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Lucia Claudia Fiorella

Relics of Trees and Angels: J. M. Coetzee, Zbigniew Herbert, and Berlinde De Bruyckere at the Venice Biennale

Abstract I: La scultrice belga Berlinde De Bruyckere esplora i corpi in stati liminali tra vita e morte, fondendo forme umane, animali e vegetali per esporre la loro condizione comune di sofferenza e decadenza. Nel 2013 ha rappresentato il Belgio alla Biennale di Venezia con *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood, 2012-2013*, a cura di, J. M. Coetzee. Undici anni dopo è tornata a Venezia con una mostra collaterale della Biennale 2024, *City of Refuge III*, un insieme di installazioni che evocano catastrofi e traumi collettivi. Adottando un approccio intermediale, questo contributo indaga le influenze letterarie alla base di queste esposizioni, mettendo in luce il ruolo ancora poco esplorato di Coetzee e di Zbigniew Herbert nella formazione dell'estetica e della visione etica di De Bruyckere.

Abstract II: Belgian sculptor Berlinde De Bruyckere explores bodies in liminal states between life and death, fusing human, animal, and vegetal forms to expose their shared condition of suffering and decay. In 2013 she represented Belgium at the Venice Biennale with *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood, 2012-2013*, curated by J. M. Coetzee. Eleven years later she returned to Venice with a side show part of the 2024 Biennale with *City of Refuge III*, a set of installations evoking catastrophe and collective trauma. Adopting an intermedial approach, this paper investigates the literary influences behind these exhibitions, highlighting the underexplored role of Coetzee and Zbigniew Herbert in shaping De Bruyckere's aesthetics and ethical vision.

Keywords: Berlinde De Bruyckere, J. M. Coetzee, Zbigniew Herbert, Venice Art Biennial.

1. A Spiritual Affinity: *We Are All Flesh* (2013)

Berlinde De Bruyckere is one of the most acclaimed sculptresses on the art scene today. A Flemish artist, born and living in Ghent, she was the daughter of a butcher, whose profession largely impacted her imagination. Dead horses, fowls and deer, their hair, skins and bones, as well as emaciated, disfigured human figures, recur frequently throughout her work, characterised by a fascination with death and agonising bodies fed by centuries of Catholic iconography. Soft wax, horse skin and hair, fabric, leather and wood are among the 'feminine' materials she uses, set against the 'masculine' qualities of marble and stone – no-

bler, durable substances for admirable bodies. The effect of fleshiness, decay and decomposition is attained by colouring the several layers of wax using the same palette of the human body – a palette which is strongly reminiscent of the pinks and reds of late Renaissance, Baroque painting. Yet, what distinguishes her art from a macabre musing on corpses of all sorts is a form of secular compassion which makes use of Christian imagery to broaden the scope of the pitiful from humans to animals and plants.

Active since the 1980s, when she primarily focused on building cage structures, De Bruyckere gained international recognition with her first participation in a Venice Biennale, in 2003, when she exhibited the sculpture of a crouching horse, *K36* or *The Black Horse* – extraordinarily realistic but unnervingly devoid of eyes or genitalia. She continued working on horse figures, as well as on the human body – headless, maimed, deformed – throughout the 2010s, also exploring tree trunks and animal hides in her experimentation. These twisted, skewered, intersected, tortured, sometimes barely recognizable bodies demand and obtain a level of attention that instantly turns into a plea for assistance. De Bruyckere's aesthetics of the abject, despicable body, and her mute call for responsibility, is strikingly close to J. M. Coetzee's, whose work is traversed by the same concerns – as it is evidenced, just to mention the best-known examples, by the figure of the academic devoting his days to burying the carcasses of stray dogs in *Disgrace* (1999b); or by the Magistrate bestowing a sensual care on the brutalised body of the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980); or by Marijana, the Serbian nurse, attending her amputee patient in *Slow Man* (2005). Coetzee himself recognised the prominence of the question of the suffering body in his narrative as early as 1992, in a now widely quoted passage:

> If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not "that which is not," and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. [...] And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable (Coetzee 1992: 248).

Coetzee's long-standing concern with the suffering of all living beings has anticipated issues that have become crucial in post-humanist thinking, questioning human responsibility for it, and human capacity to respond to it sympathetically. Therefore, the title chosen by De Bruyckere for their first joint collaboration, the art book *We Are All Flesh* (2013), even though originally designating an earlier exhibition of her works (De Bruyckere & Giordano 2009), perfectly encapsulates their shared preoccupation with the disturbing reality of pain and death. De Bruyckere had approached him as a devotee to an internationally renowned novelist whom she considered "a soul mate" (De Bruyckere & Coetzee 2013c: 32) working in a parallel world; she had dedicated a sculpture to him on his seventieth birthday in 2010.

We Are All Flesh comprises detail shots of De Bruyckere's art pieces and numbered extracts from Coetzee's novels selected by her. Both pictures and writing are fragments: they represent only a part of their respective, pre-existing wholes. The connection is not immediate nor straightforward: it is left to readers to determine the nature of their relation. Readers

are left wondering about the identity of the narrative voices, the context of their speech, the nature of their predicament; likewise, they are to decide whether the pictures they are observing reproduce human, animal, or plant features, as it happens with the series of deer antlers, which may look like tree branches or human bones.

The book (35 pictures and 113 prose passages) is organised in five unequal sections introduced by parenthetical, lowercase captions. The narrative, which constitutes the greater part of the work, is interspersed with images; sometimes just one picture, as if it were a pause in speech, other times a number of them, as if they took their turn to communicate. Some pages are left completely blank, as if it were not possible to reply; others present very little writing standing out from a blank space which serves as a pedestal for words. *We Are All Flesh* is arranged according to a visual, synchronic pattern which relies on the semantics of blanks: for example, a single line at the top of the page conveys the idea of unfinishedness, whereas a line at the bottom suggests something above has gone missing; the central position, or framing, is commonplace, and it is never used. Pictures do relate to narrative cues, as it happens on pages 46-47, where a sentence from *Boyhood* (1997), describing how the protagonist feels exposed and ashamed as he goes through puberty, is associated with the picture of what could be a mollusc or a snail deprived of its shell (*Unintentionally Keloid*, *2011*); or, on pages 16-17, in an excerpt from *Age of Iron* (1990), Elizabeth Curren's musings and longing for her mother's body is responded to by the magnified detail of a piece of delicately stitched skin, where, possibly, birth has occurred (*Lingam II*, *2012*); or again, on pages 106-107, a punched torso on the left (*Feminine Habitat*, *2008*) is paired with a single line from *Age of Iron* at the top of the page ("These people can take many blows, but I, I am fragile as a butterfly"). Perhaps, the most obvious correspondence between writing and picture is found on pages 116-117: a long passage from *Boyhood* describing how the young protagonist is both repelled and darkly fascinated by the slaughtering of sheep is combined with the picture of what looks like entrails laid down in a padded crib, as it were a *Deposizione* or a *Pietà* – although admittedly a disturbing version of it (*Inside Me II*, *2010-2011*). Surely De Bruyckere is strongly reminiscent of Baroque painting and sculpture, from which she derives the poses and colours for her bodies. Baroque suggestions are also noticeable in De Bruyckere's use of vitrines and glass display cases to host the remnants of her bodies, as in the front cover picture, featuring some sort of relic shrine in the foreground.

