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Artist Wim Delvoye On Courting Controversy with Twisted Wheels, Crucifixes

By INTI LANDAURO



Wim Delvoye's "Trefoil."

PARIS— Belgian artist Wim Delvoye doesn't believe in minimalism: He builds 7-foot-tall marble replicas of twisted Gothic-style towers.

"I'm not interested in sculpting cubes or painting monochromes, it's too easy," Mr. Delvoye, 49, said as he presented his latest art exhibition in a Paris gallery. "Art must fascinate people and doing easy things is not a good way to seek fascination," he said.

Mr. Delvoye, whose pieces fetch some of the highest prices among Belgian contemporary artists, has surprised the world with complicated conceptual art for the past two decades. Tinged with irony and self-mockery, typical of famous Belgian artists such as Rene Magritte or James Ensor, his works have often shocked and created controversy.

His pranks, such as tattooing pigs and selling their skins as canvas, eventually earned him a certain respectability that allowed him to exhibit in prestigious places such as the Louvre. Some of his most prominent works have sold for more than \$100,000.

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

The never-ending quest to dissociate art from an exact depiction of reality has pushed artists to paint like "children, babies or monkeys," Mr. Delvoye says. The fear of competing against computers also pushes many contemporary artists to work in basic, minimalist ways, he argues.



Belgian artist Wim Delvoye poses with "Suppo" in the Louvre museum, in 2012. — Getty Images

The artist wants to push creation in the opposite direction: using technology to come up with new, complex shapes that will attract interest for what they are and not because they are trying to make a larger point.

His current exhibition held at Perrotin Gallery in the Paris Marais district until Oct. 31 includes an imposing 7-foot-high white marble twisted Gothic tower rising from a tree root, delicately laser-carved tires and a 2-meter-long double-helix made of bronze twisted crucifixes, among other art works.

Mr. Delvoye sees himself more as a conceiver of art than a craftsman. The Gothic marble was designed with the help of an entire team of computer geeks and the actual tower was carved by Italian craftsmen. The artist is leading a small art company with offshoots all over the world. He hired Iranian embossers for a series of aluminum suitcases he is also presenting in Paris this month.

"They are my delegates," he said. "That way, I can focus on the art, on the ideas."

Does he make more money than the people who are actually making the art pieces? "I hope so. I bring the idea, without me there is no art work, and I take the risk," he said.

He pushes the people who work for him behind what they are used to do, says Dirk Swauwaert, the director of Brussels-based Wiels Contemporary Art Center, and co-author of a book on Mr. Delvoye.

His works have already been exhibited in mainstream art galleries and contemporary museums. He was invited by the Louvre to hold a temporary exhibition two years ago.

Mr. Delvoye is also known for controversial works that were considered at the time as gimmicks and built his reputation as a provocateur. The tattooed pigs episode drew protests from animal rights groups, after which he moved the operation to a farm in China.

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Following the series of tattooed pigs, Mr. Delvoye went one step further and tattooed a man's back and sold it as a piece of art. The art collector who bought the tattoo will keep the man's skin when he dies and meanwhile has the right to see the tattoo a specified number of times a year.

With that sort of prank, Mr. Delvoye both criticizes the codes of the art market and plays with them to his benefit, Mr. Swauwaert says.