

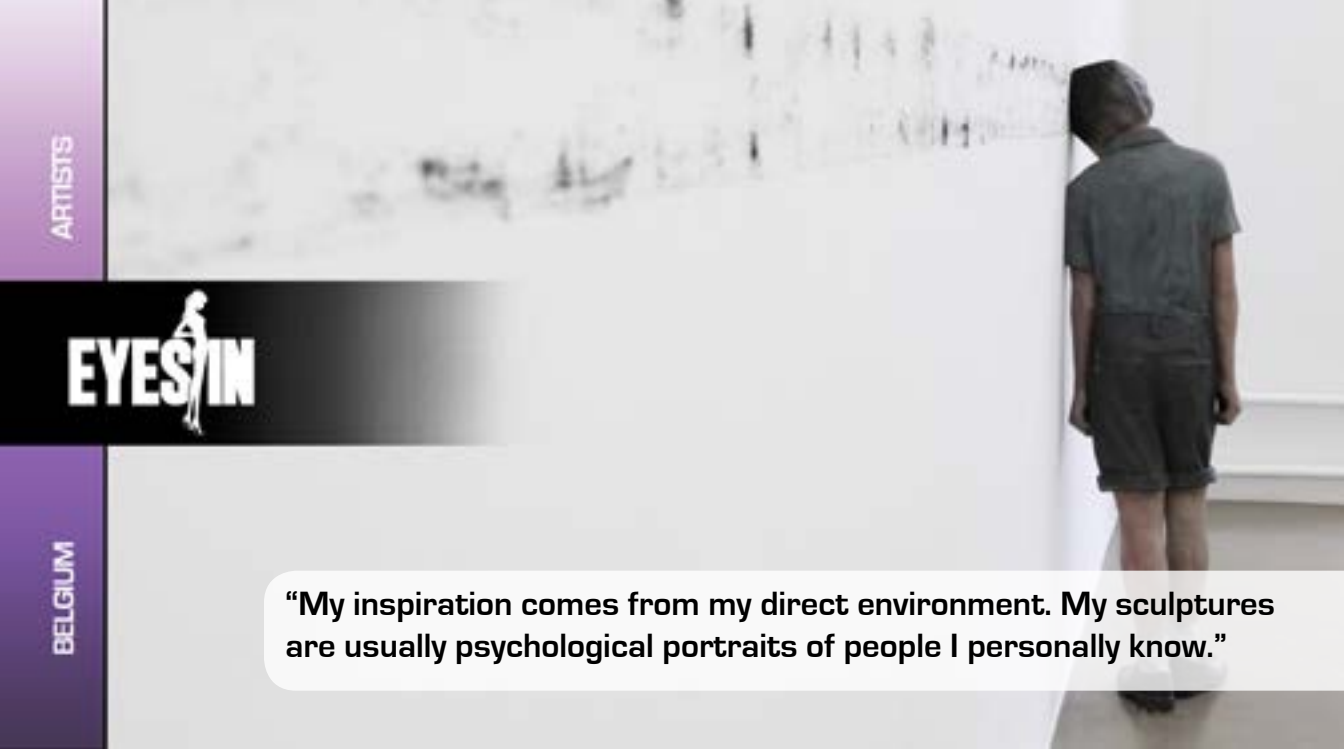
ARTISTS

EYES/IN EDITION 19

BELGIUM



Every Side of Beautiful: The Art of Sofie Muller



“My inspiration comes from my direct environment. My sculptures are usually psychological portraits of people I personally know.”

For someone who wanted to grow up to be a nurse and who spent 10 years as a teacher, Artist Sofie Muller produces surprisingly mysterious and often sad-impressioned art. There are stark scenes of a lone individual, head hung low, obvious but hidden pain. Her sculptures and images exude emotion and force it upon the viewer, conjuring up a need to respond but without the knowledge of how to do so. Amidst the tension and discomfort of the scene, there is also empathy. All of us can relate to the deep message in her art.