2. *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood* (2013)

The origin and nature of De Bruyckere and Coetzee's collaboration in the *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood* installation have been thoroughly investigated by Kusek and Szymański (2015), whose main objective was to ascertain the role of the writer in that partnership and the generic status of the book of the same name which was published as a sort of catalogue for the Belgian Pavilion of the 2013 Venice Biennale.

In September 2012, De Bruyckere was selected to represent her country at the Venice Art Biennial the following year. In accordance with custom, the artist was to choose her curator to see her through the working process and help her making artistic choices. She immediately wrote to Coetzee asking him to be her curator but then requalifying his prospective role: "not to help make any decisions, but as a source of inspiration" (De Bruyckere & Coetzee 2013c:

29). By doing so, she cast him in the role of her Muse; she asked for a new text, something that he thought might be related to her work, 'a parallel text' that could be later published in the catalogue of the Belgian Pavilion. Coetzee replied on the same day, sending her a story that had not appeared in print yet, "The Old Woman and the Cats" (2013a). As observed by Kusek and Szymański, the story may well be one of Costello's lessons (2015: 23) – Costello being the female *alter ego* and protagonist of Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), featuring an elderly novelist and her musings about the moral obligations humans have towards animals: in "The Old Woman and the Cats", Costello has retired to a small Spanish town and takes care of feral cats and a retarded man. The story is given from the skeptical point of view of her son John (a compelling form of authorial doubling), who visits his mother in an attempt of reestablishing a connection with her, only to find himself dragged into philosophical (Levinasian) debates over the moral authority of the face of the Other – be it human or animal. Coetzee's story, as well as the letters aforementioned, are now included in *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood* (2013c), the publication serving as a catalogue for the exhibition.

After a few weeks De Bruyckere replied with a long letter, claiming that the narrative had inspired her in a profound way; yet, according to Kusek and Szymański, there is no evidence of a direct influence on her project for the Venice Biennial, neither in the correspondence nor in the exhibited installation (2015: 26) – but this is a comment the artist had already anticipated in her letters, acknowledging there were no literal references to Coetzee's story (De Bruyckere & Coetzee 2013c: 32). In fact, De Bruyckere seems to have been developing a former idea she had of working on a tree form. Initially, she had thought to install some sort of undergrowth in the Pavilion, which she calls *Kreupelhout (Cripplewood)* – and it is for this earlier version of her project that Coetzee penned a specific short piece which was displayed in the vestibule of the Pavilion and is now included in the catalogue. Kusek and Szymański refer to it very briefly as "a lexicographic analysis of the term and its various meanings" (2015: 27) but they do not offer any further comment on it. Yet, I believe this text encapsulates Coetzee's understanding of De Bruyckere's project, focusing on the trope of a dormant, abortive life, and its Ovidian overtones – a concept which is arguably crucial to the Cripplewood art piece and its performative nature, as I am going to contend. In his signature concise, objective, speculative style, Coetzee writes:

> Cripplewood is not deadwood. Deadwood: in the mythology of the American West, the town of failed hopes where all trails end. Cripplewood, by contrast, is alive. Like all trees, the cripplewood tree aspires towards the sun, but something in its genes, some bad inheritance, some poison, twists its bones.
> The lexical tangle around *kreupelhout* – cripplewood – gnarlwood (gnarled, knurled, knarled are all the same words in variant forms):
> (1) *kreupel* – *kruipen* – creep – crouch – crutch (*kruk*)
> gnarl: gnarled, snarled (knotted)
> snarl: 1. a snare (trap); 2. a tangle, knot (of hair)
> The cripplewood tree that cannot straighten itself, that grows bent at a crouch; from whose limbs we get crutches for those who can only creep; a tree of knotted limbs, gnarled, snarled.

> Knots are of two kinds: the rational kind, creatures of human reason, that having been tied can be untied; and the kind that occur in nature, for which there is no loosening, no solution, no *oplossing*.
> *Cripple – kreupel*: a word no longer in polite use. Rejected as unclean, it is dismissed back from the world in which it came and to which it belongs, a world of hovels and tenements, of open drains and coal cellars and horse-drawn carts and starving dogs in the streets. An unwanted word, pressed back, repressed, buried. The cripplewood tree grows out of the buried past into our clean present, pushing its knotted fingers up through the grate / gate behind which we have shut it (Coetzee 2013b: 46).

The piece opens on a negative definition, as if it were countering a former explanation, making distinctions and then delving into the lexical analysis of the term. Yet, the tree has "bones", "hair", "fingers" and "limbs" suggesting an animal or human nature as well. The human element is then introduced with the use people ("we") make of it (cutting out crutches for human cripples); and then cripplewood (a literal translation preserving the sense of dire necessity and unaccomplishment of the Dutch term) becomes a metonymy for the physically impaired, addressing the issue of the repressed in a society failing to attend to the needs of the vulnerable and disadvantaged. These people are removed ("rejected", "dismissed", "unwanted", "buried", "shut"), and it is to this segregation practice that the first type of knot refers: the rational one, the one created by human beings (the "trap"), which has nothing to do with the second type, the knot of natural failures, sickness, and death[1].

