

Laurence
Dervaux

Some works

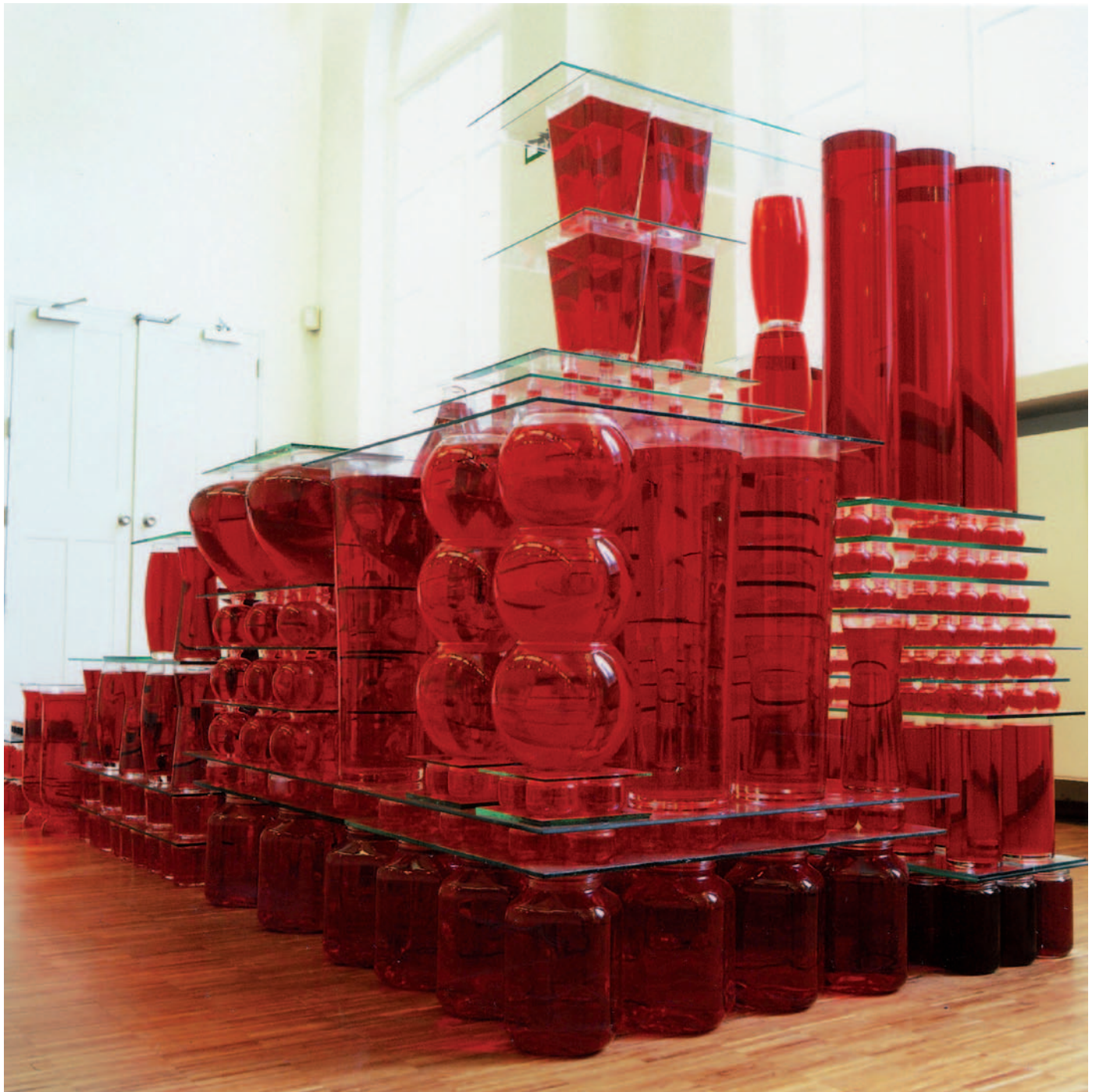
« Reminder of life » Catherine Henkinet

At the rate of 7000 litres of blood pumped by the human heart in 24 hours, this sculpture shows the amount of blood pumped in 1 hour and 28 minutes.

The installation is formed by the piling up of 750 clear glass containers, (vases, glasses, lab equipment, bottles, jars, blown glass sculptures etc...). These containers are filled with red liquid of different tonalities (bright red blood, dark blood). Their piling up forms an architecture where each container seems essential to the stability of another. Their precarious balance symbolizes the blood content (life) but it induces the blood not contained (death). This sculpture evokes the fragility of life.

110/340/160cm.

Production: ISELP. (Institute of the study of visual language) Brussels, Belgium. 2003



