



Beyond a cabinet of curiosities

Juxtapositions, correspondences and interactions are explored in an innovative exhibition at MAS in Antwerp. Graz gallerist Gebhart Blazek is stimulated by a celebration of similarity

What have twenty, mainly Moroccan, carpets and textiles to do with El Greco, Francisco de Goya or Karl Grünling—or with Chinese stones and a coral head? What links a Catholic monstrance, a Japanese *boro* textile and a collection of votive candles with pre-Columbian shamanistic textile bundles and a black neolithic goddess from southeast Europe?

‘Not much’ is what the cabinet of curiosities would answer to such questions—while at the same time enjoying both the quality and the diversity of such singular artefacts. However, for art historian and curator Paul Vandebroek, who has worked for the last twelve years on the

of ways. Sometimes different materials with obvious stylistic or structural analogies result in fascinating correlations. In almost heavenly delicacy a couple of wonderful pieces of lacework pair with complementary fine white pieces of coral. Placed in between we find a sculpture by the British artist Tony Cragg, the perforated surface of which mirrors not only the material of the coral but also the interaction between the spaces and the substance of the textile, emphasising the contrast between the density of the material and the empty spaces.

Quite different are the apparent similarities between a picture by Karl Wilhelm Diefenbach and a Japanese *boro* textile. In the previous



2

It seems plausible that the crafted artwork and the natural structures could be the result of some related impulse

concept of ‘Encounters’, these objects are unified by much more than chance similarities.

In all, ninety-one objects from European and American public and private collections, of which more than twenty are carpets or textiles, have been gathered and will spend time together until 20 August 2017. In addition they will be silent witnesses to a series of 90-minute dance performances that will take place three times a day during the exhibition hours. Thus static contemplation of the artworks will counterpoint with dynamic movement and direct physicality, perhaps revealing the latent, potential energies within the artefacts.

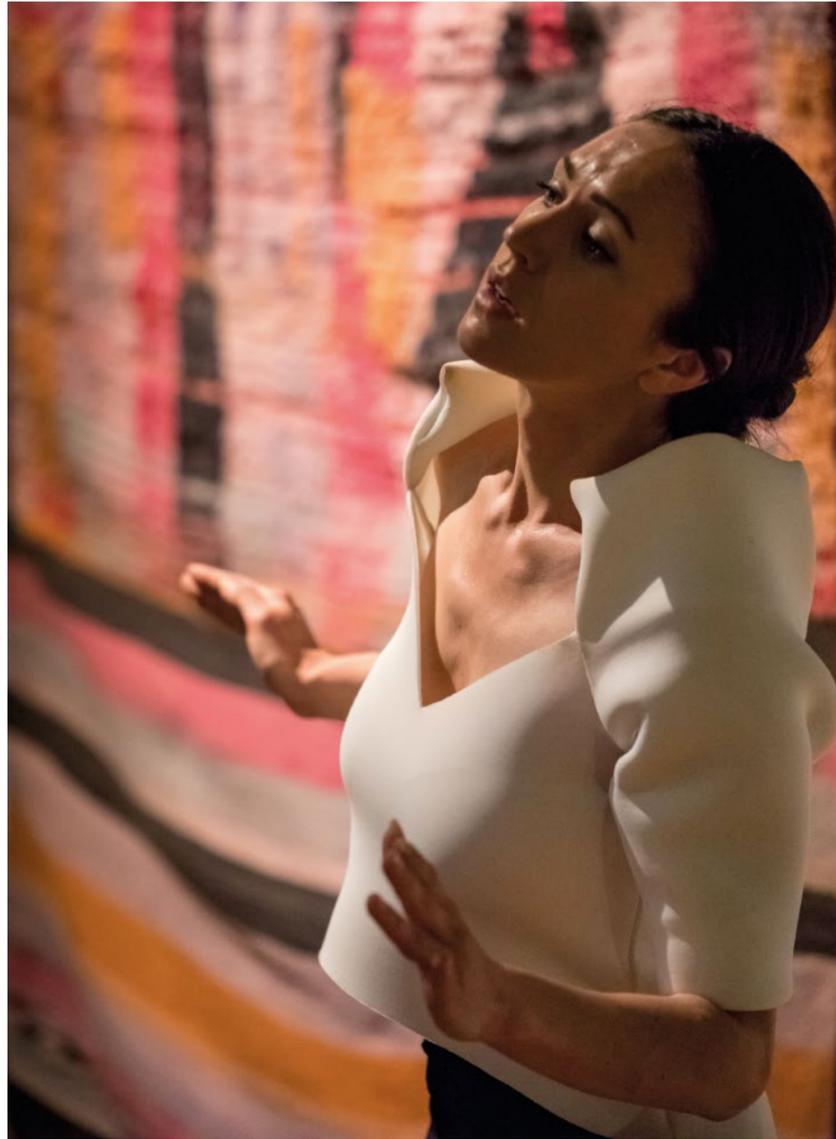
The exhibition is organised in groups of objects that correspond in a wide variety

