

In Napoleon's Apartments

When you think of The Louvre in Paris, it is the works of the grand masters that spring to mind, rather than global contemporary art. Wim Delvoye, however, is mixing it up, juxtaposing his modern decorative pieces with the treasures of the Napoleon III apartments.

Wim Delvoye, born in 1965, is a Belgian neo-conceptual artist known for his inventive and often shocking projects, many of which deal with the human body. Perhaps his best known work is 'Cloaca', a machine originally constructed in 2000, which turns food into faeces, through a digestive process replicating human digestion. Delvoye claimed he would never sell a Cloaca machine to a museum as he could not trust a curator to maintain the installation properly, however, he softened on this stance and a custom built Cloaca is part of the permanent collection in the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, Tasmania.



Another fascination of Delvoye's focuses on pigs. He started tattooing pig skins taken from slaughterhouses in the United States and other parts of the world in 1994, moving on to live pigs in 1997. The concept is to see the pigs grow in value, both physically and economically. In 2004, he bought a farm in a village near Beijing where he elaborated the artistic concept for his Art Farm. There, the pigs are raised by a team of specialists. The pigs are inked with a variety of designs, created by Delvoye and are not killed for their skin, but are sold as living art that can only be materially possessed after death. Some dubious animal welfare issues involved perhaps, particularly curious as Delvoye is a practicing vegetarian.

Not content to stop at pigs, in 2006 Delvoye tattooed a man called Tim Steiner. The tattoo was then bought by a German art collector for €150,000 in a deal coordinated by the Zurich gallery De Pury & Luxembourg, which took a cut, as did Delvoye, with the remainder lining Tim Steiner's pockets. In return Steiner is required to exhibit the work three times a year and after death the tattoo on its skin canvas will revert to the new owner. One of these appearances was at the opening of Delvoye's exhibition at



The Louvre. One can only wonder what the Mona Lisa thought as she smiled wryly at the sight of the tattooed young man.

The Louvre invited Delvoye to exhibit in various locations within the museum, including under the Pyramid, and in the Napoleon III apartments. His sculpture under the pyramid is a huge Gothic corkscrew-shaped tower made of stainless steel, entitled 'Suppo', abbreviated from 'Suppository'. Rumour has it that Delvoye vacillated between calling the sculpture 'Suppo' or 'Doner Kebab.' Apparently The Louvre preferred the former as it could not be deemed discriminatory.

Looking closely at the piece leads to the discovery of distorted



elements of Gothic architecture amongst the delicate metal, another recurring theme in much of Delvoye's current work. His laser-cut steel sculptures often reflect seventeenth century Flemish Baroque styles with Gothic filigree. 'I like the fact that Gothic was not liked by anybody, when I took on this style', says Delvoye, 'While working on this, I learned to appreciate this style. The irony went away.'

In Delvoye's solo exhibition 'Au Louvre', his contemporary works are placed subversively within the period rooms of the Napoleon III apartments. Viewing the exhibitions is like a game of hide and seek. Some pieces are immediately apparent, while others, despite their definitively different style, meld into the chaotic





splendour of the rooms. Saws sit on a shelf among 19th century plates and contorted and twisted crucifixes act as centrepieces along a lengthy dining table. The pigs even make an appearance, albeit this time polyester pigs coated in fabric sitting amongst medieval tapestries.

Other notable pieces include a laser-cut steel model of a Gothic dump truck, sitting on a period table next to a pile of hand-carved car tires. Taxidermied rabbit slippers sit in a glass display case by a window open to the French Renaissance style courtyard. A beautiful 5 metre high stained-glass window reminiscent of a church artefact appears to be innocent, however, perhaps a more observant viewer could find the twist. Delvoye has worked with stained glass before and the resultant work was again provocative. In 2001 Delvoye used pornographic X-ray

scans to fill gothic window frames instead of classic stained glass. For The Louvre he appears to have toned down these provocative impulses somewhat.

The range of work alone is spectacular. 'The wide range explains a little how I work', explains

Delvoye, 'I work simultaneously on all these works, in different techniques, in different materials, all at the same time. I have to work synchronously because each work takes a long period of time to be designed and then materialised.'

When deciding on the exhibition location within The Louvre, Delvoye first determined which works he could finish in time then where each would be interred. 'I decided on the apartments of Napoleon III because there was no art there,' clarifies Delvoye. 'These apartments were period rooms from a period with very different aesthetics, but I stayed far away from the rooms with Old Masters. The fun part was choosing for each object its 'correct' place. The most difficult part was the negotiating work with the directors and curators of the Louvre.'

Delvoye's Louvre exhibition has come to an end, although Suppo remains in situ until January. There is little doubt, however, that wherever life takes him, Delvoye will continue to titillate and fascinate. We can only wonder what form this will take.

For more information about Wim Delvoye see www.wimdelvoye.be