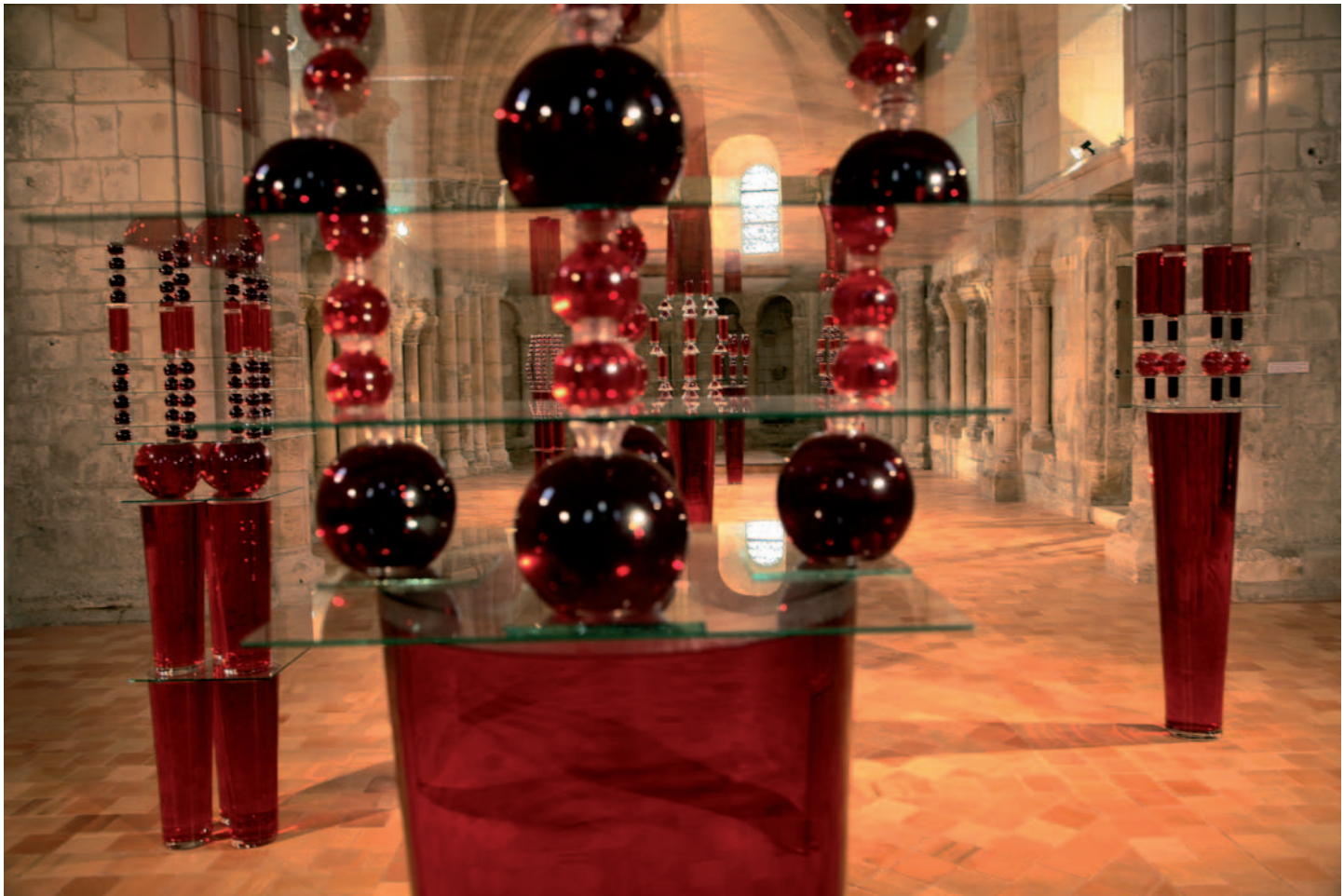


The amount of blood pumped by the human heart in 57 minutes and 40 seconds.

An installation of seven sculptures formed by piling up transparent glassware containing red liquids. Each sculpture represents the amount of blood pumped by the human heart in, more or less, 8 minutes. The dimensions of each sculpture (height: 180 cm, diameter: 50 cm) make reference to the height of a human being. Their precarious balance evokes the fragile nature of the body.

Installation in the chapel “Saint-Julien” de le Petit-Quevilly, Rouen, France.
Exhibition produced by the city, in collaboration with the gallery Koma. 2007.





Human fluids.

Set of sculptures in transparent blown glass. These sculptures of organic forms have hermetically-contained liquids, the colours of which are those of various human fluids. 2006-2007.

Courtesy: L 'Atelier Hermes, Seoul. Korea. 2009.











Human skulls covered with black clay, white, red and yellow.

These colours symbolize the different colours of human skin. The skulls are exhibited at the same height as the face of visitors. Skulls covered with few coats of clay look like a skull. Those covered with many coats are more like a human.

Contemporary Art Center: “Les Brasseurs”, Liege, Belgium. 2009.



Bowls filled with black clay, white, red and yellow.

The clay dry and cracks.

This set is associated with the installation of skulls covered with clay. Again, the colours of clay symbolize the different colours of human skin.

These bowls are set on tables (4x60/300cm.) to refer to the vanities called: “served tables”.

Contemporary Art Center “Les Brasseurs”, Liege, Belgium. 2009.







Water contained in hands.

Casts of the hollow of joined hands to receive water.

Transparent resin. 2001.

Series of casts of 20 different people. (Men, women, children).

Sculptures exhibited at the height of the visitor's mouth.

Courtesy: gallery Jacques Cerami.





Rice and food colouring.

Work eatable.

