

Herculanum (Sigefride Bruna Hautman)
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Sigfride Bruna Hautman
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The M Museum in Leuven has set out to bring to light the poetry of Sigefride Bruna Hautman, born in 1955.

It is a poetry that completes the puzzle of the Belgian imagination by adding the missing pieces—pieces lost due to our various forms of blindness.

It is poetry that grew in the space between Delvaux and Magritte—closer to Magritte, to tell the truth, no doubt due to a matter of pH—right there, in that patch of soil, where there was still room and enough light and nutrients to grow, at first timidly, we were told that nothing would grow in the shade of the tall trees, that settling there in the 1980s would have been a sort of anachronism, but our valiant plant paid no heed to these warnings, and grew its stem and leaves, reaching upward to carve out a place for itself in the sun, and there it is now, with all its chlorophyll, in its vibrant green, ready to be seen.

It is violent poetry—at least at first, though perhaps less so in the second phase—in that it leaves no room for interpretation, no waiting time, no leeway; on the contrary, it chooses to impose itself on us right away, to fall into our hands, almost as if we were taking in an orphan who had been left on our doorstep one morning, but then, don't panic—life goes on, and the child grows up without too much trouble, hence the second phase I was telling you about, which isn't all that intense.

It's a poetry steeped in alcohol—a strong, clear liquor that goes straight to your head, that isn't sipped but seizes your liver, colonizes it, plants its flag there, and then you have your whole life to sober up slowly.

It is a poetry that chooses to coexist with us, to exist in volume rather than in image, to be in close quarters rather than face-





to-face, and it is for this reason that it leaves the audience no choice in how it is received; for this reason, it descends upon you, leaving to others—those concerned with image—the delays, the convolutions, the psychoanalysis, and the intellectual grandstanding.

It's a poem that grabs Magritte by the collar, drags him out of his little house in Jette, and drops him on the sidewalk—there, right there—and now, what do you say?

It's a poem that breaks free from the prison of the image—and the proof is that it's in the round; it's photographed just as it scales the prison wall.

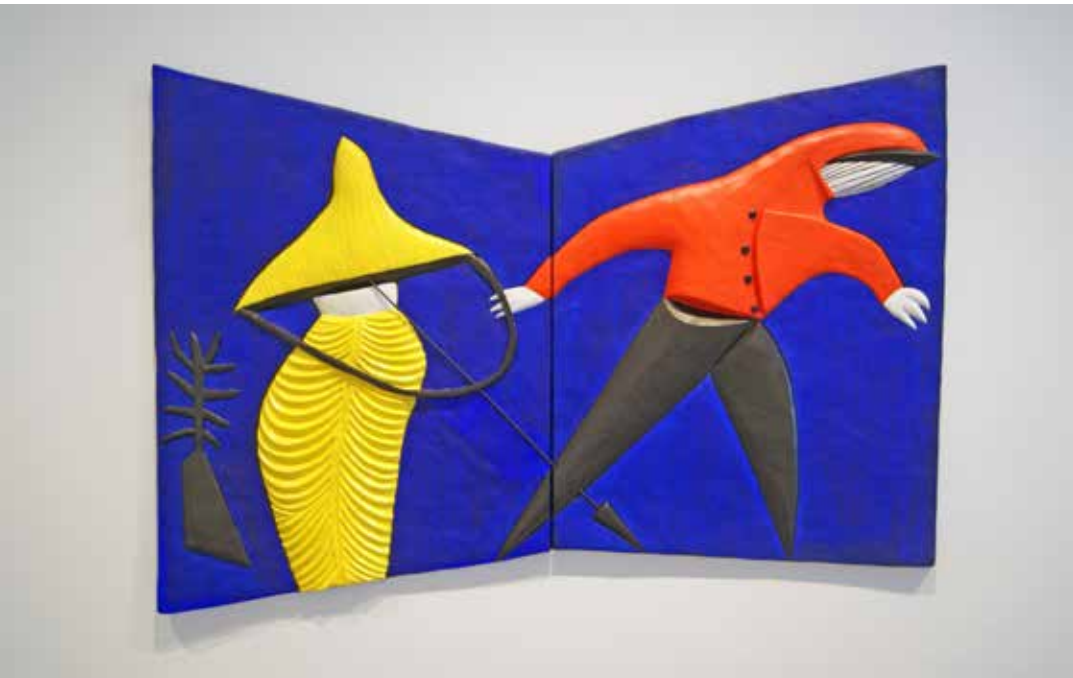
It's a form of poetry that seems to be a petrification of what we thought existed only in our heads—something immaterial, trapped in that gelatinous substance flowing from the painting to our minds—nothing solid in there, nothing tangible. Can we even succeed in materializing the imagination? No, in fact, the artist specifically says that one of her artistic challenges was precisely to give form to water, and in this confession there is so much to read—we must read more, understand how this is her talent: the ability to solidify what is intangible and what we thought was immutable in that state.

It is a poem that focuses on certain details in Magritte's paintings—a bed, for example—and others in Delvaux's—a bridge, for example—and chooses to pull them out of the gilded frame where they rested comfortably, as if to play the role of baby-sitters: "Mom and Dad are out; come on, kids, let's have some fun," and that's how we see the bed and the bridge suddenly take on a life of their own—and we hadn't realized that these peripheral elements in the painting possessed such autonomy, that they were endowed with life, as if to remind us that at the gates of Belgian Surrealism, animism has always been lying in wait, right there, not far off—to the point, in fact, that a few



trailing-behind Surrealists have sometimes timidly murmured about it, putting forward that very animism as a concept, when it wasn't that other literary-derived concept known as magical realism, of which, by the way, Wiels offers a rather curious interpretation these days.