Unlike the Costello story, which is essentially a lesson in moral philosophy – and, unsurprisingly, many moral philosophers have turned to Costello's cogitations[2] – this short piece manages to address moral issues by simply conjuring the idea of discrimination. Likewise, the sculpture De Bruyckere eventually installed in Venice raises the issue of responsiveness to other living beings' needs through the mere ostension of a pained body – a body which has seemingly undergone a sort of carnage. What the visitors saw in the pavilion, after their eyes became adjusted to darkness, was a giant elm-tree trunk, lying horizontally, maimed and beheaded, its branches alongside as if they were human limbs (fig. 1). The human likeness is strengthened by the fact that these branches are painted the pinks and reds of human skin and flesh, and they are braced by supports and swathed in bandages (fig. 2). And of course, bandaging means drawing attention to the wound and at the same time hiding it; raising the issue of harm but also indicating the path to healing. The unsettling experience of observing an object whose nature is unclear – and therefore literally grotesque, just like Coetzee's cripplewood is grotesque, "pushing its knotted fin-

[1] Yet, humans are also capable of tying other knots, meant to sustain and promote life, which Coetzee alludes to when writing about Japanese gardeners in his last letter included in the catalogue (De Bruyckere & Coetzee 2013c: 51).

[2] The subtitle of *Elizabeth Costello* is *Eight Lessons*, but the Costello character actually originated earlier, *in The Lives of Animals* (1999a), a volume edited by Amy Gutmann and comprising a contribution from bioethicist Peter Singer, who also edited, with Anton Leist, a collection focusing on the philosophical dimension of Coetzee's work (2010). Other philosophers who thoroughly engaged with Coetzee's writings are Stephen Mulhall (2009) and Jan Wilm (2016).

gers up through the grate" – is then amplified by the realization that the work is not wood but a painted wax cast simulating both arboreal and human features: a feat Alloa beautifully describes as "an almost alchemical transmutation of matter, replacing the wood of this *objet trouvé* with a much more fleeting substance" highlighting "the mass's frailty through the use of wax" (2014: 205). Likewise, in an influential review of the Biennial, art critic Buchloh praised *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood, 2012-2013* as "the embodiment of the spectacularised uncanny par excellence" (2013: 316) representing the ecological ruin caused by human misuse of the environment.

Neither Coetzee nor De Bruyckere address ecological issues in the correspondence produced in the catalogue, but the art piece certainly affords Buchloh's interpretation – and anyway, once it is given to the world, any work of art is subjected to its audience's evaluations despite its creators' original intentions. This is the reason why I would argue that Kusek and Szymański's evaluation of Coetzee and De Bruyckere's collaboration is flawed by the expectation of a literal influence of the writer on the artist, which leads them to suggest that the latter merely exploited the association of her name with the Nobel Prize-awarded author[3]. They assumed that De Bruyckere would indeed "translate Coetzee's piece into her sculpture" (2015: 26) just as she had written in her letter dated 9 February 2013 (De Bruyckere & Coetzee 2013c: 45). They point out how she ignored his suggestions about Saint Sebastian, Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne*, Zbigniew Herbert's "Apollo and Marsyas" as well as his doubts about the combination of steel and wax in her installation (Kusek & Szymański 2015: 27). Yet, despite one's pronouncements, the creation of an artwork – be it visual or verbal – entails perpetual amendments, adaptations, and on occasion, radical restructuring of the preliminary designs due to several reasons. De Bruyckere, for example, mentions severe technical difficulties as well as new ideas imposing on her mind (notably, one central sculpture rather than a multipart installation scattered all over the pavilion; De Bruyckere & Coetzee 2013c: 41). It is probably true, as Kusek and Szymański contend, that the second collaboration between De Bruyckere and Coetzee did not meet all parties' expectations, but this cannot be considered evidence of bad faith on the artist's part; and there are other, hitherto unnoticed, aspects of the installation that can be traced back to the writer's suggestions. In fact, besides contributing the *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood* piece, Coetzee played a crucial role in bringing the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert to her attention – and it is to Herbert's influence on her work that I am now going to turn.

3. Zbigniew Herbert

De Bruyckere explicitly acknowledges the import of Coetzee's suggestion in a book published in 2021, *Angel's Throat*, serving as a catalogue for her exhibition of the same name (*Engelenkeel*, 2021a):

[3] "In what we are tempted to call a relationship of exploitation (as it is clearly De Bruyckere who profits from being associated with the major voice of contemporary literature), it is De Bruyckere's and not Coetzee's 'story' that is to be heard. As it was indeed *her* [our emphasis] piece that was shown during the 2013 Venice Biennial" (Kusek & Szymański 2015: 28).

> J. M. Coetzee sent me the poem 'Apollo and Marsyas' by Zbigniew Herbert during our collaboration on *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood, 2012-2013*. I never thought that seven years later this poem would inspire me to make a Marsyas sculpture, which brought me back to figuration and triggered me to read more of his work (De Bruyckere 2021b: 141).

The poem – apparently neglected but nonetheless included in *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood* – is a chilling, sardonic retelling of Ovid's version of the myth of Apollo and Marsyas in the *Metamorphoses* (as shown by Niżyńska, 2001); originally a narrative on the perils of human(like) hybris is turned by Herbert into a poignant reflection on the brutality of power in general and the atrocity of torture in particular. Just like many 16th and 17th century artists, when the myth enjoyed notable success, Herbert focuses on the second part of the story, with the god skinning the satyr alive as a punishment for daring to challenge him in a musical contest. Apollo has won because at the last moment, when they were tied, he has begun to sing as well as play the lyre, which the satyr could not do because he was playing a wind instrument. Despite his triumph, Apollo decides to take revenge on the loser by forcing him to do what he previously failed at, that is, singing – and sets to torture the wretch with his own hands. He ties the satyr to a tree, and Marsyas cries out in agony as he is reduced to one single wound and his internal organs are exposed to the gaze of the Arcadian people, all shedding tears for his plight. This is "The *real* duel of Apollo with Marsyas", writes Herbert in the stunning opening of his poem, referring to an antefact that is not given on the page because readers are presumed to be aware of it, as they "already know" (Herbert 2013: 48). It is not a contest between artists, but between a titanic state power and the individual (the dissident, the artist, the poet) culminating in the latter's demise:

> bound tight to a tree
> meticulously stripped of his skin
> Marsyas
> howls
> before the howl reaches his tall ears
> he reposes in the shadow of that howl
>
> shaken by a shudder of disgust
> Apollo is cleaning his instrument
>
> only seemingly
> is the voice of Marsyas
> monotonous
> and composed of a single vowel
> Aaa
>
> in reality
> Marsyas relates
> the inexhaustible
> wealth of his body (48).

