

Caput 2. BLOBS

My first passion was architecture as there didn't seem to be as much innovation happening in sculpture. Back then, I was working with angular objects and flat surfaces, from which I extracted simple shapes. When using a computer, I started from pre-programmed base forms, such as cubes, spheres, cylinders and prisms. But I gradually realised that this geometric way of working was not challenging enough for me, either in the physical or the virtual world.

My very first BLOB started out as a model made from a toilet roll. The model was entered into the computer program, tightened up, made into something more organic, then physically recreated. This became *NIEBLOY* (2009).

The shift from box to organic blob form was initially built on the antagonism between them, but the blob increasingly played a leading role. It soon grew into the broader energetic concept that I would use to build my own world, as though it was a new kind of primary building block, an extension of my old Lego blocks. Over the years, the blob has become a base ingredient through which I view and explore the world, a tool to research, question and debate the eternal dualities of sculpture: inside/outside, antagonism/harmony, concave/convex, male/female, angular/round, and large/small.

It has grown into an explosive force field, capable of reproducing energetic growth in human and architectural relationships in the most diverse ways. I use it to recreate the world in all its chaotic beauty, boundless grandeur and poetic charm. It has become my favourite means of expression, allowing processes of infinite and relentless expansion, from the miniscule to the monumental. The blob is endlessly malleable, unstoppable and unpredictable.

For me, it is all about a freedom that flows outwards - admittedly a perplexing freedom, which makes it all the more attractive to an artist. Considered together, my BLOB structures become a new personal alphabet, as it were, an ever-expanding network of characters that allow me to create a different world, explore other dimensions.

My eyes were opened to this fresh perspective in a totally unexpected way when I was invited to exhibit at MoCA in Shanghai. During a walk in the Yuyuan Garden, I noticed the whimsical, water-hollowed rocks along the banks of the Huangpu River. There, in the Far East, I was put in mind of the sculptures of the British artists Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore. They had also moved away from figurative work to abstract and are considered in the West to be the "inventors" of the hole, or negative space, in sculpture - although in fact it was Hepworth who beat Moore to it by a year.

How odd, I thought at the time, that negative space in our culture is less than a hundred years old. While the limitations of chisels may be part of the reason, perhaps it had more to do with the popularisation of science in the early 20th century, with Einstein's proof that atoms exist, or his prediction of the existence of black holes. Hepworth and Moore used holes to integrate the landscape into their sculptures. I make holes in my BLOBS to explore their innards, as it were, and to provoke a desire in viewers to be sucked into the fantasy world of the

sculptures. I want to challenge the negative spaces themselves, to approach them from an extreme perspective.

My BLOBS never take on the form of calcified energy but are in energetic flow. They are splashes, gigantic raindrops, cosmic eggs: energy surges that destabilise each dimension to create new life. *OLNETOP* (2012), evocative of a wave crashing into the shore, is the perfect illustration of this: an ode to elemental power and the beauty of a magnified water drop.

I had long harboured an image of highly mobile organisms, some sort of expanding and shrinking viral force that could burst out in all directions at once (*IKRAUSIM*, 2009). A sculpture can be presented on a horizontal or tilted plinth (*LUBZAERC*, 2012-2014), looking down from a towering column (*LUIZADO*, 2011-2012), or transformed into a huge shrouded chair hidden behind a 4-storey building (*CIRBUATS*, 2011-2013). Over the years, I have entered into dialogues with traditional architectural spaces and the museological expectation of the vertical dimension, that is, the classic box structure, with works such as *SUMNIM* (2013) and *KOMANIL* (2015). I needed to insert more rounded and fluid forms and reach a sort of rhizomatic swarming chaos if I was to challenge the linear sensibilities that characterise traditional architecture.