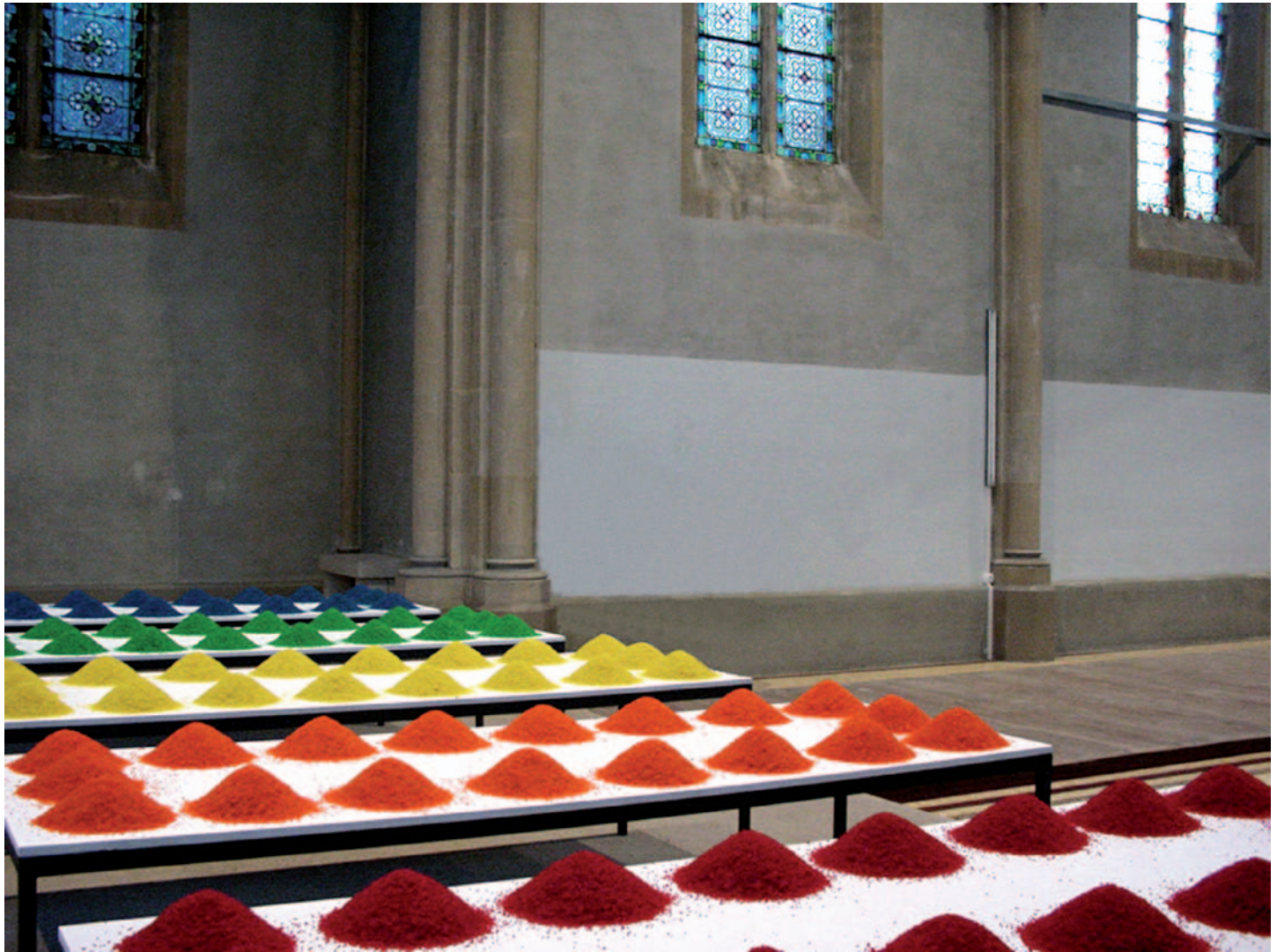
90 piles of rice, 5 tables 90/250cm. The base of each pile is the size of a plate. This work refers to the vanities of the 17th century where the precariousness of life was expressed in still lifes of served tables.

Contemporary Art Center of Belgian Luxembourg.
Chapel of Virton. 2002.

Production: League of Human Rights, Brussels.







Human ribs made from porcelain.

The Installation consists of 24 bundles of human ribs made from porcelain. Each bundle comprises twelve ribs. The diptych display symbolises a chest, a human presence. These sculptures are exhibited at the same height as the ribs of the viewers, which makes for a disturbing face-to-face encounter.

Production of the new edition: Foundation Hermes. Paris. 2009.



Being 65% water.

The amount of water contained in a human body weighing 70 kilos.

Either de water is simulated by transparent resin (puddles and drops per thousand), this water is as fossilized, hence no longer subject to the process of evaporation, and remains indifferent to the effects of time. Or the water is enclosed in transparent receptacles of more or less subjective organic forms, in which condensation continues to form. Sealed in forever. Perpetual movement and therefore, life. These fragile objects of glass, water and resin are arranged on fifty glass panels displayed throughout the space, 40 cm. above the floor. The near-transparency of the installation and the sculptures' shadows on the floor evoke an impalpable, immaterial presence.

The visitors walk through the installation.

10m/10m (variable dimensions), H: 40cm.

Production: La Verrière Hermes. Brussels, Belgium. 2006.







Human Liquid.

Video.

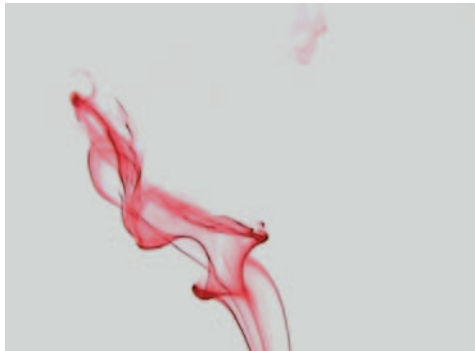
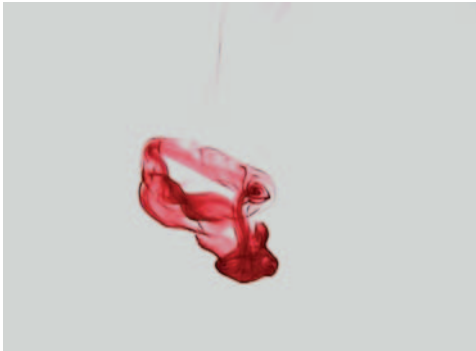
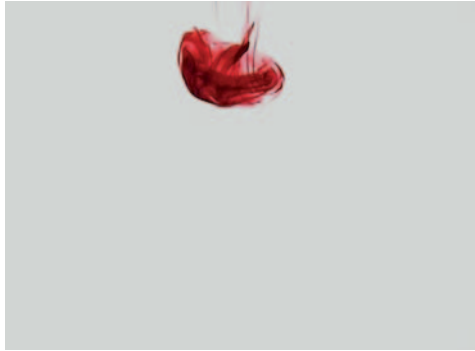
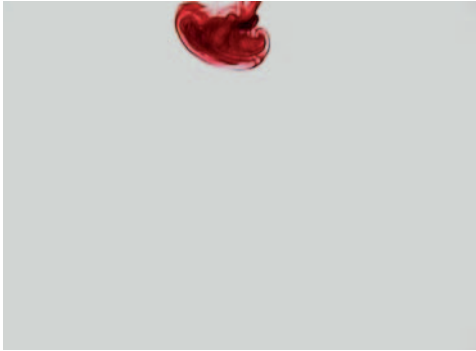
Large format projection of the movement of a drop of blood falling into water.
A series of fifteen short films.

