

Gothic mischief

and other serious matters

Wim Delvoye succeeds in biting the hand even before it feeds him, and his grand schemes know no bounds. **Sarah McFadden** meets the artist

Wim Delvoye heads a multi-national creative industry. The so-called *enfant terrible* of contemporary Belgian art has offices in Shanghai and Hong Kong, a pig farm outside Beijing, and a large studio – he calls it the nerve centre of his operations – in Ghent. Nearby, in the village of Kwatrecht, he's restoring an 18th-century castle which he intends to use as a showcase for his art. If for any reason things don't work out in Kwatrecht – it's a listed property with all the attendant restrictions – he has his eyes set on a much larger spread in the Philippines. Unfazed by borders, including those between his native Flanders, where he was born in 1965, and Wallonia, Delvoye considers himself a Western European and sees the world as his oyster.

It has been aptly stated elsewhere that Delvoye thumbs his nose at capitalism by successfully employing its own strategies to amass private properties, all in the name of art. He ran the pig farm, which is now being phased out, as a profitable business, but its primary function was to supply him with tattooed hides which he used as material to be fashioned into art objects – fake Louis Vuitton handbags to kitsch wall hangings – all made in China. Who would buy such things? Institutions hungry for smart art and private collectors bent on making smart investments, even if that entails buying art whose very substance cries out “capitalist pig”. The artist's brand name turns the insult into flattery, making it seem chic and shameless, and that's his point.

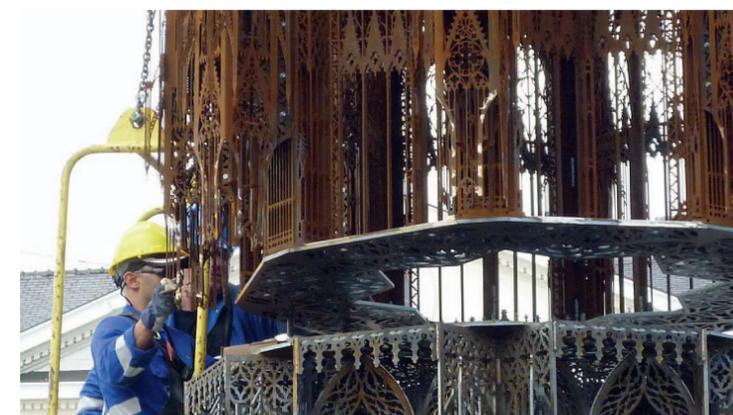
Cloaca, Delvoye's most widely known, mediated work, skewers the greed of the entire

culture industry, artists included. Developed with the help of scientists and engineers, like a proper industrial R & D project, it's a sophisticated machine (there are several versions) which replicates the workings of the human digestive system, right down to its art-marketed end product: excrement. *Cloaca* is Delvoye's most ambitious scatological work, but it was neither his first – in 1992 at Documenta, he made his international debut with a mosaic of ceramic floor tiles printed with images of his own faeces – nor his last: a recent tour of his studio turned up seven small bronze turds cast from his own biological output. Self-mocking self-portraits, perhaps. “I like them,” he says. “When

you stand them up, they look like dwarfs.” *Cloaca* meets Disney.

I was reminded of those dwarfs in late August during the installation of Delvoye's 17-metre-high *Gothic Tower* outside Bozar, across from the Royal Park. It's essentially the same work that was shown on the Grand Canal landing of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection during the Venice Biennale in 2009, and at the Musée

Rodin this past summer, only taller. Each time the tower is exhibited, a 5-metre-high section is added to the base of the open-work steel structure, which is laser-cut to resemble Gothic tracery: state-of-the-art technology substituting for medieval craftsmanship.



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Previously shown in Venice and Paris, the upper parts of Delvoye's *Tower* are joined to the new, lower part outside Bozar in Brussels, where it remains until January. The building seen is the Hôtel Errera

The very least that can be said about the tower's present incarnation is that it serves as an imposing beacon for Delvoye's first solo show in Brussels, a selection of recent sculptures and drawings which opens later this month. Bozar's building, formerly known as the Palace of Fine Arts, is an Art Deco monument by the esteemed Belgian architect Victor Horta, but it has no profile on Rue Royale. It was designed not to obstruct the view of another palace, the Royal one, situated nearby. Delvoye's tower calls attention to this discreetly hidden side of Horta's building and gives people in the Royal Palace something new to look upon.

Seen from the viewing platform on Bozar's flat roof, the new tower echoes the neo-Gothic spire rising from City Hall in the Grand'Place. "It's a duel," Delvoye says, amused by the stature of his adversary. He readily acknowledges the phallic symbolism of his monument – how could he not? "It's a sign of power," he says, "and it will outlast the crisis." He's referring to the world economic crisis, which he thinks about a great deal (he writes a monthly column on finance for the Flemish edition of the business magazine *Trends*). Perhaps he's saying that he won't have to sell it as scrap metal to make it through these parlous times.

Technical plans are already in hand for the tower's expansion. In its present state, according to Delvoye, the piece is just a finger exercise for the 180-metre-tall structure it will become. That's a lot smaller than the 300-metre high Eiffel Tower, but as a self-financed art work, it's colossal, to put it politely. With its open-work ornamentation proliferating *in excelsis* – crockets, wimpergs, corbels, lancet windows, ogive arches, flying buttresses, finials – the piece already smacks of unbridled extravagance, mad folly. In terms of artistic form and intention, neo-Gothic is regarded as decadent and reactionary – on an architectural scale, in your face.

Delvoye watches the crane lower the heavy steel plate on which the tower will stand. It comes to rest on an improvised foundation consisting of a thick cement slab surmounted by the base of a bright yellow crane on which 35 tonnes worth of concrete piles have been stacked log-cabin style. A small piece of gleaming metal sandwiched between the crane and one of the concrete elements serves as the proverbial matchbook under the leg of a shaky table.