Some of the BLOBS have elementary energetic forms dripping on to the floor from a height (*KOMANIL*). BLOB sculptures such as *EGNABO* (2011), *TSENABO* (2011-2013) and *TIEBLOY* (2014-2015) crawl towards people as symbols of eternal rapprochement, of longing to draw closer in situations where it is physically and emotionally difficult, such as in care homes and hospitals. Blob-shaped connectors reach out from rooftops (*NIEBLOY*, 2009; *WARSUBEC*, 2009) and between buildings (see the studies for *ATROA*, 2012 and *IKRAUSIR*, 2016) in repeated attempts to bend our linear proclivities into more rounded, fluid shapes. People were invited to walk between the buildings, and in Emmen, in the middle of Raadhuisplein, *EGNOABER* (2015) appeared to be a beacon welcoming everyone, especially when it was illuminated at night.

Many of my expanding BLOBS appear to be yearning to reach out to all that surrounds them in time and space. They seem to be radiating the desire to find unity in diversity, diversity in unity, and are positioned between figuration and abstraction, symmetry and fantasy, and freedom and imprisonment. They ask for a new kind of social interaction between people – and between humanity and nature.

I initially opted to use signal yellow (RAL 1003) as I wanted to make this transition in ideas and materials stand out. It felt like a good colour to metamorphose the world like a modern alchemist. Yellow was traditionally seen as one of the stages in refining, purifying and transforming matter.

But what started out as polyester and polyurethane dressed in this yellow evolved into other materials (wood, iron, ceramics) in a more explosive colour palette (for example, the fascinating blue of *REWAUTAL*, 2015). The original monochrome BLOBS have now mostly turned into multicoloured demonic creatures, their sickly colours making them look like composite, their cool and clean egg form vanishing as they mutate into execrable androids.

I know that my sculptures are really my attempts to circle and approach the big questions about what sculpture is and what it could be. What haunts me is how, as a child of my time, I can add something. Perhaps it is naïve or overly ambitious to imagine that I can make a difference to the history of sculpture.

After all these years experimenting with the blob as a basic building block in a specialised sculptural alphabet, I am very conscious of the boundless possibilities that advanced digital techniques still offer me. I have in fact always been preoccupied with exploring the sci-fi and computer games of my youth with this meandering energetic form, within the territory between sculpture and architecture, in order to design my own, new kind of world, one that I can shape as I please.

Today, I feel that our confrontation with the Anthropocene provides me with the philosophical impetus to refine my BLOB's position vis-à-vis the climate crisis. Are we humans reinventing ourselves as technological machines or will we fall prey once more to our own hubris? The act of shaping matter that endlessly reforms itself offers perhaps a point of reflection about our problematic Western identity.

Caput 3. PLANTS

As far back as 2003, I marvelled at what lay just below the earth under our feet: the enigmatic networks, pipelines and plant roots. This fascination became even more acute while I was an artist in residence in Berlin. In a series of prints (*GNI_D_GH*), I explored the coral-like structure of the earth as a subsurface that was alien to me. A few years later, I suggested the links between invisible structures that constitute life beneath a metropolis using tubes and elongated blobs (*YAROTUBE*, 2007; *YAROTOBS*, 2007). With this work, I hoped to bring oxygen to the organic and industrial underpinnings of a city. My yellow BLOBS took on the form of living, virtual coral.

In 2009, I used a floral and coral-like weave, looking like it walked out of a 19th-century Baroque wallpaper, for the first time. I enlarged this motif for an exhibition at S.M.A.K., Ghent, and created a large wall drawing and a 3D sculpture from this 2D original. Neither purely design or sculpture, real or virtual, there was a sort of *sfumato* atmosphere for visitors to submerge themselves in that was very disorienting (EITOZOR, 2009). They seemed to float in a vegetal dimension that impacted them while remaining elusive. The roof sculpture that I installed on a building in Zebrastraat, Ghent, (*WARSUBEC*, 2009) also invokes a fluid universe, like a sort of rampant coral that has formed a house of mirrors out of internal tendrils.

In 2013, I revisited some of these plant motifs in the context of what would become the Plant Mutation Project. The "strawberry sculptures" that emerged from this originated from an exchange with Dr A.P.M. Ton den Nijs, a scientist associated with the Plant Breeding Department of Wageningen University. This department holds a patent for the cultivation of a genetically manipulated variety of strawberry. Researchers developed a new strawberry variety resistant to fruit rot and requiring less pesticides, which means it has a longer shelf life.