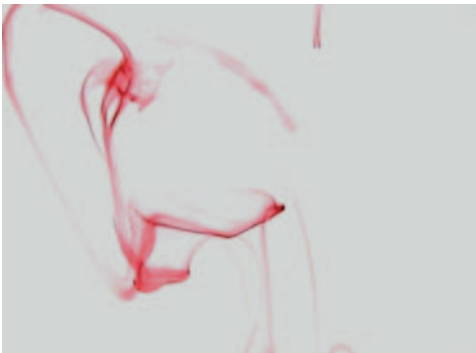
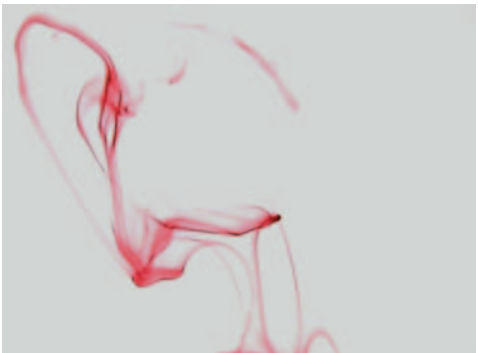
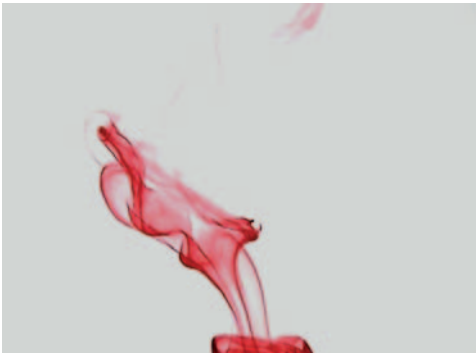
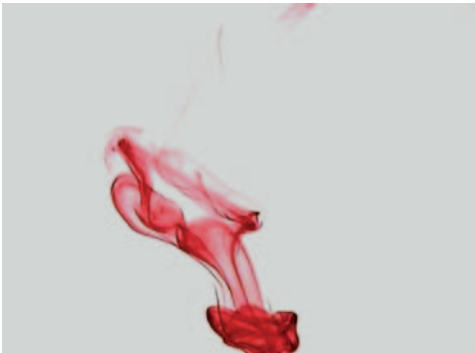
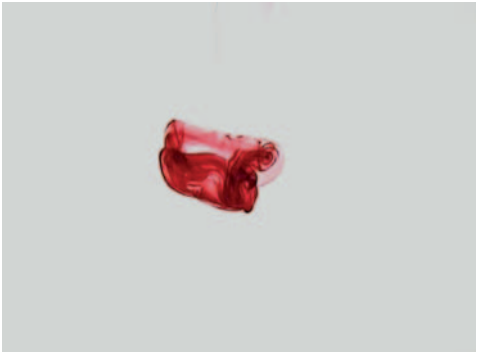
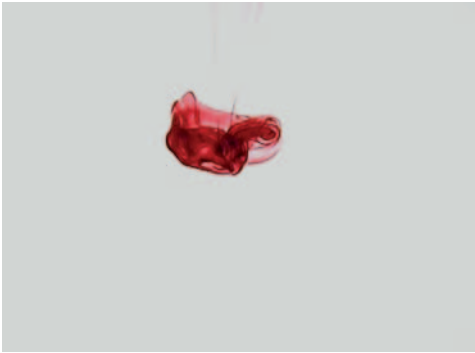
Image: Joël Bassée.

Assembled by: François Bouko

With the participation of No Télé (Hainaut Occidental's Television). 2004.







Acrylic paint on glass representing a funeral urn.

The reflecting effect positions the viewer within the urn.
104/230 cm.

Production: Foundation Hermes, Paris. 2009.







« **Vanity with Flowers** »

