. The added elements are thus essential.

MA: Because your objects are of a certain age, your works seize time. Are they supposed to serve as *aides-mémoire*?

JM: Between 1985 and 1988, my use of taxidermy animals in works like *Les reines mortes* (*The Dead Queens*, 1988) and *Cherubini Gemelli* (1987) was motivated by the notion of implied personification, somewhat in the spirit of children's tales. When these works were exhibited, I realized that, for the viewer, the morbid dimension almost obscured my real intentions. So, I began using polychrome religious statues from the world of Catholicism and continued with them from 1988 to 1994. I chiefly used plaster statues with a lively glance and humane attitude, which I found second-hand and accumulated in the studio. In the 19th century and during the first half of the 20th century, there were factories that churned out such religious images. My choices depended on what was available at the flea markets and what I could afford to buy. Had I been born in the Soviet Union, I would probably have used



"I always aimed to keep what is human at the forefront—establishing a link with it, finding a poetic tenor while playing with representation."

statues of Lenin or Stalin in the wake of perestroika.

MA: Were you inspired by the Catholic masses that you attended as a child?

JM: The social cohesion of my childhood was linked to the parish, both in and out of school. Being a dreamy child, during religious offices, I would scrutinize the statues placed here and there on top of pedestals. In the 1970s, during my adolescence, we wanted to simplify and modernize the rites. I later distanced myself from these beliefs, so one should not see any proselytizing in my approach.

MA: Some of your objects evoke industry, and with it, the industrial revolution, capitalism and the exploitation of workers, and notions of progress and positivism.

JM: Around 1990, I began to integrate mechanical elements into my works. The relation between my sculptures and the reality of the world was lacking a crucial element, namely time. Mechanical devices enabled me to realize sequences amounting to a synthesis of light, time, movement, and sound. Repetitive music and composers like Erik Satie have always been of singular importance to me.

My mechanized sculptures should not be considered automatons. The latter seek to match the movements of a human being, which they parody; therefore, their mechanisms are mostly hidden. In my works, the mechanisms are exposed. My goal is not to dupe, but to provide all the clues required to understand my intentions.

MA: Mechanisms are condemned to repeat themselves—just like we do, though less systematically—until the machine is switched off or breaks down.

JM: A sequence of events is a notion that excites me. I have difficulty developing an argument outside the framework of a sequence. I love that magical moment when a sculpture illuminates and animates itself for

OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT:
***I'm Sittin' On The Top Of The World,* 2007.**
Educational figurine of a U.S. president, small globe, motorization, cables, and electric bulbs, approx. 0.4 x 0.25 x 0.15 meters.

***Les reines mortes,* 1988.**
Taxidermy sow, candle, zinc basin, vintage stretcher stand, water, coins, pebbles, goose eggs, and locks of women's hair, approx. 4 x 1.8 x 1 meters.

THIS PAGE:
Installation view of "No Room For Regrets," MACs, Grand-Hornu, Belgium, with (front to back): ***Le second martyre de la pieta***, and ***Les reines mortes***, 2020–21.

OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE: MARC LANDER, © JOHAN MUYLE

the first time, revealing my intentions in a sequence I had imagined. For me, the ringing generated by a small wooden hammer striking a crystal glass evokes every toast that has ever been offered and every festive occasion throughout the world.

MA: You are from Charleroi, a town that has had grave economic troubles for over half a century, ever since the mines and factories closed. What was it like growing up there?

JM: The perception of Charleroi isn't always positive, though its people exude an uncommon warmth. Because of its cosmopolitanism, and the fact that I was a child of interior immigrants (my parents were Flemish) surrounded by the children of other immigrants (Italian, Greek), I came to understand two things: first, one is from the place that makes one come alive, and second, one is an outsider everywhere—here is elsewhere. My father ran a small artisanal enterprise. I undoubtedly inherited his dedication to work, and to work that is well done. It wasn't Byzantium, but it wasn't Zola, either.

MA: Why does your work deal so often with power, hierarchy, and authoritarianism?

JM: The artist isn't situated outside the reality of the world. He tries to be an actor within reality. I am troubled by violence, by the barbarity of which man is capable. I would like humanity—in one great communal swoop—to abandon its frustrations, its angers, and its desire to despoil the other or take his place. We have lost, over the last decades, the desire for utopia. This saddens me. Correction: this angers me, and it saddens me that I am occasionally angry.