Born in Belgium, Muller comes from a family with a rich artistic heritage; her parents were antique dealers who had a large collection of 17th century paintings. They wove artistic culture into Muller's childhood, spending much time in museums and allowing Muller to attend an all-art school over the traditional high school.

Sofie Muller, whose recent collection of work titled Brandt, always knew she needed to be an artist. Strangely, she went a different direction first and worked as a teacher. It was only five years ago that she decided to pursue her art full-time. Working from her studio in Ghent, Belgium, she creates patinated bronze sculptures that capture the complexity of the human psyche. One of the sculptures is of a boy dragging his burned head against the wall. Through that, the artists depicts a deep message; the act of trying to erase the past, while leaving behind a clear mark of it.



It is a collection she says was partly inspired by the novel *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, which tells the story of a future society intent on censoring ideas and suppressing thought by burning all the books. The idea of a dystopian destination feels near in her work and communicates the artist's view on the different seasons of development. Her choice of medium—hardened, burnished bronze softened to sculpt and depict equally soft and hardened humanity—is telling.

Muller also offers an interesting sculpture through the one titled, "Clarysse." The girl sits on top of a burnt desk and looks as though she has just experienced that blackout, or mental void, known in the world of psychology to be brought on by trauma. It also alludes to the blackout of information characteristic of the novel that inspired her work. Drawing

from the ironic inspiration of suppressed critical thought, Muller invites you to embrace it, encouraging the viewer to ask, "What does this mean to me and why?"

In addition to the sculptures, Muller also has an array of "smoke drawings." Each related to the sculptures, they are produced using the smoke of burning wood, a unique choice that nods to the prevailing theme of destruction.

Sofie Muller is a thought-provoking and honest artist who harnesses in her work the same quality she admires in others: "My idols know how to grasp life to the fullest, with all its beautiful and less beautiful sides."

Her latest collection is on display at the Galerie Martin Kudlek. You can find more about her at www.sofiemuller.be



A Conversation with Sofie Muller

“A good work of art, a good book or a piece of music hits you right between the eyes and in the heart! And that’s what they are supposed to do.”

As a child, what did you want to become?

As a little girl, I dreamed of becoming a nurse. Fortunate enough for society, that plan never happened. Patience isn’t exactly my strongest feature. I was 15 when it became crystal clear to me that my future definitely lay in art. That’s why I chose to attend a special art school instead of a regular high school. And I never looked back. It was as if a new world opened up to me. I played my part as well, as a teacher, for more than ten years. But five years ago, I choose to focus solely on my career and am now a full-time artist.

In which town did you grow up?

I was born in Sint-Niklaas and raised nearby in Lokeren, East-Flanders in Belgium. For the past 15 years, Ghent has been my home.

Do you think your background has influenced the way your artwork has developed? If so, what specific element in your background is most pervasive in influencing your current artistic style?

Definitely! I was born in a family of antique dealers; three generations of art collectors and merchants. Growing up, I was surrounded by art and antiques, even masterpieces of Bruegel, Frans Snyders, David Teniers, Niklaus Weckmann, James Ensor, Gustaaf Van De Woestijne, etc, because my father specialized in 17th century painting and sculpture from the 15th and 16th century. Art and images have played an important role in my life from very early on in my childhood.

What inspires you as an artist?

The people surrounding me. Very often my inspiration comes from my direct environment. My sculptures are usually psychological portraits of people I personally know. But naturally, once they are realized they transcend the anecdotal and get a more universal meaning.



In which way do you consider yourself an innovative creator?

I don't consider my work to be innovative. One thing is sure: my artwork is everything but trendy and fashionable. Partly because of its material form, the bronze and subdued patina, but even more so because it digs into something much deeper: the human aspect, the psychology of the human being, that I mentioned before. And that's something you only seldom run across in contemporary art.

Which basic elements of creativity did your family teach you?