The three large sculptures – *AELBWARTS* (2013), *NABEKIESAV* (2013-2014) and *NABEKIARTS* (2013-2014) – were to some extent still dependent on the blob form that I developed in 2009 with my piece *IKRAUSIM*, whose internal skeleton resembled a demon about to storm out of its cave. I also thought about the Japanese art of flower arranging, ikebana, when designing the leaves for the strawberry plant, and the associated desire to evoke symbolic worlds. I certainly kept in mind ikebana's three pillars—*asymmetry, space and depth*—which symbolise sky, earth and human. To some extent, these elements were more important than the colours of the flowers themselves, which gradually changed.

The fantastic Meissen porcelain vases I encountered in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, also influenced me deeply and formed the basis for the numerous exuberant vase sculptures I went on to make. The traditional still life with fruit undergoes a surreal transformation in my imagination. I effaced the natural colours from leaf, stem and fruit, as though they had been exposed to radiation and genetic manipulation by a future scientist playing God. The still life is suddenly not so still or innocent, instead yellow strawberries hang heavy from strange blob shapes encased in white exoskeletons and covered by pale blue petals. But perhaps these petals are actually butterflies about to fly away, because I was also reflecting nostalgically on the old Disney film *Beauty and the Beast*, where candelabras and teapots suddenly come to life and dance around. With my *PLANT* series, I wanted to suggest constant movement and flashes from the energetic flux - movement within apparent stasis. The strawberries appear to be collapsing under their weight in slow motion as they keep growing further from their stem. A rotating vase is reminiscent of the legs of a girl in a short skirt. Indeed, this hybrid flower vase looks like it's poised to leap into real life.

I explored new and different forms that issued from the interaction between the digital and organic worlds, heralding the return of the vegetal and animal kingdom from whence we all come. How far would humanity go in order to print their own organs, to create a living organism or grow plants, fruit and vegetables in the square visual language that it imposes? In works such as *VIGAV* (2013) and *EMOBCOR* (2013-2014), I was playing both sides, as I thought about the status of the new creatures I was making, with their profusion of disjointed bones and mutated plants, while the earth as primordial goddess remained recognisable.

Here again, my fascination with simple natural objects like bones and shells is clearly on display. But there was a departure from the Rubenesque, fleshy *SNIBURTAD* (2011-12) as I turned to completely different sorts of figures. In *EMOBCOR* (2013-14), bones became alien-like relics, with the addition of a punctured eyeball and deformed hips. It pulses with the sterility and desolation of the Grand Canyon, apocalyptic, the landscape after a plague. But however overripe, chaotic and unnatural the colours, I believed that viewers would be drawn in by the sweetness radiated by the plant and fruit, and the refinement of the many details. These are uncommon traits in the contemporary art world.

Over the past five years, I have also focused on smaller works in glazed ceramics, which express the same sense of preciousness in a more traditional way. I often refer to them as my "sweet pepper and cacao series". They emanate a sort of primal life force and capriciousness (*AKRITERA*, 2015-18). I recently had the opportunity to show my own glazes, created through experiments with mixtures of colour and clay (Jerusalem

Chapel, Bruges, 2021). It was incredible to see how ancient manual techniques could be complemented with digital computer modelling to produce a very different, modern result – the perfect marriage between old and new.

I have always found the ancient myths of the first human being made from clay and then brought to life by the breath of a deity inspiring, along with the fact that primitive humans lived solely from what they found around them in nature. Thinking about this led to my most colourful BLOBS, in glazed ceramics, which centred on cacao beans as variations on my strawberry and sweet pepper series. These hybrid ceramics glittered in a wealth of colours in the Jerusalem Chapel, as though gemstones excavated from the depths of the earth and sea (*NEBLOAK* and *NEBKATROBS*, 2017).

Like bright fossils, they did raise the question of what their function was in the earth's womb, since on closer scrutiny there are teeth and tentacles under the golden hue, and so an ominous dimension to the mutated cacao bean is revealed. We are consistently mystified, corrupted and seduced by the expressive power of the hybrid, which begs the question of whether there won't also be beauty in the mutants of the future.