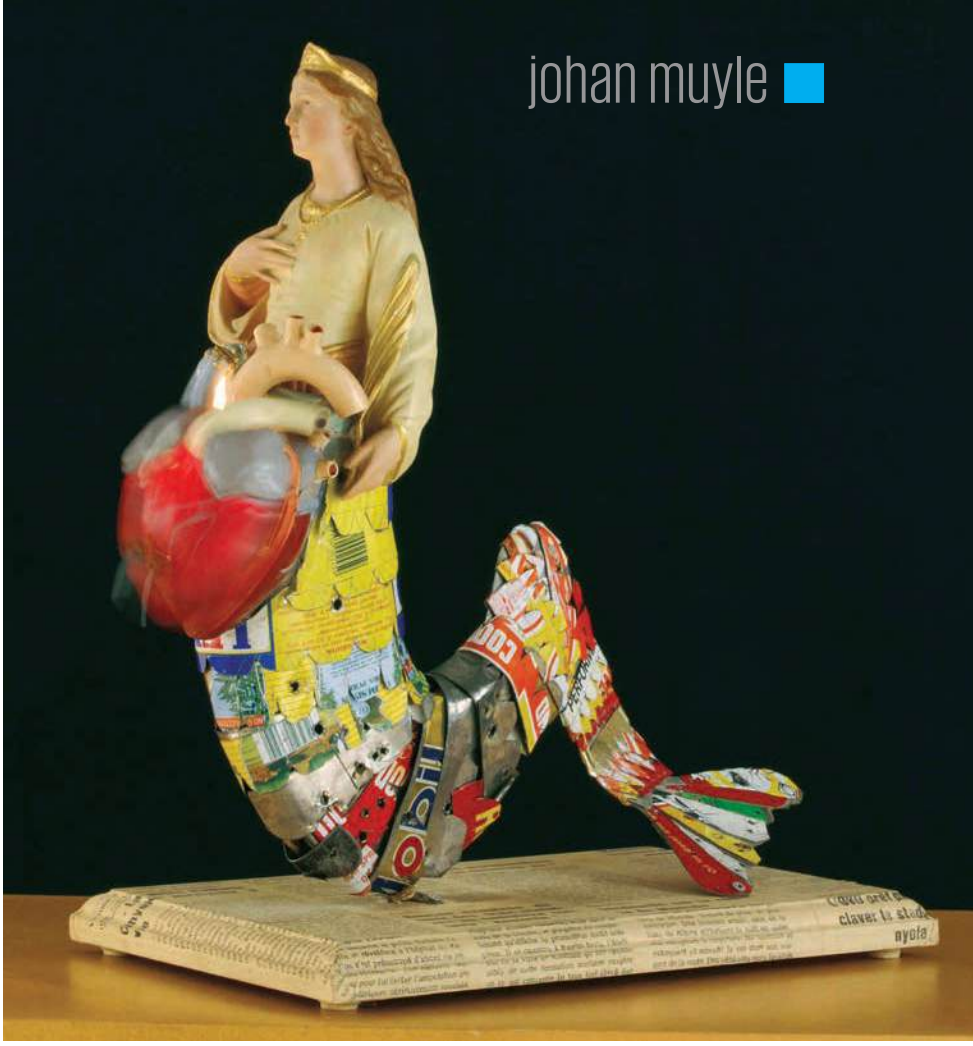
MA: Your first major study trip was to Zaire, a former Belgian colony, in 1993.

JM: That visit amounted to an electroshock. Until then, I had evoked the world without having crossed the frontiers of Europe. A gallerist friend of mine who worked with Chéri Samba asked me to join him. Our arrival in Zaire, just after the pillages of September 1991, exercised—and reinforced—my humanist views.

MA: *L'Impossibilité de régner* (*The Impossibility of Reigning,* 1991), with its full-scale rhinoceros standing on a two-wheeled armature complete with engine, demonstrates how you deal with topical issues. The title makes a clear reference to the political fence-sitting of King Baudouin, Belgium's Catholic monarch, who, in 1990, asked the government to declare him unable to rule so that he wouldn't have to sign or reject a bill decriminalizing abortion. Once the bill was passed, he was reinstated.

JM: The rhinoceros is made of epoxy, based on a taxidermy animal intended for the Museum of Natural History in Brussels, whose life had ended inside an animal enclave. Like many captive rhinos, which can lose their horns by rubbing excessively against the walls of their enclosures, this creature is hornless. In this, I recognized a metaphor for power that has lost the attribute of its force and bangs against the walls of its cage.

MA: That missing horn brings up associated beliefs and superstitions. Are you interested in irrationality or the absurd?