There are no earthly creatures weeping for Marsyas in Herbert's poem, and Apollo, "cleaning his instrument" (not the lyre this time but a knife) feels only disgust for the satyr's howl, which he perceives as "monotonous". Yet, "in reality" (which reconnects with "the real duel" in the opening line), the victim's body is disclosing unexpected beauty to his tormentor's unsympathetic eyes:

> bald mountains of liver
> white ravines of aliment
> rustling forests of lung
> sweet hillocks of muscle (48).

This anatomical landscape – recalling, as Niżyńska has suggested (2001: 162), Ovid's pastoral setting – is profoundly disturbing as it is not naturally visible but only as a result of extreme brutality. Apollo's aestheticization of Marsyas's body is comparable to what a hunter or a butcher can appreciate when disembowelling their game. Yet, Apollo's savagery is not born out of a need to procure meat: it is exclusively an act of vengeance confirming the unpredictability of the gods.

Later, when he leaves the slaughtering site and walks along an idyllic path ornated with a box hedge (underlining the artificiality of his world) Apollo wonders whether "Marsyas's howling" will not originate a more "concrete" kind of art "some day". He is immediately served his answer:

> suddenly
> at his feet
> falls a petrified nightingale
>
> he looks back and sees
> that the hair of the tree to which
> Marsyas was fastened
> is white
>
> completely (48).

The suspicion that the cry of the flesh may be more powerful than the ethereal melody of the god is immediately confirmed by supernatural changes (the petrified nightingale, the whitened crown of the tree). Apollo's horrifying cruelty has turned to stone two key elements of the traditional *locus amoenus* (Niżyńska 2001: 162); they are now *sculptures on the ground*, the most concrete of the visual arts, with the likeness of the beauteous forms they once were.

Now, my thesis is that, although the Coetzee-De Bruyckere correspondence does not contain any trace of it – correspondence which, however, is not complete, as pointed out by Kusek and Szymański (2015: 25) – there is a strong possibility that the artist had this poem in mind while working on her project. To all effects, what rests on the ground of the pavilion is a half-scalped body, its exposed limbs mercifully wrapped in bandages and propped up

with cushions – a gesture that may recall the earthly creatures' pity in the myth. Incidentally, the tree as an instrument and therefore a metonymy of torture resonates with the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, which De Bruyckere frequently returns to in her letters. Furthermore, the fact that this very poem is recognised, retrospectively, as a crucial step in the artist's path (the return to figuration and deeper engagement with Herbert's poetry) supports the idea that the *Kreupelhout/Cripplewood* installation may well be an early, arboreal version of the subsequent animal and humanlike *Marsyas (2020)* (fig. 3).

Pictures of De Bruyckere's *Marsyas* are included in *Angel's Throat*, comprising other two poems by Herbert, both focusing on angels: "Preliminary Investigation of an Angel" (1969) and "The Seventh Angel" (1957). Herbert's influence is acknowledged from the very epigraph to the entire publication, citing the concluding lines of the former poem. Angels are a pervasive theme in European poetry after the Second World War, notably in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland, and especially in Herbert's first four collections of poems covering the 1950s and 1960s. Building on previous Polish scholarship, Pyczek (2010) has attempted a reconstruction of Herbert's angelology, which is based on the iconographic, rather than moral, archetype of the Judeo-Christian angel. Herbert's angels are recognizable as such by the fact that they have halos, feathered wings, are perfect, move between Heaven and Earth and are guardians of mankind – but in a very different sense from the radiant, protective presence of angels in Western post-Christian spirituality. His angels are impassive, even cruel, carrying out orders in an afterlife where there is not much difference between Heaven and Hell, but above all, no difference from life on Earth. Even in the afterlife God is absent, or rather, he is visible only "for those of 100 per cent pneuma" (from "Report from Paradise", Herbert 2007: 240): all the rest must be content with his lieutenants supervising operations with a bureaucratic efficiency strongly recalling post-World War II Soviet reality – a correlation that seems to be confirmed by the relative scarcity of angels in the poet's work from the 1970s onwards.

A particularly ambiguous and unsettling feature of Herbert's angels is their corporeality, clearly indicating their belonging to the terrestrial world. Angels snatch children from their mothers' arms, wear clogs, "sharpen their wings" (Herbert 2007: 26), and, in a disturbing suggestion of vampirism, even drink the poet's blood emptying his heart[4]. There are few exceptions to these bleak representations, and De Bruyckere has chosen precisely two of them, selecting widely different poems as for subject, tone, and contextual reference, whose (only) shared element is the reduction of the supernatural figure to more common, human features.

Yet, the humanisation of the angel depicted in the first poem included in *Angel's Throat*, "Preliminary Investigation of an Angel", offers very little solace, as the reader is projected in the darkest profundity of a torture chamber and forced to adopt the perspective of the perpetrators – the same strategy employed in "Apollo and Marsyas". After the first question, the innocent angel blushes, possibly realising what is going to follow:

[4] I'm here referring to the poems "At the Gate of the Valley", "Look", and "Seven Angels", all included in Herbert (2007).

the blood is helped on
with instruments and interrogations
with an iron ferrule
a slow fire
the limits of his body
are defined (Herbert 2021a: 39).

The first aim of torture is the reduction of the victim's person to their body, and this is precisely what happens in this poem, where the angel is given what is presumably an excruciatingly aching body. Yet, the poet never refers to this pain, as it is beyond his tormentors' perception – which obviously intensifies the chilling effect of the description:

after a few nights
the job is finished
the leather throat of the angel
is full of gluey agreement

how beautiful is the moment
when he falls on his knees
incarnate into guilt
saturated with contents (39).

The informal tone of "the job is finished" indicates a contemporary setting, whereas "the leather throat of the angel" (referenced in the title of De Bruyckere's publication) suggests that the angel has been reduced even further in the cosmic order, to the state of a dead animal. In tune with the aestheticization of suffering already noticed in "Apollo and Marsyas", the perpetrators find the angel's fall onto the ground visually attractive. To help his imminent confession, hesitating "between knocked-out teeth", "they hang him head downwards", like an animal carcass to be butchered:

from the hair of the angel
drops of wax run down
and shape on the floor
a simple prophecy (40).