Caput 4. HUMANS

For the sculptures that contain traces of a human being, I explored the fascinating lines that link polar opposites, such as that which leads from the inside to the outside of a body, or from animal to divine being, or from physical to mythical consciousness. Just as the sculptors of previous generations often took the nude as a source of inspiration, I've always been fascinated by this body in which we humans are obliged to live.

There is an enormous amount of information about the human body available to us these days, but anatomy remains an inexhaustible source of wonder to me. Although the functioning of the body is the result of a very long evolution, how we experience being human bodies still feels magical to me. My first in-depth anatomy lesson was probably a visit to the Museum of Natural Sciences in Brussels, and especially the soaring dinosaur gallery. Later, I was deeply impressed by the *Body Worlds* exhibition. Wherever I am in the world, the same excitement always returns when I see anatomical models.

The jumbles of muscles, veins and nerves I saw depicted in medical textbooks inspired my own visual language, with blob-like organs as the building blocks. I reconstructed the chaos of connections but without a coherent structure or obvious function, somewhere between the organic and the virtual, a dimension that is hard to situate in our known universe. Were these scenes from virtual, potential or sci-fi contexts? Or visions of the future of medicine, when it can implant, scan and bioprint us to its heart's content?

After many conversations with professors Pierre Delaere and Koen Van Laere of the Catholic University of Leuven, the first version of *AGRIEBORZ* was completed in 2009: a strange human head dominated by a larynx that seems to be screaming some wildly chaotic primal force. It was as though I had taken a scalpel to living tissue to uncover its secrets, and the sculpture is suggestive of an existential battle between the energetic yellow (good) and the cold black undertones (evil). The first large-format version—a print of 8 x 7 metres—was

joined by a 3D sculpture and lightbox, making it appear as though an internal battle between blob-shaped organs and longer, liquid protrusions, had made the body explode.

The slender female head that I made in a later version, *AGRIENANUH* (2009-2016), may seem alluring but this piece of recognisable human was also trapped in an organism gone berserk, that was never finished and therefore always in the process of becoming. Maybe you could see a longing for embrace in it, but there was also distance and repulsion as the two elements never finally fused.

SNIBURTAD (2011) was Rubens in blob form, one of the many figures who can attest to such a strong and exuberant life force that any internal foundation or support system (such as an endoskeleton) would be superfluous. These works brought a sort of vitality to the world, and the alternation between 3D print and HD 3D video animation—in which body tissue bulged beyond the normal limits of a body—created an unusual spectacle. The impression given by these expanding sculptures (especially *ELBEETAD*, 2011) must have been of anti-classical energy, a forcefield that was outside of the Rubenesque – but this sort of apparently noncontextual work allows me to complete my own language.

ELNAYTAB (2013) saw me reaching the point where a blob sculpture escapes fully from the endoskeleton and shoots into the space around it. Wildly rampaging tentacles, motivated by an unclear force, sprouted like an oceanic coral and unlike any human organ. A human heart liberates itself from its external corset in *TRACHEOLB* (2013), searching with silver tentacles for some new circuit to join. With these works, I left behind literal depictions of humanity and nature and entered the border zone between biology and technology, an artistic zone that I could populate with visions of my own.

Cyborgs were already in the pipeline in 2009, but a little later, at the request of Antwerp University, I was given the generous opportunity to develop the project. I started with the idea of the classical bust, like the ones you see in university foyers and traditional libraries. It was a real challenge to me to deconstruct the time-honoured, often Greco-Roman-based, bust and make it something that spoke directly to me.

What followed were warriors and cyborgs, such as *NESURAK* (2016), *LAPIRSUB* (2015-2016) and *DIAPERICK* (2015-2016), that played with familiar depictions of mythical heroes, medieval knights and manga cartoon characters: a hybrid of eras, a new synthesis, a new concept of man. With their wild hair radiating around them, they looked impressive and commanding. I had them look imperiously and piercingly at the viewer, distant and distinguished, the new gods and future leaders from who knows where in time and space. I made versions in 2D and 3D and a lightbox that could be placed in unusual museum settings.