group it seems plausible that the crafted artwork and the natural structures could be the result of some related impulse. But in this pairing, the analogies in composition and colouration can only be by chance. Indeed, the aspects of format and structure that interrelate are so striking that one might consider them being the result of a metaphysical big bang. It could be, however, that in presenting these pictures of dark beauty Mr Vandebroek is demonstrating not only a striking visual memory but also his mischievous humour.

A monstrance (a vessel to contain the Host, or other object of Catholic veneration) from Antwerp; a circular marble sculpture by Luc Verbeke; a radiating feather crown from the

1 The exhibition ‘Encounters’ at Museum aan de Stroom (MAS) in Antwerp, Belgium is concerned with the universal experience of art and includes a 90-minute dance performance twice a day

2 The allusion of shared forms highlighted by a modern ceramic sculpture and a 20th-century Houz carpet, eastern Morocco



3



4

3 A dancer performs in front of a Boujad carpet, Morocco, first half 20th century. Reinisch Contemporary, Graz

4 Ait Abdellah women's veil, Western Anti-Atlas, Morocco, early 20th century. Dip-dye and henna painting on a wool fabric, Gebhart Blazek Collection, Berber-Arts, Graz

5 A marble statue of a girl at contemplative prayer in front of a Mazanderan kilim, north Persia, 20th century from the Werner Weber Collection in Zurich, and a man's tunic, Peru, 400 BC-600 AD, MAS, Antwerp (AE.2000.0411)

6 Reliquary statue of St Philomena lying in front of a Rehamna Berber carpet, Morocco, eastern Anti Atlas, 20th century

Tapirapé region in Brazil; and an amethyst geode—seen together, they suggest a harmony between circular areas of high energy of either godly, artistic or simply natural origin. White motives seem to hover above the indigo ground of a Tunisian or Libyan *bakhnoug* textile, which is mirrored by a video on a loop showing slowly 'gliding' bioluminescent jellyfish.

It is probably not just because of a certain stylistic similarity that the entrance to the last room is formed by an enigmatic dreamscape from François de Nomé (previously known as Monsù Desiderio) and a stalagmite. After all, the 200,000-year-old stone circles of the Bruniquel Cave near Toulouse are considered to be among the oldest-known sites of human ritual.

Other groups in this dark and mystic room follow these motives. An abstract painting by Christophe Benys, a simple Nazca mantle from Peru and a similar plain but monumental Mazanderan kilim form a geometrically balanced, sombre foil to a kneeling white marble statue that rests in silent worship (5).

Photos: © Gebhart Blazek



5



6

Even more cathedral-like is the neighbouring reliquary statue of St Philomena lying in a glass sarcophagus under a Rehamna Berber carpet. In return, owing to its lighting, the carpet evokes the dignity of the stained glass windows of a gothic cathedral (6).

An international dance group directed by Pé Vermeersch strives to interact with and energise the enigmatic installations, presenting another layer of experience, providing commentary and explanation through movement. In concept, the exhibition aims to minimise the distraction of labels and long texts next to the objects in favour of a direct, intuitive experience of the visual presentation. That might be part of the reason that nearly twenty per cent of the exhibition is dedicated to tribal carpets and textiles. In these cultures carpets are traditionally the most important conveyors of visual imagery; and an intuitive, sometimes allusory stylistic language specific to Morocco created spontaneously in the act of weaving is seen as an important characteristic of weaving culture.

A small booklet guides the visitor through the exhibition, but for those wishing to delve deeper into the subject there is a 450-page English catalogue in which Paul Vandebroek describes the theory underlying the exhibition. Titled *A Glimpse of the Concealed. Body Intuition Art* and not 'Encounters About Art and Emotion' as per the exhibition, the author and publisher have created the book to exist outside and beyond the context of the show.

The groupings might seem speculative; adding a performance element may appear risky; however, the exhibition (if one can still use the term) explores artworks in ways that would be impossible within traditional forms of presentation. For some this may be difficult to digest. But to show different expressions of human creativity without separating well-known artists from lesser ones, without distinguishing between art and applied art, and by incorporating samples of the natural world and encouraging intuitive emotional interplay—this may well open up new doors of perception. ♡