It is a form of poetry that gives equal prominence to characters and objects; however, when it comes to objects, they are often portraits of people close to the artist, whom she personifies through props—such as this piece, for example, showing two containers exchanging liquids, **Portrait 5 (Yvon)**, which evokes the intertwined relationships of parentage and motherhood; and in other cases, the work calls for interaction with the audience, as if to bring the body into the work through yet another avenue, as seen in this majestic piece consisting of two thrones that seem to have been drawn from some forgotten civilization, somewhere between Egyptian and Phoenician, on which visitors were originally invited to sit—not so much to enter into the poetry, but to confirm that they might already be within it, even without sitting on it—a 1987 piece titled **Since I Know You Cannot Sit on a Cloud**, which in itself says it all.



This is a form of poetry that one might examine through the lens of Werner Herzog, since what is ultimately unsettling about Herzog is that he alternates between so-called fiction and so-called documentaries—except that the two genres end up exchanging their means and ends, if only subtly, between the lines, **Aguirre** is a documentary about the filming of this impossible fiction in the jungle, and the same is true of Sigefride Bruna Hautman: when she adopts a realistic and phenomenological approach, we sense that she is dreamlike, and when she opts for the realm of dreams, we feel that it is, in fact, a documentary—which reveals the dual nature of her work, its dual depth, its dual layers.

It is a poetry that may seem tender, sweet—even kitsch, as



some skeptics might say—but which hardens and darkens after the first impression, like a licorice candy, reminding us, moreover, that Surrealism was a precursor to Pop Art, since Pop immediately took a liking to the glucose flowing through the veins of its forefather, and we need look no further for proof than the marketing frenzy surrounding Magritte today—marketing having been pop art’s great conquest—a marketing strategy that our Sigefride Bruna Hautman, for her part, naturally keeps at arm’s length, thanks to the choice of harshness she employs as a safeguard against a candor to which she generally subscribes.

It is a form of poetry that employs the same principle of the visual rebus so dear to Magritte (and also to Delvaux, though to a lesser extent), as seen in this other piece/portrait, **Portret 1** (Vader), from 1990, which resembles a hybrid of a child’s bed and a bridge—or perhaps the colonnade of a viaduct, on the edge of which rests a bottle containing a miniature boat, the whole crowned by a sock on a pole, like those seen at small provincial airfields, used to indicate wind direction—that Belgian coastal atmosphere, Delvaux, Middelkerke, as I was saying—but one gets the impression that the rebus is less rhetorical than in Magritte’s work, that it expands differently, and in that respect it undoubtedly comes closer to Delvaux, his other uncle, but while completely stripping away the erotomaniacal dimension of his friend Paul; in short, all this to say that when it comes to surrealism, there are various types of tensions embedded in the rebuses, whether in the way we construct a sentence with objects, shifting them from an ontological status to a linguistic one—because that, after all, is what surrealism is largely about: stretching the fabric of the unspeakable to attach it to the frame of the speakable, stretching it until it becomes distorted—both the fabric and the frame, for that matter.



It is a visual poetry that, in its linguistic titles, generally remains explicit, delving little into that rich linguistic ambiguity with which Magritte and his friends were associated; no, Bruna



Hautman did not go to that café, was not a member of that club—when she titles her work, she says: “It’s Yvon, my son,” or elsewhere, “It’s my father,” and in this immediacy, we find confirmation of the artist’s apparent distrust of anything that might hinder the circulation of her art—which, as we said, like alcohol, like medicine, must act quickly and directly; there’s no time to linger over deciphering the Rosetta Stone, languages—they must be spoken immediately; the body—it must be experienced, since life is a matter of the body more than of the mind.

It is an eminently ritualistic form of poetry—no doubt aided by the liquids, the theatricality, costumed characters, props, and symbols all playing their part—so that one always feels as though one is witnessing a baptism, a sacrifice, an offering, or some kind of mass, without this mystical apparatus ever feeling cumbersome, since one senses that, if there is a ritual, it operates on a fundamental level, at the very core, at the heart of being, and in doing so, it is universal; it belongs to no religion, to no side—no more Phoenician than Egyptian, no more Brussels than Middelkerke. It is, above all, a summoning of the invisible into the visible, an obligatory summoning, you can’t escape it, just as you can’t avoid going to vote—which is, after all, what Magritte did his whole life: setting the stage for the ritual, then walking away saying he’ll be back, except that he never returns, and that’s where it all begins, whereas Bruna Hautman sets things up, creates, and doesn’t leave, and contrary to any concerns Magritte might have had, well, when you stay, it works too.

This poetry draws on archaeology even more than Magritte did—who already wove archaeological motifs into his paintings—ruins, busts, cut stones, and castles—in that it sees in them the perfect synthesis of dream and reality. For what could be more astonishing than coming face to face with Tutankhamun, or with this or that caryatid, suddenly unearthed



through real, very real methods—excavation, in particular—yet a discovery that then upends all reality, presenting an implausible paradigm right here and now; but what, ultimately, is this “here and now”?