These are the final lines of the poem, that De Bruyckere chose as the epigraph to her catalogue. According to Pyczek, Polish commentators of this poem were puzzled by its finale, and interpretations varied, some suggesting the angel's ultimate 'win'; and Pyczek himself hesitates (2010: 277-278). To me, the "simple prophecy" is a clear, sarcastic allusion to the fact that the "preliminary investigation" will not be followed by any further examination due to the highly predictable death of the angel (notably, a creature of light, as pointed out in the opening lines of the poem), melting on the floor like a wax candle – the most transparent symbol of the precariousness of human life, which is, first and foremost, a mortal life. Since her primary medium is wax, it is no wonder that De Bruyckere found this image so compel-

ling as to bring it into being: *Liggende – Arcangelo I, 2023* is a superb embodiment of angelic, human, and animal traits in a single form, knocked down, unequivocally lifeless, lying face down on a sepulchral base (fig. 4). A black equine hide cloaks the figure's torso and head, evolving into feathered wings at the bottom edges, from which the 'humanised' angel's bare calves and feet become visible – recalling Andrea Mantegna's *Dead Christ*'s. This sculpture was first exhibited in Zurich in 2023 in a solo show titled *A Simple Prophecy*, clearly quoting Herbert – even though this reference, to the best of my knowledge, has gone unnoticed.

As anticipated, the poem appearing right after "Preliminary Investigation", as if to emphasise the opposition, presents an entirely different scene. "The Seventh Angel" is the antiphrastic title (one of Herbert's distinctive features) of a poem describing an imperfect angel, and therefore an imperfect Heaven. The poem opens, just as noted for "Apollo and Marsyas", *in medias res*, highlighting a contrast:

> The seventh angel
> is completely different
> even his name is different
> Shemkel (Herbert 2021b: 44).

This name refers to the Jewish rather than the Christian tradition. Readers are then introduced to the other angels – in lines that Pyczek describes as an example of onomastic exoticism (2010: 278): Gabriel, Raphael, Azrael, Michael, Azrafael, Deadrael, all attending to lofty occupations ("upholder of the throne", "planet-driver", "hetman of the hosts", "interior decorator of the universe", Herbert 2021b: 44-45). Shemkel, instead,

> is black and nervous
> and has been fined many times
> for illegal import of sinners
>
> between the abyss
> and the heavens
> without a rest his feet go pit-a-pat
>
> his sense of dignity is non-existent
> and they only keep him in the squad
> out of consideration for the number seven
> but he is not like the others […]
>
> the Byzantine artists
> when they paint all seven
> reproduce Shemkel
> just like the rest
>
> because they suppose
> they might lapse into heresy

if they were to portray him
just as he is (44-45).

This idea of a foreign angel smuggling sinners into Heaven, who is fined repeatedly but eventually tolerated only to preserve a facade of flawlessness, reduces the celestial order and its regulations to the mundane level of local authorities prioritising their reputation while trying their best to keep the outcast at bay. The ironic distortion evidently calls into question the perfection of a Paradise discouraging compassion; it evokes the doctrine of universal salvation, very popular in the Orthodox world; and, by referencing the Byzantine painters, it gently mocks artists fearful of authority. De Bruyckere may have been thinking of Byzantine mosaics and their gilded background when she was fashioning *Sjemkel III* (2020), placed on a voluptuous golden blanket hanging on a wall (fig. 5). In this case – prior to the *Liggende-Arcangelo* sculptures, and before De Bruyckere's re-engagement with the human body – the artist evokes Herbert's odd angel by placing a dark-coloured wax cast of a bovine hide on the golden background, thereby elevating animal nature to the heavens[5].

4. *City of Refuge III* (2024)

In 2024 De Bruyckere was back in Venice with another exquisite show for the Biennale, this time as a collateral event hosted in the Abbey of S. Giorgio on the island of the same name. The separateness of the location – the island can only be reached by ferry – was certainly instrumental to direct visitors' attention to what they were going to experience, which would not have been possible in the hustle and bustle of the pavilions in the Biennale Gardens. The monumental architecture of the church and the spiritual setting greatly contributed to the sense of something sacred being revealed; and as churches have always been art as well as worship sites, artwork displayed there is consequently understood as a sort of sanctuary offering shelter to a distraught humanity.

The idea of a sanctuary was emphasised by the title of the exhibition, *City of Refuge III*, paying homage to a song by Nick Cave of the same name – as acknowledged on the website of De Bruyckere's agent Hauser & Wirth and reported on many other art websites, but the reference is never explored or explained; which is a pity, because the idea of a 'city of refuge', beyond its connection to the topic of the 2024 Biennale (*Foreigners Everywhere*), provides valuable insight for interpreting the whole S. Giorgio exhibition. The cities of refuge are mentioned in the Old Testament as a provision which offered temporary shelter and protection against blood revenge to those who had unintentionally committed murder (Spencer 2024). In his song, Nick Cave – an artist whose imagery is often Biblical – makes reference to a divine judgment and a sin that must be paid for with death ("You stand before your maker/ In a state of shame/Because your robes are covered in mud […] You better run

[5] Art historian Stijn Huijts, curator of the exhibition and contributing a critical essay to *Angel's Throat*, entirely misses Herbert's influence on this work, giving a different account for its inception (2021: 84); and in general, he prefers to quote from Paul Celan rather than Herbert, who is ignored throughout the whole piece. In her review of *Angel's Throat*, instead, Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans states "Herbert's poetry, and especially his view of the world, seems crucial for this book" (2022: 83), and then devotes a brief comment to the poems I have just analysed.

to the City of Refuge", Cave 1988). It is not difficult to note a connection between these Old Testament refugees and their modern counterparts, victims of wars, genocides, and environmental destruction.

Upon entering the church, the correlation was confirmed by the first figure the visitors encountered in the central navy: it was supposedly an archangel, as the title of the art piece indicates (*Arcangelo I , 2023-2024*), but what was on display was a human figure, bare-legged, bare-footed, its torso and head covered by a wax cast of a cow hide (fig.6). Heads never feature in De Bruyckere's artwork; as sites of individualising identities, they contrast with her poetics of universal suffering; similarly, her bodies are sexually indeterminate, as the artist is making a point on life in general, including animal and plant life. Placed on a high plinth, caught in a moment of imbalance as it is slightly tilting forward on its toes, the archangel suggests a transcendence made impossible by its weight, and obstructed by the encompassing tattered blanket[6]. Other two replicas were installed in the transept, held down on rusty metal supports which seemed to be the remnants of a wrecked vessel, hinting at a long-lost maritime disaster.