My parents gifted me and my brothers with an overdose of culture. Every trip or travel was devoted to art and antiques. And it paid off. All three of us found our way in an artistic direction. My youngest brother, Jan, succeeded my father in his antique business; my other brother, Bert, is an architect; and then, of course, there's me, working as a professional visual artist. But despite their strong interest for culture and aesthetics, all things contemporary in art are completely strange to my parents. So today, our roles are turned around and I'm the one who tries to introduce them to new artists.

How did you get the idea for your most recent collection of work?

The starting point for this exhibition is my personal confrontation with the phenomenon of blackouts, the great impact of uncertainty,

resistance and doubt among young people during the adolescent years. I connected it to Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*, in which he sketches a dystopian world in which every critical thought is suppressed.

In which way do you choose materials for making your artwork? Do different materials allow you to express a different type of emotional dimension in your artwork? If so, how would you describe what each material does for the emotional dimension in your artwork?

The title 'Brandt' also refers to the name of one of my sculptures who is rubbing his partially burned wooden head against the wall, leaving a dark trail of charcoal behind. With this act he tries to erase the past, while simultaneously leaving a clear trace behind. So yes, I tend to play around with the meaning and connotations of materials and words, on both a physical and semantic level.

Do you have a favorite artist/sculptor yourself?

Louise Bourgeois. She is, in fact, the mother of many young artists.

Are you ever afraid you will run out of inspiration and creativity in your job?

Here's to hoping that will never happen, but currently it's not something I'm worried about. I have determined what I want to realize during the coming year and which direction to follow.

What do you hope to communicate through or what people will learn upon seeing your recent collection of work?

I want people to run into themselves. The best compliment for me as an artist is that people start to think and reflect about life, about their situation and that of their fellow man after seeing my work. And they often do.

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What is the most difficult aspect of your job?

The unstructured nature of it. As an artist, you always work towards a certain goal, be it an idea, an artwork or a specific exhibition. There's always a given endpoint. So sometimes you have to go into overdrive to meet a deadline. And once everything is finished, you're confronted with letting everything go and are left facing the void, the infamous 'black hole.' Every single work is a new beginning. Every single time you have to start again from scratch and so that whole cycle begins again. This is something that can sometimes weigh down on me.

What is the most fun part of your job?

The actual process of execution. The drawing, the sculpting . . . those secluded moments in the studio when you can really get into the material and enter a state of complete concentration. But contact with people is essential as well. I need both of those opposites. The least pleasant part of this job is all the paperwork that comes along with.

How do you expect your way of creating art to change in the future?

I honestly have no idea. I know on what I will focus during the coming year, but after that? Who knows . . .?

Do you embrace the changes in the art industry regarding social media and technology influences?

Personally, I have definitely not embraced the new technology, such as 3D printing, etc. The control over the total creative process and the actual execution is still far too important for me. The distinct visibility of that personal touch, the literal and symbolic 'writing of the artist' is, in fact, very important in my work. That is something you simply cannot obtain when you leave your work behind into the hands of assistants or machinery.



What do you consider to be your greatest masterpiece?

Talk about a difficult question! I actually have a close personal relationship with most of my sculptures because they are a kind of portrait of my loved ones. But some of them are just a bit more precious to me because they have such a specific meaning to me, such as 'Elza' or 'Anna,' which are respectively portraits of my late grandmother and my daughter.

Do you have any plans for future masterpieces?

Currently, I'm working on a sculpture for a refugee house for women. I'm very excited about this one and hope that the women who are temporarily staying there will also understand the work, that it will really help them during their stay.

I'm also really looking forward to my collaboration with the Indian Mithu Sen. The plan is to literally form a bridge between India and Belgium during Europalia and connect our two cultures. The ideas and enthusiasm to work there are already present, but we are still looking for a suitable location.

Do you have any preferences for an artist and/or for creators of artistic work?