There was a lot of my childhood imagination at play here. It was the occasion to celebrate the strange creatures of artists like H.R. Giger and set them in a revamped battleground of robots, aliens and monsters. But I also wanted them to have classical, geometrically perfect features, which we see in ancient helmets and armour.

Although they look like easily assembled puzzles, or like Transformers—the robots that can turn themselves into other types of robot (*ESAVOBOR*, 2011-2012)—they took thousands of hours of manual and computer-aided work to create.

To add interest to the narrative of *LAPIRSUB* and *DIAPERICK*, I focused on contradictions: organic/mechanical, rusty/shiny, rough/smooth, etc.

LAPIRSUB is built on the contrast between a mutated, mechanical skeleton held together by rusty, steel veins and the shiny yellow armour enclosing it. The sculpture *DIAPERICK* entailed a similar dialogue, this time between a futuristic, shiny armour and metal elements – as though a cyborg's mutated skin had been perforated with metal thorns.

NESURAK was based on hundreds of 3D-printed parts. Each little shield was sprayed with putty, sanded and varnished individually, painted by hand in different dark shades and then finished with gold and bronze details. The body itself was painted in an avatar-like blue crocodile skin. In other words, a huge construction kit, a staggeringly complex puzzle, that would never have had this colour variation if it had been printed in one section. I also worked on the interior of the head, as I want the viewer's eyes to be able to wander the little labyrinth, follow the internal light inside, and thus sense the theatricality of my warrior.

I wanted to make entire armies of cyborgs: the kid in me was alive and well. I made studies for white knights (*RACHT*, 2012), yellow soldiers (*SUCHAB*, 2012), combinations of helmets and buildings (*SIUMET*, 2011-2012), and some were able to find a home in the Gallo-Roman Museum in Tongeren, surrounded by classical cult statues. My gatekeepers *GARFINOSWODA* (2011) and *NIKEYSWODA* (2011-2012), ancient sphinxes in yellow and blue, guarded the entrance to the hall of the dead. They were two energetic blob forms that resembled wrestlers.

At the time, I wondered: what is humanity when it is no longer connected to its core, to its mind? *LUIZADO* (2011-12), a newly minted idol that was installed next to the entrance to the Gallo-Roman Museum, occupied a position where a huge Jupiter column stood in Roman times. But I had turned this king of the gods into a futuristic hero, an eclectic assemblage of figures that combined myth with Hollywood and computer games.

The creation of new forms of art has often heralded the birth of a new sort of person, one who holds a different position in the world. I often asked myself whether I felt any compassion for the birth pangs of a new *homunculus*, or whether I was more concerned about giving my fantasies full rein. I made cyborgs and warriors out of humans, I often abandoned exoskeletons and abstracted organs to suit my own, virtual world. What should the next step involve, where might the progression lead me?

Caput 5. SKIN

Over the years, I became increasingly attracted to using skin, hide or shell, that is, rather impure material, as a covering for the smooth surfaces of my polished blob sculptures. What this actually told me was that my entire way of seeing things was changing. Initially, I wanted to make beautiful, shiny, sleek sculptures, almost inhumanly smooth and clean, objects that almost gave the impression of hailing from another planet. They looked like a human hand had come nowhere near them, and yet the opposite was actually true.

My radiant, signal yellow BLOBS had therefore landed in a zone between art and design, and this resulted in the SKIN series. My sculptures became stronger, more organic and complex in structure by the addition of an epidermis. It was as if I could feel the pull of underwater plants in this layer, but also the fleshy skin of alien-like monsters.

I had become fascinated by a certain imperfection, something I also found in Henry Moore's work. Suddenly, I was focusing on the scratches and tiny patterns that you find in skin. Before this, I had been utterly satisfied by painting in one colour, but that gradually lost its appeal. So, I set out to explore how I could transfer the colour palette of a classic painting to my sculptures. At the same time, I switched focus from the study of form in sculpture to the study of painting. I found my inspiration in the fleshy skin colours that so characterise the work of Francis Bacon.