The idea of a maritime disaster was taken up again in the sacristy with the installation *City of Refuge I, II, III, 2023-2024*, a set of wax-cast tree trunks and metal supports arranged in a very precarious balance, just like the *Arcangeli*. Either cast there by the fury of the elements or gathered by survivors, this ensemble could not be called a shelter, and it was certainly not the city of refuge evoked by the title.

The exhibition then proceeded in the monastery galleries, displaying other cycles of works beyond the scope of this paper – except for the *Arcangelo Glass Domes IV and V 2023-2024*, which depicted the angels' slender, almost feminine feet in a posture clearly evocative of the Crucifix's legs and feet – until in the last room lay *Liggende-Arcangelo I, 2023*. If the visitor's progression in an exhibition is comparable to a narrative, then *Liggende-Arcangelo's* funereal posture at the very end of it seemed to put a tombstone on the possibility of transcendence evoked by the *Arcangeli* in the church. Yet, its beauty did offer that transcendence.

[6] As Huijts has noticed, *Arcangelo I* builds on De Bruyckere's 1990s blanket women cycle, a series of reclining figures under blankets, probably responding to the coeval humanitarian catastrophes in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. In these earlier works, though, the human figures' feet fully adhere to the ground, and the blankets are real ones, suggesting protection as well as suffocation (2021: 90).

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. Kreupelhout/Cripplewood, 2012-2013. Installation view at the Belgian pavilion, 55th Biennale di Venezia. Wax, leather, cotton, blankets, linen, epoxy, iron. H230 x 410x 1790 cm. Collection of Brook and Pam Smith. Photo: Mirjam Devriendt.

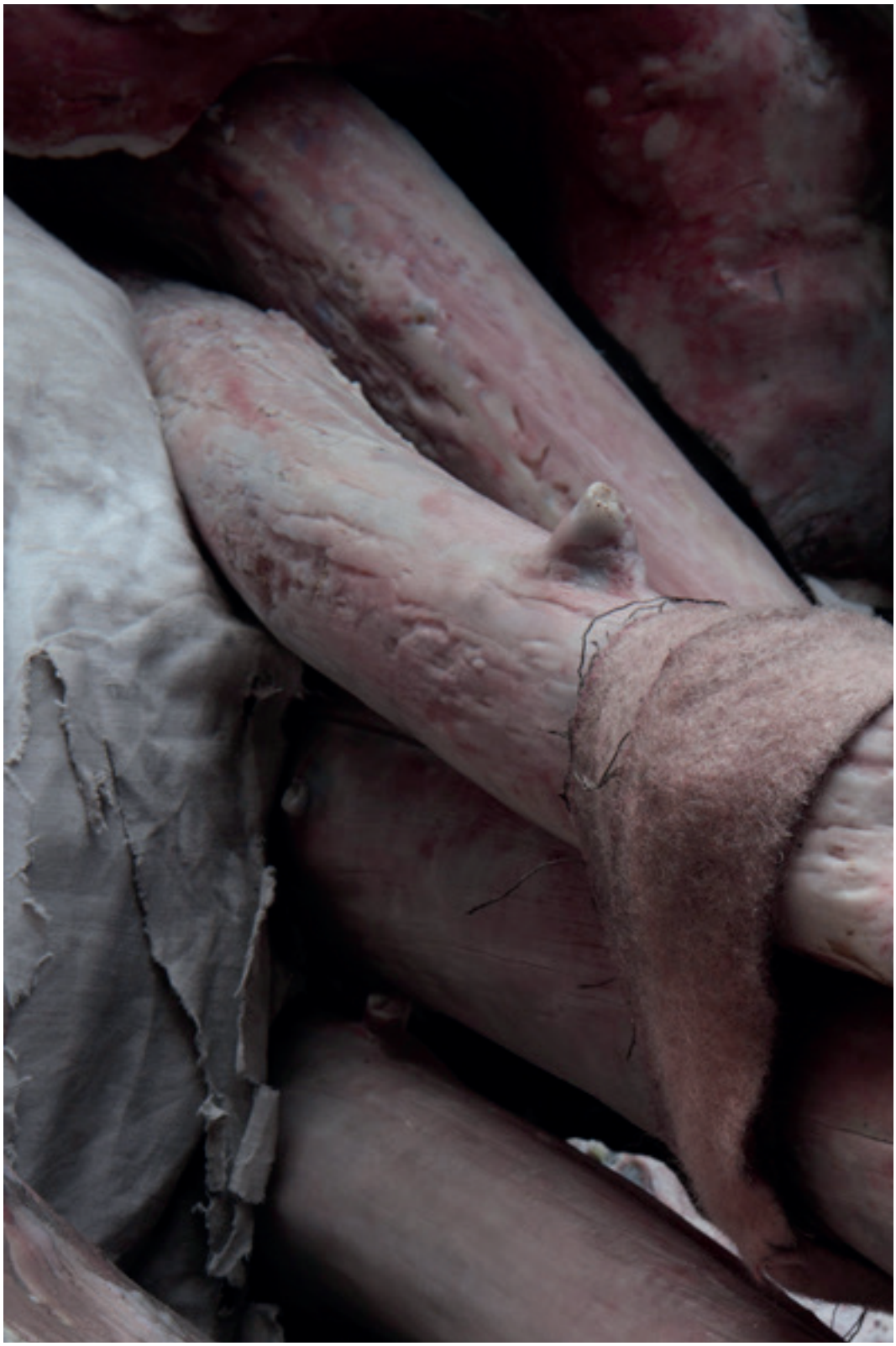

Figure 2. Kreupelhout/Cripplewood, 2012-2013 (detail). Wax, leather, cotton, blankets, linen, epoxy, iron. H230 x 410x 1790 cm. Collection of Brook and Pam Smith. Photo: Mirjam Devriendt.