Personally, there are actually a lot of women in my top list of artists, directors and writers. They often seem better capable of getting into the deeper levels and subtle sensibilities of life. Just look at Marina Abramovic, Marlene Dumas, Nalini Malani, Nathalie Djurberg, Berlinde

De Bruyckere, Jane Campion, Julie Miranda, Sonja Wyss, Sofia Coppola, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. etc. Of course, there are also many male authors whose work completely baffles me: Gerard Richter, Michael Borremans, Thierry De Cordier, Dirk Braeckman, Anish Kapoor, Wim Mertens, Philip Glass, Henryk Gorecki, Akram Khan, and others.

This past summer I had the opportunity to work with the Belgian novelist and poet, Bart Moeyaert, and truth be told: the sensitivity in his work and poetry deeply touched me.

The world of fashion, design and chefs is something completely strange to me. My house is filled with antiques, vintage furniture and found or recycled objects. I always wear the same type of – also very often vintage – clothing: long skirts and wide trousers. And I rarely go to haute-cuisine restaurants. Extreme luxury, fancy hotels and design simply don't interest me much.

If so, why is that? What special quality do you like in their work or personality?

My idols know how to grasp life to the fullest, with all its beautiful and less beautiful sides.

In which way do you think there is a parallel in the artwork you create and composers who create a piece of music?

They are very similar. A good work of art, a good book or a piece of music hits you right between the eyes and in the heart! And that's what they are supposed to do, there is no need for theoretical discourse. Whether you listen to 'Symphonie No. 3' by Henryk Gorecki or you enter the 'Red Room' by Louise Bourgeois, you simply get shivers running down your spine. The physical experience of art can be tremendous and cathartic. And the memory of it can be something you carry along with you for days, sometimes even weeks. That's when you realize that art can really make you relativize everything, that art can actually heal. Art can reflect on the essence of life.

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Do you aspire to collaborate with a creator from another creative or innovative discipline?

So far, that hasn't happened yet. But I have had regular contact with the Indian artist, Mithu Sen, for some time now. The mutual interest arose after some connoisseurs noted us on the formal and intrinsic similarities in our work. And they were right. It only took us one conversation to prove we do have a similar professional approach and take on things, so we decided to let our artistic paths intertwine in the near future by means of a shared project.

Do you follow any philosophical or psychological approach in creating your art?

I have a particularly strong interest in psychology, psychoanalysis and the way the mind works. So that's why I regularly read articles and books about those topics. The power and influence of meditation is something I already mentioned and value much.

What is your favorite building in the world and why?

I just came back from Cologne and had the opportunity to visit the Kolumba Museum by Peter Zumthor. Magnificent! Something to leave you speechless!

What is your favorite hotel and why?

I'm more into a Bed & Breakfast, because you're actually welcomed into people's own home. The hospitality that some people display is simply astonishing! My favorite spot is Domaine de Cyclone, a very authentic place run by the charming Denise Petitot in Baron, l'Oise, just 40 km outside of Paris.



What would be your ideal home and why?

I'm fortunate enough to be living in my actual dream house: an 18th century mansion in the center of Ghent. We're still anywhere but finished renovating it. It will be another life project, I guess. Maybe a house abroad? A country retreat in France or Italy does seem very appealing, especially since we've had an extremely cold winter in Belgium. Everyone yearns for the sun. If this is a harbinger for future winters, I definitely want to flee.

What would be the ideal location for creating your art?

Alternation of location works best for me. I prefer to work in my studio in my own house, where I feel most at home. But sometimes I do need to take a short break away from it by means of a short residence, a retreat or travel. I have found myself to be more open to new influences during those moments and of course, those can be triggering. The

silence or meditation not only helps to bring me deeper within myself, but I also retrieve extremely interesting ideas from it. The variety is important to me. I'm not a person who can lead a very structured life, on the contrary.

Do you have a goal that you like to reach with your artwork?

Not really, no. We'll see. I have found my way, and I'll dedicate my life to it. And I also get a lot in return.

Do you have any dreams for the future, professionally and/or personally?

Everything is going well, both in my professional and personal life. Here's to hoping that there doesn't lay too much misfortune ahead of us.