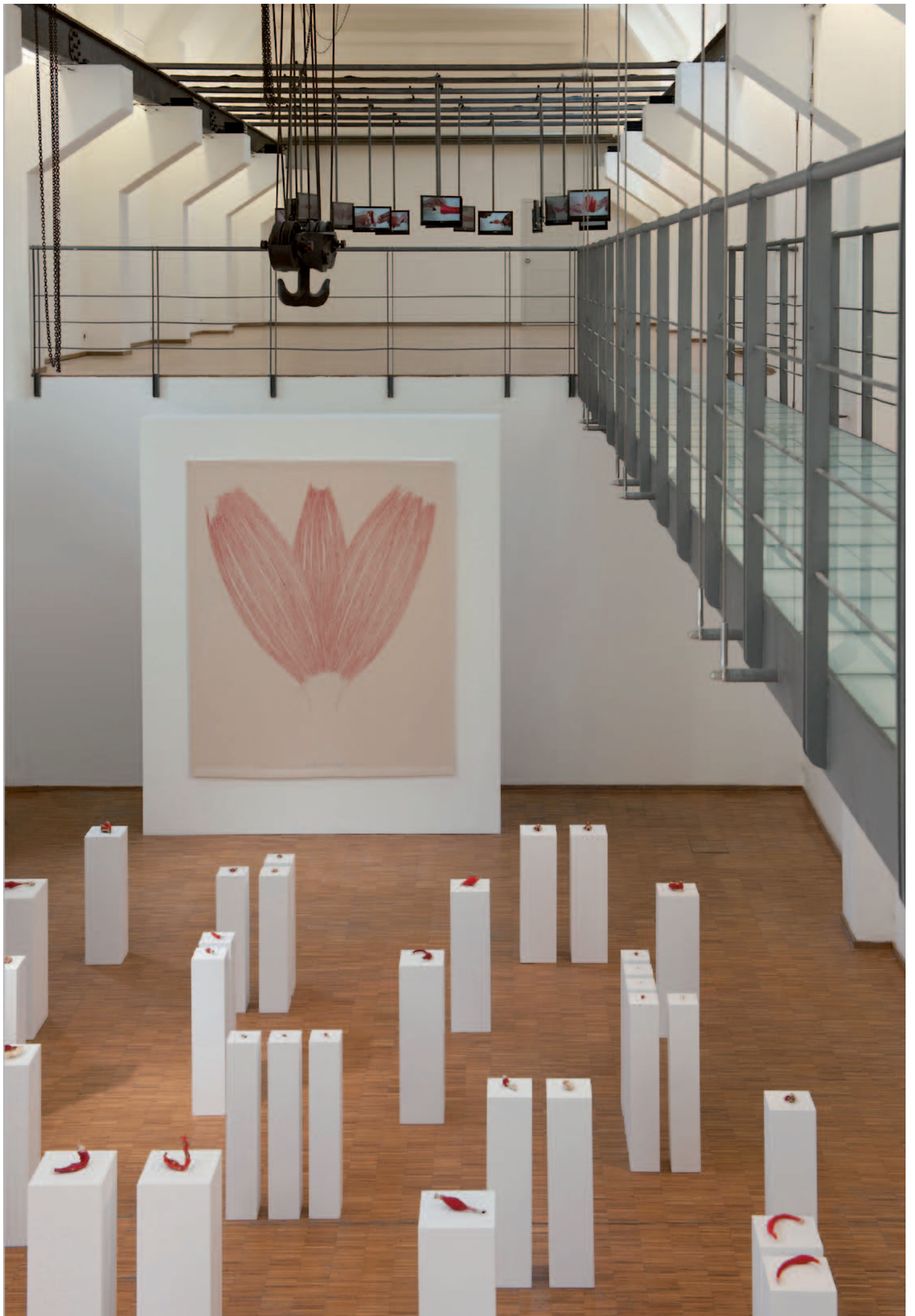
Installation with a tapestry depicting a muscle, exhibited in front of a set of 80 human bones wound with a red thread and 15 videos on suspended 19' screens.

Coproduction of the installation: L'iselp, Bruxelles, 2011.

Production of the tapestry (230/180 cm.) Le Crecit, Tournai, 2010.

Courtesy: L'iselp. Photo : Philippe De Gobert.

From a distance, an explosion of an assortment of composed plinths, almost display cases revealing a host of tiny objects, enigmatic in their allure. Fruit of ancestral loom-work, slow and painstaking, a great tapestry confronts. The birth of a red flower seems to simmer, muted vanitas hinting at the fragility of life, time passing and our finitude in the light of such suggestions. And ultimately it speaks to us of the evocation of a muscle which we shall come to know in the fullness of time...



But as proximity becomes intimacy, at the mercy of metaphorical circumvolutions, the visitor circulates like a living fluid within the installation and discovers, one by one, the objects exposed. You suspect you are seeing the tapestry beater, a bobbin enwrapped with scarlet thread, the brilliant, silken strand which illumines the virginal weft of the worked stuff up close. But look closer still, vegetable or mineral crumbs (wood, coral, pebbles...) more than likely. Every tiny fragment, be it ever so insignificant, is elevated to the rank of a jewel, and from the infinitely small, it becomes infinitely large.



The senses are ravished by a work creative of aesthetics, seductive, sensual colours overwhelming the disturbing, frightening evidence, bones perhaps, human even... The title will confirm it for us. And symbolically it will restore every spectator to the status of a living being.

Thus are these shards of bone brought back to life by the grace of the thread which stretches, grows, fills, swells, a bubble of red sap, red blood. A muscle tensed fibre by fibre, a presence reanimated, revitalised.









« People of different races winding or unreeling red thread around human bones »

Installation video. 2011
15 x 19' screens

Coproduction of the installation: L'iselp, Bruxelles, 2011.
Courtesy: L'iselp. Photo : Philippe De Gobert.

As an echo of this installation, on video, some anonymous hands, evoking all human races, tirelessly repeat the same movement with no beginning and no end, the same ritual of winding which breathes the breath of life into that which never lived... and then unwinding again. An endless to and fro. An inscription in conversation with a heap of bones of unknown human provenance, a hymn to life in the face of the mass death constantly reiterated by all the media in the world. A metaphor of the cycle of existence inscribed into that of the universe.

Summoning up both mental and physical presence, this installation of many parts reconstructs itself, takes possession of its surroundings and spreads enticingly like a field of poppies, and yet the deeps unravel into a fathomless abyss.