The tower now weighs 10 tonnes. That's news to Delvoye, who says it's a measure impossible for him to fathom. He compares himself to a banker who manages millions by day – mere abstractions – and then goes home to pay the rent, whose value he relates to. He entrusts all technical matters to his studio team – seven young architects, engineers and designers whom he employs full-time to create the 3-D digital plans for his sculpture projects and oversee their execution. They say they love working for their boss, and the sentiment seems to be reciprocated. When referring to his art enterprise, Delvoye invariably uses 'we', never 'I'.

The tower, like all of his steel pieces – in the same Gothic style, he has created a walk-in model of a chapel and life-size copies of assorted construction vehicles – was fabricated at a plant in Ghent. There, computer-guided laser beams cut lacy, open-work patterns into the metal plates, rendering them more void than solid. (The process results in a 60-percent loss of material.) The pieces are then assembled and welded together. Each time the tower is installed, it's a new adventure. This time around, the structure is composed of 11 elements which were put together Meccano-style – like a big boy's toy – on site.

Knockin' on heaven's door

The exhibition takes its title from the much covered Bob Dylan song, which has a theme – impending death. There will be no tattooed pigskins, no Cloaca artefacts on view. The show will have a darker, less flamboyant cast. Sculptures (many of them architectonic constructions, like the tower) and drawings from the last three years are included: cut-steel maquettes of Gothic-style chapels and bronzes evincing Delvoye's interest in torsion. One piece, *Suppo* (short for Suppository), combines the scatological and the Gothic. It's a reduced, reclining version of the tower (thus the association with horizontal turds and standing dwarfs alluded to earlier), torqued and pointed at the ends.

"I'm in my twisting period," Delvoye says in unusually terse fashion when asked about his new direction. "Things turning: circular saw blades, cement mixers." These are references to some of the works on which he built his reputation in the '90s. The spiralling forms are produced by digitally twisting 3-D scans of existing sculptures. *Suppo*, like the tower, is made of corten steel; the other torqued works are bronzes based on traditional portrait busts, anodyne figure groups and crucifixes – each stretched and twisted like putty. Some of the crucifixes are shown singly; others have been linked in the shape of a double helix, the molecular structure which carries the human genetic code. Death and

Knockin' on Heaven's Door, Bozar, 10 Rue Royale, Brussels, October 20 to January 23, www.bozar.be

Drawings for pig tattoos are on view at **Galerie Rodolphe Janssen**, 35 Rue de Livourne, Brussels, until October 30, www.galerierodolphejanssen.com



COURTESY STUDIO WIM DELVOYE, BELGIUM

Spiralling crucifixes: *Helix DHAACO 90*, bronze, black patina, 470 x 82 x 82 cm



COURTESY STUDIO WIM DELVOYE, BELGIUM

life compounded. The large helix piece also resembles a mechanical bore.

Why Jesus? "It's all about social class," Delvoye says. "The crucifix has been a successful icon for two thousand years. It's the most successful mass-produced sculpture – the only bronze sculpture that working-class people have in their houses." He speaks the truth with tongue in cheek: Bart Simpson and Mr Clean are other popular icons he has appropriated for artistic purposes.

Delvoye targets religion as well as capitalism in his art. Years before the disclosure of widespread sex abuse within the Catholic Church, he conjoined references to the sacred and profane, eros and thanatos in stained glass windows emblazoned with X-ray photographs of couples engaged in sexual acts. Many of these shadowy images have been integrated into a steel-wrought Gothic-style chapel which Delvoye created on commission for Luxembourg's modern art museum. Another series of X-rays features mice enacting the Way of the Cross, a popular theme in Gothic religious art. He is also toying with the idea of starting a new religion, "the most tolerant religion in the world," whose tenets will be dreamed up by an advertising agency.

For a show at the Louvre in 2012, Delvoye hopes to erect a tower over the landmark glass pyramid at the main entrance. "There will be some confusion between Moorish and Gothic in its appearance. It will look something like a mosque – a huge one." Provocative? You bet. But one has only to look to Spain for historical precedents of Islamic influence on Gothic style, or to read Christopher Wren on the subject.

Natural selection

A permanent public sculpture by Delvoye is expected to be installed behind Brussels' Royal Flemish Theatre (KVS) later this Fall. The piece is a life-size replica of a cement truck made, like the tower, of corten steel masquerading as

Dainty as a Bruges doily, and holier too: *Cement Truck*, scale model 1:6, 2010, laser-cut corten steel, 58 x 36 x 68.5 cm

Gothic filigree. Portraying a heavy-duty vehicle so that it looks as delicate as fine lacework may be seen as a caprice, but there is more to it than that.

"This truck is an enormous waste of time. That's what it's about," Delvoye says. "Trees send out millions of pollen granules and birds sing all day for a single egg. Peacocks produce all these feathers. Nature shows fitness in losing time and resources. When someone buys a work of art, it's a waste of money. He shows it to his girlfriend and she's impressed by the fact that he has wasted so much money. How many South Africans work in mines so that someone can give his girlfriend a diamond? Art is an anomaly in the Darwinist scheme. [Unless, of course, boy gets girl, and they reproduce.] My art is just trying to be honest."

Back in Brussels, as the tower's top section is spun slightly while hoisted aloft, someone suggests to Delvoye that he publish a sales catalogue advertising the tower in various individually priced editions: one with a slowly revolving top, another whose rotations would indicate the time of day, a gold-plated edition. "Let's do it," Delvoye laughs. "Anything's possible!" Especially in times of crisis, when steel prices tend to fall. ●