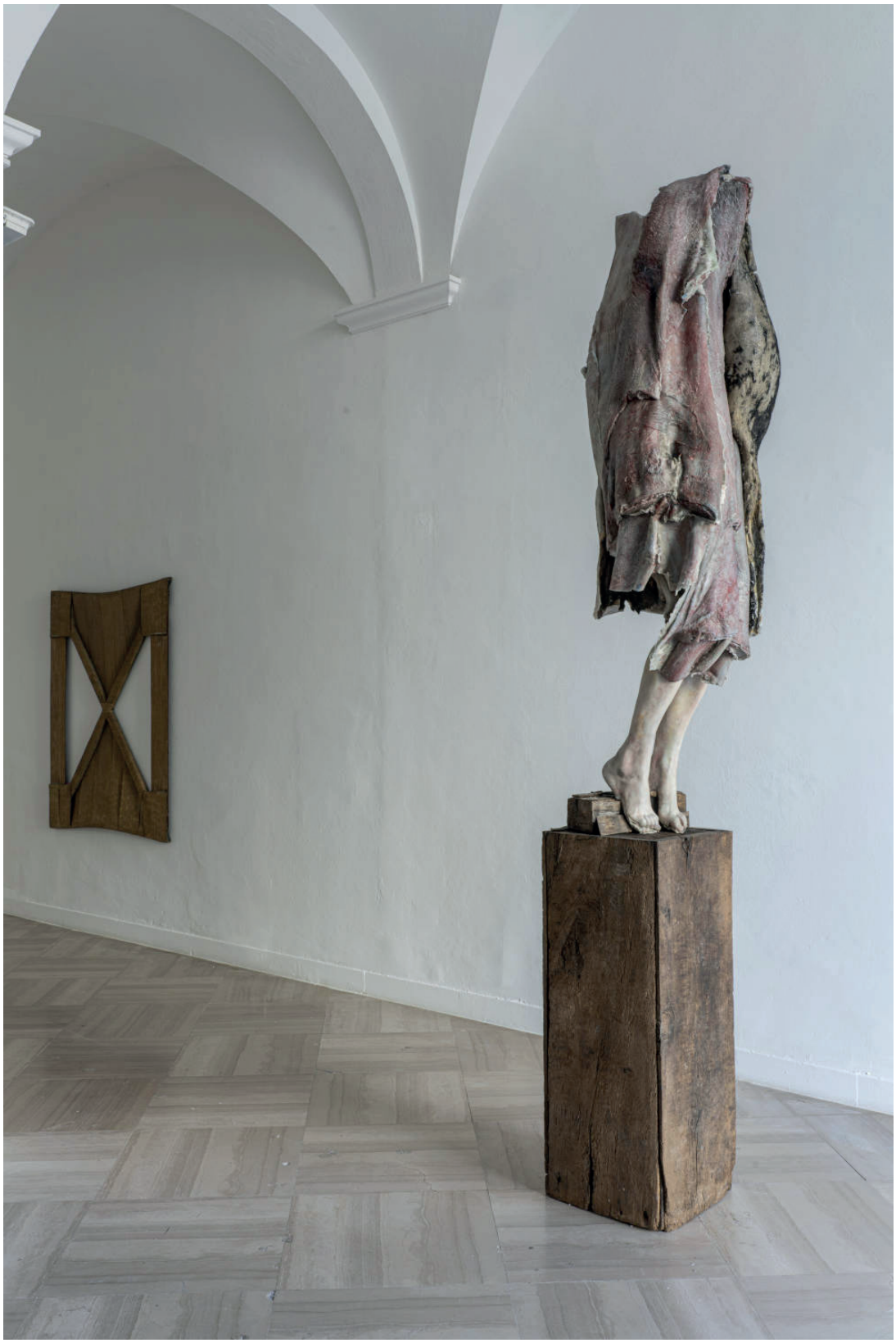

Figure 3. Marsyas, 2020. Wax, animal hair, wood, iron, epoxy. H 316 x 64 x 60 cm. Collection museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar, The Netherlands. Photo: Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio.