A reminder of life

The work of Laurence Dervaux (Tournai, 1962) focuses on the human body which she strives to establish as both magnificent and yet delicate. Nourishing elements, bodily fluids, organs and bones are transposed in a range of seductive devices which encourage the eye of the viewer, little by little, to perceive them with increasing clarity or to modify the perception from a distance. The staging of these various elements creates a subtle play between the evocation of a form, its power to attract and the reality of what is shown. A journey into the heart of the probed human, revealed in a range of ways, leading to a step-by-step revelation of the duality of the everyday reality which keeps us alive. This is a work where the symbol of the human condition is revived and reactivated, provoking a steady and contradictory vacillation. Reflection as much as meditation, this work delivers a body of work to us as attractive as it is oppressive, and the guiding principle which underpins it weaves another vision of ourselves.

In the beginning : the act of creation, and then the emergence of a body...

Having inherited an engraver's workshop in the Beaux-arts, she retains aspects of her training in her work in the physical and corporeal sense of the word, an active involvement in the process of creation such as the effort of the thousands of gouge cuts required for the large formats of her youthful engravings. The intensity of that action will be found in other forms: in the kneading of the dough, of the clay, the blowing of glass and indirectly in the return to the slow production of tapestry.

From "Justine" (1985) revealing her finery in "The Origin of the World" (1985) dressed in black, these abstract yet suggestive, lascivious forms mutely evoke the body which has for ever been the source of inexhaustible inspiration for so many artists, and which finds in the hands of Laurence Dervaux, meaning and reinvention. This carnal form is the material being and assumes reality in a particular shape, ever changing. Transposed here into allusion, it forces us to move beyond a mere glance, to step from one space into the other: going and coming... within the shape, within the work, since nothing reveals itself instantly.

We are reminded of an installation in Valenciennes (France, 1987), where we had to make our way into the interior of a house. Entering and leaving, misleading ourselves? The artist makes use of a place for what it is; a corridor leading to an art gallery which she transforms for the exhibition into a room with a bed and a table on which lies a newspaper, an image which sends us back to the place. The newspaper informs us that a bloody murder has taken place within this room shared by a couple. A plunge into the depths, the story of a past drama, there... The removal of an experience related by the press and the invasion of the spectator into the very heart of the story: the location of the tragedy. It represents a progressive shifting of meaning which will become the trademark of the work of this artist. A to-and-fro movement takes place around an element which directs the eye to another field of meaning, that of an imaginary (meta)narrative in this case, but becoming more real later on... A man, a woman, blood, life, death: the language of a work which can be translated in many ways.

This is the creation of a story, then *immersion in the other's being...* because that is what it means, a transfer from one body to another, from outside to inside. Subsequently her work draws on a range of memories of everyday existence, hints of life battling with hints of nothingness. Recontextualised, a variety of used objects have been recovered by the artist, particularly during the time she lived in a run-down rent-controlled building on the outskirts of Dunkerque (France, 1990). The artist took possession of the location and the stories of the past and present inhabitants of the building. An ashtray, crockery, the dustbin, etc., left in situ, have been reinvested to show all the potential of the reactivation of the memory associated with the object, the lifeless residue of past life.

Other items have been reused in the same way, such as these worn-smooth bars of soap, resembling pebbles and entitled "Initially a 150 gr bar of soap with an impressed illustration of a palm tree on an island. Initially a 150 gr bar of soap with an impressed illustration of a female profile" (1997). Or "a coffee stain. A paint stain" (1999).

From falling back on the elements which define all of human life, from the most banal, like coffee and soap, we move onto the more intimate: the body and what it is made of, its sundry needs in the time frame which defines its existence.

The slow maturation of a process binding together various assorted objects with existential meanings forges the link between the lifeless and the living.

Constantly feeding and watering the work... Revelation of some recurrent processes

“A cottage loaf, a bread basket” (1995) (painting, diptych)

“A grain of white rice” (1997) (collage of grains of rice on fabric. Right panel of a diptych, the left panel being “A coral-coloured lentil”, collage of red lentils on fabric). Rice and lentils will make up a work in which the material itself constructs the shape. A long grain of rice and a round lentil create the motif and the material reconstructed on the fabric by subtle superimposition. Afterwards the title comes like counterpoint, a cold, stolid explanation, straight to the point.

“The artist colouring 50 kg of white sunflower seeds with edible scarlet dye No. 42 -E110-E112” (1999). Clarification comes in the form of an explanatory key, a note which adopts a didactic tone, a principle which will subsequently be repeated automatically. This binary development operates as an initial opening into the physical allure of the work so that we are then orientated in a second phase towards the quasi-scientific meaning; the references are adjusted. Initially the attraction of the work is enigmatic, it calls upon a known reference frame here, such as foodstuffs. But then it becomes the driving force of the whole of the human condition, it takes on meaning and, no more essentially, form. It moves from signifier to signified, the relationship becomes conceptual and more simply contemplative.

“Edible bread dye” (1999) (sculpture). In this work, too, the first contact is made essentially through the eyes, through the seductive aesthetics of the piece, its true beauty marked by this seductive red. Furthermore, this red, “*universally held to be the basic symbol of the principle of life, its strength, its power and its vibrancy*” will subsequently be rediscovered in a number of works, such as her heaps of coloured rice. “Edible rice dye¹” (2002). A really beautiful work, pivoting on the colour made from edible ingredients, the link which then bonds with the human being and our vital conditions, a process which becomes recursive. Presented on a series of tables set for a shared meal in the unique setting of the “Petit Chateau”, the reception centre for asylum seekers, this starch – the basic survival carbohydrate – takes on a human and even humanitarian meaning. The work can even be eaten, since all the components are edible. The consumer society and its derivatives underpin the work and point to a critical position regarding the socio-economic modalities which characterise our lifestyle.

