Cabinets of *curiosity*

A solo show of Carolein Smit's ceramic sculptures at the V&A illustrates her fascination with the darker side of life. *Colin Martin* steps into her fairy tale world and discovers some Grimm stories

This summer the Dutch ceramic sculptor Carolein Smit has solo exhibitions taking place at three major European museums, which coincide with the publication of a monograph surveying her work since 1989. While studying at AKV St Joost, the School of Fine Art and Design in Breda, southern Netherlands, Smit specialised in graphics and lithography, before working as a painter and illustrator for a decade. Then in 1996, during a residency at the European Ceramic Work Centre (EWKC) in 's-Hertogenbosch, she underwent a Damascene conversion to clay.

Today, Smit's studio in Belgium resembles a 21st-century alchemist's laboratory. The technical description of her work: 'earthenware, hand-built, with moulded elements and coloured glazes and lustre' doesn't conjure up the intense emotional charge of her sculptures. There are few 'happy ever after' endings in her ceramic narratives; no besotted prince fits a discarded clay slipper onto the foot of a downtrodden drudge. The darker undercurrents in Smit's work owe more to folk stories by the Brothers Grimm than to Disney's altogether lighter adaptations. Her favourite fairy tale, Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen,* 1844, essentially narrates a struggle between good and evil. Smit describes herself as an atheist, but acknowledges the influence of her upbringing in the Catholic south of the Netherlands on her aesthetic.

ABOVE: *Foxy reading,* 2017
RIGHT: *Skeleton with little blue bird,* 2014

Images: Winnifried Limburg

THE DANCE OF THE DEAD

Darkness seeped through the windows at the evening preview of *Myth and Mortality: the fairy-tale world of Carolein Smit* at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Guests drifted among her cabinets of curiosity, as though in a febrile, surrealist dream. Her *Anatomical man with walking sticks*, 2014, recalls the engraved illustrations of dissected cadavers in Flemish anatomist Andreas Vesalius's book *On the fabric of the human body,* 1543. Like Pre-Raphaelite artist William Holman Hunt's *The Scapegoat,* 1854–1856, her closely observed *Drents moorland sheep,* 2017, is filled with detail. Her eviscerated *Hare on a cauliflower with knife and fork,* 2010, harks back to 17th-century Dutch still-life paintings of meat, fish, vegetables and fruit. The lustre-glazed knife and fork propped behind its forelegs might be construed as symbols of martyrdom, but in fact they also functioned as kiln supports during bisque-firing. The beseeching, jewel-encrusted fingers of her *Skeleton with little blue bird* (pictured above) hint at the faked remains of saints sold historically to believers.

One vitrine holds two white-glazed sculptures: *The white rider of the Apocalypse,* 2018, depicts the fourth rider, identified as Death, as a skeleton clinging to his emaciated, rearing horse. This new work signifies Smit's increasing preoccupation with boundaries between life and death; its base is covered with flora and fauna, symbolic of rebirth. The dark-blue painted wall behind is covered with her site-specific installation, *Death in Paradise*, 2018 (overleaf). It depicts a multitude of white-glazed, bas-relief figures in various stages of decomposition, performing a *danse macabre* or *totentanz*. This tonal contrast between light and dark has a graphic quality, reprising Smit's artistic training and referencing both 18th-century Wedgwood jasperware and early Renaissance painter Fra Angelico's depictions of heaven.

DARKNESS AND HUMOUR

Describing her sculptural practice during a museum workshop, Smit stated: 'I never make sketches before I start – I need it to be an adventure.' She usually works alone and 'loses' herself in the creative process. 'The highly detailed works allow my thoughts to wander and combine several things that sometimes are not very logical together but make sense in the end,' she explains. She isn't precious (avert your eyes, purist potters) about wedging her clay or formulating her own glazes, and still uses the same earthenware clay she initially used at EWKC. Spiralling the clay upwards to improve its stability during firing, she carefully builds up her sculptures on a wooden base plate. Her most time-consuming process is patiently making individual hairs or feathers, before carefully attaching them to sculpted figures to simulate fur or plumage.

'Redefining what naturalistic ceramic sculpture might be, her works question what it means to be a sentient living creature, animal or human'

ABOVE: *Death in Paradise*, 2018

She rolls hairs using a grooved wooden board and press-moulds feathers. Bones, muscle tissue, jewellery and small fruits such as strawberries are also press-moulded. Smit invariably uses commercial glazes. A 'fat' red glaze forming glutinous drops of blood, obscuring the face of *Man of sorrows*, 2017, was applied in three layers. She often delegates the glazing of bisque-fired works to a freelance assistant, but always personally glazes her sculptures' eyes.

Smit has a growing fan base of staunch collectors. 'In 2001 I bought my first work of hers, *Cat*, 2000, from Galerie Terra Delft, which had first recognised her talents,' says Dutch collector Rosemarie Willems. 'I had kept cats for many years and was immediately flabbergasted by this meowing female cat's simultaneous expression of anger and fear – it was exactly how cats nursing kittens can behave.' Formerly a child psychiatrist, Willems is a shrewd observer of non-verbal behaviours and was intrigued by Smit's work. 'I bought another sculpture at the same time of a very sweet mouse on a bed of red roses, which shows the artist's broad spectrum of themes and the emotional range within her work, encompassing both darkness and humour,' she explains.

Willems' subsequent donation of Smit's works to a variety of public collections including Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam and the Grassi Museum in Leipzig has no doubt contributed to the artist's international profile.

Her London dealer, James Freeman, positions Smit as working at the forefront of contemporary surrealism. 'Her unpremeditated "stream of consciousness" approach would seem initially to be incompatible with the creation of such highly detailed and technically accomplished pieces, and yet it works,' he explains.

Redefining what naturalistic ceramic sculpture might be, her works question what it means to be a sentient living creature, animal or human. 'Where are the boundaries – where does innocence become guilt? Where does life become death? That is what my work is about,' says Smit. *L' Amour fou*, the title of her Leipzig exhibition, is defined as 'a love that defies rational criteria, but is highly passionate, irresistible and addictive.' It's equally apt as a comment on the appeal of Smit's oeuvre. CR

Myth and Mortality: the fairy-tale world of Carolein Smit, *V&A, London, until 30 September; vam.ac.uk.* L'Amour fou, *Grassi Museum, Leipzig, Germany, until 30 September; grassimuseum.de.* L'Amour fou, *Drents Museum, Assen, the Netherlands, 4 November–3 March 2019; drentsmuseum.nl*