OPPOSITE:
***B. au bord des lèvres,* 1992.**
Vintage box of chocolate, chromo image, water pump system, and small glass cup, approx. 0.4 x 0.2 x 0.07 meters.

THIS PAGE:
***Mamiwata ou la vie comme elle va,* 1993.**
Mixed media including small religious statue, didactic plastic heart, 220V motorization, mermaid tail in advertising iron box made in Kinshasa, Congolese newspapers, and wooden base, approx. 0.5 x 0.25 meters.

OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE: MARC LANDER, © JOHAN MUYLE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***We don't know him from Eden,* 1998.** Installation view at Venice Biennale, 2001.

MARC LANDER, © JOHAN MUYLE

JM: I heed human rituals. I bear witness by assembling objects that humans have produced.

MA: The rhinoceros leads us to Africa, and thus to Congo, which won its independence from Belgium in 1960, during Baudouin's rule. In *B. au bord des lèvres* (*B. at the Edge of Lips,* 1992), he appears as the sad king who weeps—like a miracle-working image—into a glass cup. What is he mourning? Probably not Belgium's occupation of Congo or the assassination of Patrice Lumumba; perhaps he is crying for his mother who died when he was a child, the treason of his fascist-sympathizing father, or his wife's five miscarriages.

JM: The work allows for a multiplicity of interpretations. Its title is explicit. I regularly evoke oxymorons in my work. The seemingly nostalgic portrait of King Baudouin is contradicted by the fact that the subject weeps through his eyeglasses. Works occasionally have autonomous lives. *B. au bord des lèvres* was reproduced on the front page of a major Belgian newspaper when the king died. Some interpreted it as a homage.

MA: In *Les reines mortes* (*The Dead Queens),* one of your most troubling works, an eviscerated sow is mounted upright on the back of a kind of wheelbarrow, its abdominal cavity filled with candles and surrounded by eggs, a sign of fertility. This seems to be an unusual take on the Diana of Ephesus, evoking magic, ritual, and sacrifice.

JM: It is, without a doubt, a strong image. In addition to the Diana of Ephesus, I was interested in the work of Félicien Rops, Thierry Zeno, Breughel, and James Ensor, as well as the Venus of Willendorf and the Fontana di Trevi. The eggs are goose eggs. Out of each one, a lock of a woman's hair emerges. This references a spellbinding ritual carried out in the countryside in Wallonia. The pig is placed atop a rock situated by the edge of the water contained inside a zinc bathtub, which contains money at the bottom. The viewer might imagine being invited to make a wish after having tossed in a coin. The whole is perched on top of the wheels of a stretcher, suggesting that this devotional ensemble can be moved during a hypothetical procession.

MA: In the tableau vivant *L'Amie du Magicien* (*The Girlfriend of the Magician,* 1989), a woman sits on a chair almost two meters above floor level, wearing a long black dress that reaches to the floor. Large eggs cover her torso, and statues of angels populate the neo-Baroque assemblage suspended above her.

JM: This is an attempt to question the status of assemblage sculpture by using a human being in the way I would use a statue. I frequently introduce this type of performance in my larger exhibitions. The actions I propose to the actor are simple and silent: hand out goodies or pass out business cards with various texts—for example, *E PERICOLOSO SPORGERSI.*

MA: You have collaborated several times with African and Indian artists. *We Don't Know Him From Eden* (1998) features colossal, illusionistic, Bollywood-style heads created by the painter Jagan Perumal Krishna.

JM: In 1994, I traveled to Chennai (Madras) to meet with artists who were producing movie industry posters. I wanted to change the scale of my work and confront that old demon, painting. I aimed to mix and sample cultures and images. I incorporated those artists' manner of painting by having them paint my projects. I contributed the installation, with movement, light, and sound, seeking meanings that transcend advertising and include humanist intent.

MA: Do your works intentionally resemble riddles, inviting the viewer to track down and organize clues to reach a solution?

JM: I mix current techniques with images from the past. Both have equal value. I have never attached much importance to the cost and/or the historical or patrimonial value of an object. The moment an object becomes pertinent to a project, it has value, and the same is true of technology. I am not nostalgic; I understand that time contracts within history—the small things that differentiate our daily routine yesterday, today, and the next day will have but little importance within a year.

I do not seek to trap the viewer. Working in the studio enables me to explore the questions that I ask myself about my contemporaries. The images that I produce do not furnish answers. At most, they raise new questions. That satisfies me. It underscores the notion that nothing is fixed for eternity—nothing is black *or* white, but black *and* white.