Because of the material selected, its relationship to colour and hence its relationship to art, the meaning goes beyond this first postulate: coloured food becomes a sculpture with a relationship to the body, to human survival and to the need for life. Foodstuffs stand in ambiguous correlation with the body, in a similar uneasy relationship as that which binds the need for art to life. It is art which must be constantly nourished with references and inputs if it is to ripen.

Water, the other element essential to survival, also reappears again and again in the body of work.

“Water held in the twenty pairs of hands of different people” (201) (sculptures placed on metal stands at mouth-height), a set of imprints in transparent resin, made by moulding the hollow of the hands, the primary substance, fixed. Fakes to show the real.

Note also: these shards of pottery brought from Egypt and reused to become recipients of traces of eternal, timeless water: puddles in glass become eternal, fixed, abolishing the transition state from liquid to vapour to

become the symbol of the quest for thirst beginning with the maternal breast, a reference repeated explicitly in these shapes of swollen coils, inflated under the pressure of this milk/resin immortalised for eternity. It is the nourishing breast perpetuated by these paunchy pots containing the regenerating liquid, probed here in the inner parts by a subtle mirror procedure which reflect our image at the very heart of the mother's body. Water and mother's milk, the fundamental nourishing liquids are to be found at the heart of things, precious containers, indicating the vital need to preserve them.

Immortalising what is mortal through absence

Locks of hair, a clod of congealed earth, a table set with cups of rice, a fragment of ceramic or two joined hands containing unplumbed water, the marks of fingers scraping the bottom of a bowl, all these works appear suspended in time, fixed in their state, since man seems to be absent. Rendering items immobile in the beauty of their material is one of the earliest forms of vanity born of the paintbrushes of some 17th-century Dutch painters. The traces of a fulfilled life, symbolised by the glow and the wealthy finery of a richly decorated table is immortalised on canvas. *"The paradox of fixity as evidence of the ineluctable flight of Time, and of Death which breaks its thread, thus continues to act in the picture or installation with the same title as the conventional arrangement of the emblems of Vanity"*. Unlike the classical vanities, the means implemented in this work exploit the material component associated with its primordial needs, not essentially in its representation, but used as such, in an almost literal meaning and no longer purely symbolic. A shift of register leads to the notion of vanity in an even more tangible reality even if it remains still somewhat distant (use of resin, of glass, of food colouring). These sundry recreated objects urge the visitor to question the meaning of such assemblies. While the visitor may wish to remain in the register of sensory experience, reading the title repeatedly diverts him from that and remorselessly leads him to question, to a step beyond mere looking. An initial literal representation accentuated in certain places by kind of reflective metaphor is followed by a staggering realism which plunges us into the very heart of existential preoccupations. A work focused on the relationship to man and his reference to Time contained within the area of space trapped between birth and death with corollaries such as the ephemeral and fragility. It falls to the spectator to draw out the meaning which lies beyond the seductive and deceptive appearances which both fascinate and revolt. The idea is to reveal what cannot be grasped – time, absence.

A faceless body³, intrinsic, broken down into basic units with a precise function

If the representation of the body has developed over the past few centuries and particularly during Renaissance, that development has taken place because of changes in ways of thinking inherited from Platonism or even from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, overturned by the Enlightenment and the fundamental effect of Reason on all forms of subjective thought. Likewise, the scientific revolutions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have ushered in their own changes: where the tiniest part of the body has been mercilessly probed and even changed, removed, cloned... not forgetting the impact of psychology and the many studies which reveal the complexity of a sensitive body, a prey to questions about its finite nature. Every time light has been cast on the mastery of the body and the knowledge of it, it has made it possible for artists to turn it into their favourite subject, one which has been broken down here in a unique manner.

Laurence Dervaux dissects this body in order to probe its constituent parts:

Blood. Never waste a drop : "Human Liquid⁴. A drop of blood falling in water" (2004) (video), a mechanism: a tiny quantity of blood spreads in multiple swirls with loose and sensual outlines, forms which are entrancing, but the origin of which is the flowing of this precious liquid, a liquid to be preserved. Here is the image of this installation presented at L'iselp in 2003 "At the rate of 7,000 litres of blood pumped by the human heart in twenty-four hours, this work represents the quantity of blood pumped in one hour and twenty-eight minutes", and which preserves its more than impressive scientific characteristics in a variety of forms. A veritable house of cards, this architectural structure, consisting of a stack of 750 transparent glass containers with a very fragile look about them⁵, is the first example of her way of actually placing the spectator in a position of physical danger from the work. Subsequently reconstructed with more human

proportions (Chapelle St-Julien, Rouen, 2007), this type of work creates a precarious balance, the symbol of all life to be protected. This state of instability will be explored again using other kinds of fluids such as water.

The artist had already urged us to see water as an essential external element (soaking the body), but it then becomes a constituent part of the body, inherent in its organs. It takes on material form in delicate blown-glass sculptures suggesting the internal anatomy, usually invisible to the eye, and yet here revealed (colon, intestine, liver, etc.), dissected. “The 65% water human⁶” (Hermès Glassworks, Brussels, 2006) shows us the basic proportions of the human body. The opposite appears: parched earth, dust, the progressive or forced desiccation of the body, want, The image of death seems to insinuate itself in the most eloquent manner ...

Muscles drawn in ink are stretched out on paper (2001) and are extended disproportionately fibre by fibre on the tapestry⁷ (2010). The similarity is deceptive.

Bones: the first to make their appearance were the tiniest bones in the human body, “The hammer, The anvil and The stirrup” (2003) located in the inner ear. They have been removed from their hiding place to become small precious jewels to be admired. Presented in a velvet case, they are ennobled, embellished, neglected no longer. “Porcelain ribs arranged in bundles” (2001) confirm their name and speak of their hidden fragility in a dismantled form, having lost the characteristics of their rigid framework. Arranged at the height of a man⁸, the analogy becomes more present, perception takes on an elegant form, they become more trivial.

