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Installation view of *Piëta* (2008) [left] and *Behind Sadness* (2007-2008) at Yvon Lambert



Berlinde de Bruyckere
Behind Sadness
2007-2008
Yvon Lambert



Berlinde de Bruyckere
Piëta
2008
Yvon Lambert

DEAD HEAT

by Ben Davis

Berlinde de Bruyckere, Oct. 10-Nov. 15, 2008, at Yvon Lambert, 550 West 21st Street, New York, N.Y. 10011

Berlinde de Bruyckere (b. 1964) is well placed to represent the "new mood" in post-bubble art. The Flemish sculptor got her first major exposure on these shores as part of "After Nature" at the New Museum, curator Massimiliano Gioni's ode to contemporary doom and gloom. An article last year about her work in *Sculpture* magazine opened with the following: "When many artists of her generation more or less loudly proclaim their emotional detachment, she feels compelled to tackle weighty universals such as loneliness, pain, and death. . . ."

Certainly, the six imposing wax and epoxy sculptures by de Bruyckere at Yvon Lambert gallery in Chelsea offer evidence that bears out a grim temperament. The pieces on view alternate between two themes: contorted human figures on the one hand, and sculptures of dangling carcasses from butcher shops -- walk-in Chaim Soutines -- on the other. Given that de Bruyckere always insists on crafting the human figure minus its head, the overall message is unmistakable. Here you have humanity reduced to meat; contorted, distorted, rejected, dejected flesh.

Her sculptures come with titles designed to telegraph spiritual weight. One work, featuring two naked male forms embracing precariously on the edge of a pedestal, is titled *Piëta*. A giant, suspended cow carcass, gaping its guts to the world, is *Behind Sadness*.

De Bruyckere's human figures, always life-size, display a tortured mannerism, twisting and turning. These decapitated anatomical studies bear a certain existential portent -- their being is all frenzied motion, to no apparent end. Inspecting the surfaces, you find that they are replete with detail, with subtle flourishes of bulging veins and rippling muscles. Yet their various bodily clefts reveal torn and ragged cavities, offering a glimpse into hollow insides -- once again, the human body reduced to a bag.

De Bruyckere's bodies do display just enough humanity, however, that the metal poles thrust into the soles of their feet, supporting them and welding them to their crude wooden pedestals, offer something like the shock of representing a kind of wound -- particularly because they echo the holes where real ropes are punched into the side of *Behind Sadness's* fake animal carcass, suspending it. At the same time, a tumorous bulge from the ankle of another human sculpture, *Takman*, leaves an ambiguity as to whether it represents a deformity or a sculptural flourish.

This moment of ambiguity allows us to get under the surface of the work a little better. Taken on the terms that I have just described it - - which are undeniable -- de Bruyckere's work is good, but the accumulated effect is also somewhat lugubrious. If this were all there were, it would be the sculptural equivalent of the caricature of a



Berlinde de Bruyckere
Behind Sadness (detail)
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Berlinde de Bruyckere
Takman (detail)
 2008
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Takman
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"European art movie" that everyone can call to mind, stark black-and-white images of people staring direly into space and weeping for no reason. You could understand why it would appeal to someone who was sick of Jeff Koons, but by itself its seriousness is just a little too overdetermined.

Which is why it's worth drawing out, just a little, the subterranean current of mischievousness in de Bruyckere. Start, for this, with *Takman* and *Marthe*, two human forms de Bruyckere based on observing models in her studio (the titles are the names of the models), twisted into improbable positions. Both have, instead of heads, manes of tree roots that cascade down to the floor, inexplicably. The spectacle of her headless humans transforming into trees offers a note of fantasy that cuts against those ponderous "weighty universals" that otherwise might smother the whole endeavor, even if it is pulled off in a fairly pokerfaced way. Human reality is, after all, about more than being nailed to the cross of some bleak, universal condition -- it's also about imagination. It's a note of J.R.R. Tolkien alongside her Francis Bacon.

Then there is de Bruyckere's subtle use of materials. Start from a detail from *Marthe*: The emaciated female figure is bent forward jaggedly, its shoulders melting down into tree roots. Yet inspecting these one finds among them a human arm mixed in, its spindly form almost indistinguishable from the roots. The sculptural exercise is one of setting up a play on the way that one studiously realistic image can be transformed into another, and made almost indeterminate with it. De Bruyckere's rough, waxen surfaces, tinged with veins of red that realistically evoke human skin, nevertheless provide a medium ambiguous enough to render unknown just what you are meant to be looking at. The question is deliberately left hanging as to where, exactly, the artist's fidelity to the reality of her observation of her models leaves off and where her imagination begins.

At Yvon Lambert, de Bruyckere's sculptures are placed on wooden pedestals -- unlovely and scuffed, often covered with flaking paint. *Marthe* is set in a kind of wooden booth with glass panels on one side, like a fragment of a ramshackle porch. The wood is a deliberately inert material. It is just what it appears to be; it bares itself as junk; the shoddiness of the material is clearly meant to evoke the shoddiness of life in general. But at the same time, the inertia of the support contrasts with the way de Bruyckere uses her medium of choice, wax, to conjure substances totally other than itself, like wood and flesh. This contrast may be the true reason that her humans transform unexpectedly into trees -- to set the textures of her trompe-l'œil wood off against real wooden surfaces.

Understanding de Bruyckere's understated playfulness becomes most significant when you look at *Letsel* (*Scab*), two connected sculptures in the back gallery, each representing a dangling hunk of meat, depicted in a state where all evidence of what creature it came from has been hacked away. The sculptures are hung from a metal frame in a structure of wooden dividers, suggesting some kind of warehouse or abattoir.

It's the suggestion of a space provided by the reality of splintery wood and rusty metal that allows you to identify the abstract form of the sculptures for what they are: hunks of meat. But simultaneously, in contrast to the forceful actuality of this scaffolding, the substance of the sculptures stands out as particularly unreal. The contrast highlights the work's presence as an abstract shape, even as it throws into relief its presence as a simulation -- it makes all the more palpable how very different the wax sculpture is from the tactile surface of the meat that it so faithfully represents.



Berlinde de Bruyckere

Marthe

2008

Yvon Lambert

All of this points to the fact that below the saturnine surface of Berlinde de Bruyckere's oeuvre, there is, if not a sense of humor, then at least a sense of play. This is important. It means that her work is not just about lying down in front of the reality of "loneliness, pain, and death," but also, gently, a way of scrambling that reality, and thus of finding a way to get past it.

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Berlinde de Bruyckere

Marthe (detail)

2008

Yvon Lambert



Berlinde de Bruyckere

Letse

2008

Yvon Lambert