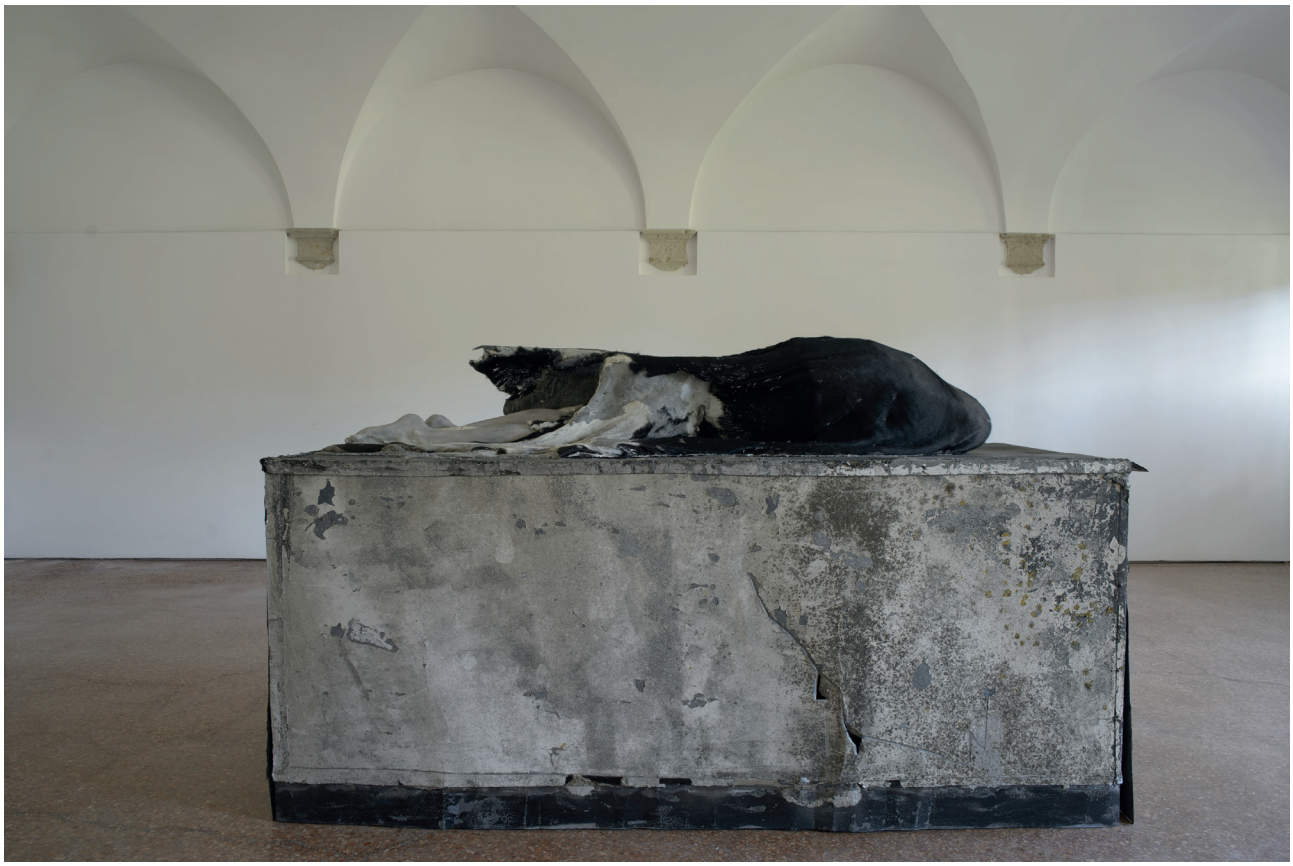

Figure 4. Liggende-Arcangelo I, 2022-2023. Installation view at Abbazia di San Giorgio Maggiore, 60th Biennale di Venezia. Wax, animal hair, textile, bitumen, linoleum, zinc, wood, iron, epoxy. H 146 x 256 x 102cm. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Mirjam Devriendt.

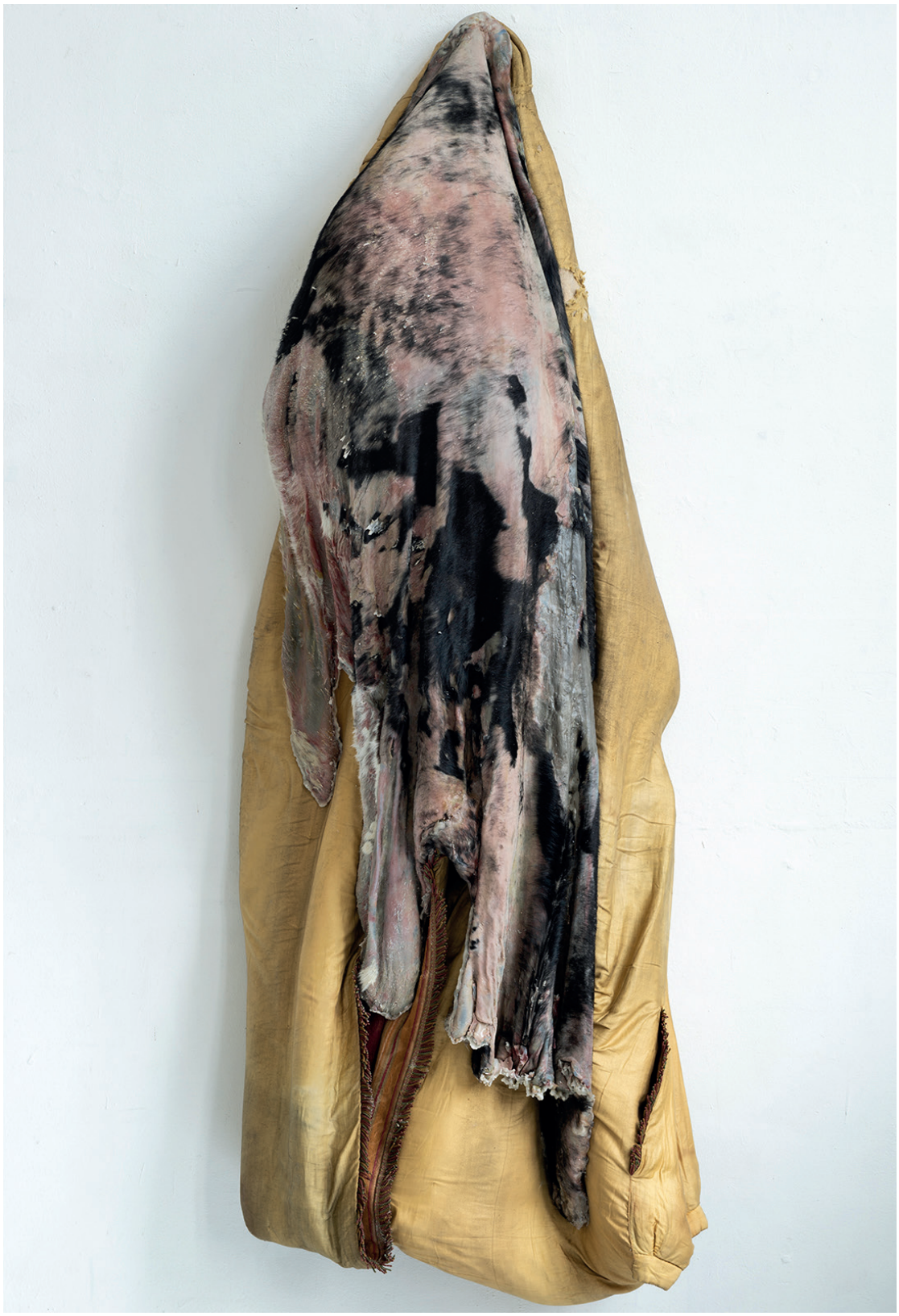

Figure 5. Sjemkel III, 2020. Wax, animal hair, silicone, textile, polyurethane, metal, epoxy. H 196 x 72 x 34 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Mirjam Devriendt

Figure 6. Arcangelo II (San Giorgio), 2023-2024. Installation view at Basilica di San Giorgio Maggiore, 60th Biennale di Venezia. H 254 x 84 x 80 cm. Wax, animal hair, silicone, iron, epoxy. Collection Flemish Community.

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Lucia Claudia Fiorella is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Udine, Italy. She specialised on the work of J. M. Coetzee (*Figure del Male nella narrativa di J. M. Coetzee,* ETS, 2006) and auto/biographical studies, especially autofiction (*Oltre il patto autobiografico. Da Barthes a Coetzee*, Artemide, 2020). Lucia also worked on travel literature, especially on narratives of polar expeditions in the early twentieth century; as a comparatist, she investigated depictions of madness in European literature and authored several articles on the intersections between literature and contemporary visual and performing arts.
lucia.fiorella@uniud.it