The first skull to appear is magnified by the addition of gold within the dome. Placed on a mirror, it appears as a shell containing a secret, a “box of meaning” (2000) enhanced by the gilding, a memory of a sumptuous past. At first the evocation is only fragmentary, sublimated. But then, this piece of bone will be seen in mutation: the earth used to cover it, particularly in the installation “Skulls covered by white, black, yellow and red clay⁹” (Les Brasseurs, Liège, 2009), will evolve little by little from the primary curve of the egg to that of a head in an increasingly realistic image, a modification evoking the passage from formless to form, from birth to death and vice-versa. The image of a transitional state strengthened even more than the drying clay of which it is made, cracks on the surface and fragments into a range of colours chosen according to the possible pigmentations of the skin. This is a metaphor which will be rediscovered in the same way in a set of bowls in these same colours (white, black, yellow and red) as well as various fissures or greater or lesser depth. But then, this brain box becomes solid and reaffirms its presence by a light which irradiates all its parts, a constellation: “Dialogue between the human being and the universe¹⁰” (Busan, South Korea, 2010). A head has been pierced by a multitude of little holes from which light rays emerge sketching an infinity of stars on the ceiling. A seething interior life dawning, an escape to other possibilities. A man bonded to the universe, in the image of this chrome-plated skull¹¹ (2011) which also reflects a form of external life, the eye of the viewer, the viewer’s own life. The vice tightens, the limits between the viewer and the viewed become narrower and the relationship between the two becomes increasingly frontal, without deviations and oblique approaches. The sequel will be even more definite with the use of real teeth and even hair and nails appearing among the clods of reshaped clay, the only elements which are regenerated after the threshold of life. The real has its walls, establishes its footprint, cannot be imitated, but can be incorporated.

The end of all life is no longer feigned or disguised but rather introduced as it is, as in these videos where the container of holy blood breaks and endlessly spills its contents (Busan, South Korea, 2010), or in an even more direct way in this large painting on glass representing a human-sized urn “Vanitas vanitatum, et omnia vanitas¹²” (Seoul, South Korea, 2009), where the spectator literally sees himself enclosed by the mirror effect, and the blade falls. The presence of death prowls without ever fully revealing itself and is automatically counterbalanced by the presence of the living (the reflection of the visitor in the urn or on the chrome surface of the skull, a glass which falls without every breaking, breathing paced by the video loop, and so on. A constant to and fro between life and death. A contemporary analysis of the motif of vanities, a new form arises because *“we have to invent a new paradigm for time, which will cause the ephemeral to vibrate outside of the Being, in a real Cogito Mori of appearances. These are precisely the second vanities of*

contemporary art, where the ephemeral has gnawed every theological horizon, because it has been grabbed by the medium itself, with the internal displaced to the surface¹³”. The definition of these vanities defined by Christine Buci-Glucksmann can be related to the development of the work of Laurence Dervaux as “indifferent allegories, where death is present and neutralised, in a reflexive distance proper to the primacy of the surface and the superficial”. They work “like doubles, and even the necessary linings of life¹⁴”.

The work shown at L’iselp serves as a bridge over troubled water, a crossing of the elements which make up the work. The process reverses itself and the to and fro between internal/external, life/death, presence/absence, seduction/repulsion resumes its position to indefinitely reject the finiteness associated with passing time. As a creator, she breathes life into that which was dead. She forces back the limits of time.

Driven along various tracks we have identified, the work of Laurence Dervaux pursues, step by step, the threads which lead to a work where the human being, the human body, its representation and its internal workings will be dissected to the tiniest element. Turning the Symbolists on their heads, she marks her route with references where the image presented intrinsically possesses a match in the world of ideas, ideas which operate by the actual transformation of every image unconsciously fed by a need: that of a body called to life, the essence of all humanity and where the outcome remains inevitable death.

Catherine Henkinet

(Endnotes)

- 1 Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, Editions Robert Laffont S.A. et Editions Jupiter, Paris, 1999, p. 831
- 2 Joint production by Centre Culturel de Woluwé Saint-Lambert, Brussels
- 3 Marie-Claude Lambotte, «The Vanities in Contemporary Art, an introduction», in Anne-Marie Charbonneaux (s.l.d.), *Les Vanités dans l’art contemporain*, Flammarion, Paris, 2005, p.18
- 4 Except the video «Cathy dont on ne connaît pas l’histoire» [Cathy, whose history is unknown to us] (1999).
- 5 Work produced with the collaboration de No Télé, Télévision du Hainaut occidental.
- 6 Iselp joint production, Brussels
- 7 Precarious balance exacerbated by the contents: 450 litres of red liquid.
- 8 Production La Verrière Hermès, Brussels
- 9 The tapestry shown at ISELF was produced by CRECIT asbl (Centre de Recherches, d’Essais et de Contrôles pour l’Industrie Textile asbl [Centre for Research and Testing for the Textile Industry]), Tournai.
- 10 More precisely, at the height of the visitor’s rib cage.
- 11 Joint production: Les Brasseurs, Liège.
- 12 Busan Biennale production, South Korea
- 13 Chrome-plated bronze forming part of a series of 10 different skulls made between 2009 and 2011.
- 14 Production l’Atelier Hermès, Seoul, South Korea
- 15 Christine Buci-Glucksmann « les Vanités secondes de l’art contemporain » in Anne-Marie Charbonneaux (s.l.d.), *op.cit*, p.58
- 16 *Id.*, p.59