For *SNIBURTAD* and *ELBEETAD* (2011-2012), I focused on the imperfections of a life-giving skin stretched over an endoskeleton. Blemishes, scars, wrinkles and cellulite form intrinsic areas of skin that seem to span moving organs. In fact, these blob sculptures tend towards human forms once more: defective, vaguely round, although energetically active, as though dynamized by recurrent waves of breath.

In this sense, *SNIBURTAD* was the forebearer that led, without my realising it, to SKIN. I created *SNIBURTAD* in a 3D print and an HD 3D animation, which introduced movement. Inspired by the voluptuous Rubenesque female body, I wanted this breathing SKIN structure to open a dialogue between tradition and innovation - and show how new technology can fertilise and reinvent tradition. It wasn't easy to introduce round shapes into the fragile skeleton. I turned the usual way of working on its head by removing the skeleton's function as an internal support system. As a result, an internal anatomical body pushed its way out and presented itself as an exoskeleton. A bulging shapelessness emerged in the space, which would engender some strange reactions in viewers. Although the blob sculpture retained its internal substance neatly tucked away under a uniform coat, now the strange exoskeletons seemed to be permeated with an unknown force and vitality. They gave the impression of bursting open and allowing the viewer a glimpse of a mysterious life form hiding somewhere in the depths.

By the time of the *NOITEM* series (2012-2013), I had advanced so far with this sort of thinking that I wanted to design highly elaborate and almost violent forms, ones that would go in the most unexpected directions; breathing, indeterminate, cryptic creatures. They look like Rorschach inkblots or spatial cobwebs, existing in an undefined space. While seemingly fragile and untouchable, they are also solid as bone. Presented in

lightboxes, they looked like some kind of beacon, even evoked religious and spiritual undertones. But above all, I thought they seemed alienating, both ambiguous and poetic.

The energy of my blob sculptures was expressed in free, dynamic forms that seemed to have become figures in motion. This was certainly a homage to the pioneering work of Eadweard James Muybridge, who created the zoopraxiscope, a device that mimics moving images. My lightboxes, from *NOITOGH* to *NOITEAB*, all realised in 2013, aimed at breathing new life into this artistic tradition and giving it a 21st-century platform. I was taking a step further than I did with my blob sculptures, as the *NOITEM* series—composed of 2D prints, 3D printed sculptures and lightboxes—incorporated the illusion of movement.

A few years later, around 2015, I developed some existing drawings to create 3D printed sculptures such as *NOITALS*: mutated monsters, fossils or futuristic images from an unspecified time, which had come to claim their place in a present-day become unrecognisable. They were poised to spring into life at any moment.

At the same time, nature continued to inspire me, its primary force and the threats and promises that it emanates. This was also the underlying theme for the *NOITEROS* series from the years 2016-2018. Perhaps the overwhelmingly alienating effect of works like *NOITERIS* and *NOIPERICK* was created from precisely this nature: in all the jumble of weird compacted bones, here and there human remains, a piece of jaw or shoulder, could be detected. There was also the sudden emergence of recognisable details from classical representations of humanity (*NOITERAS*), which confronted me with the historical canon of beauty and mimesis. Sculpting stopped being a quest for the essence of a thing hidden in the material, but instead a search for the beauty of the other.

With this series, I was exploring, in drawings and sculpture, new forms of coherence and organic life that could continuously flow into each other to make a new energetic unity. This unity created swirling structures in a raw and permanent interplay of construction and deconstruction: forms of primal vitality that from an aesthetic standpoint could equally attract and repel the viewer.

It was as if a wild, primitive underground life had suddenly burst out of the polished blob and the skin mutation of Gonshi rocks been revealed. These miniature landscapes are not of course human creations but deeply rooted in the natural world, their unknown and untouched essence extracted and presented on a pedestal as something else. Naturally, there's also their role in Chinese belief as the home of the spirits of ancestors, and this provided an additional incentive to penetrate this embodied, even spiritualised, material more deeply. The earth would never again be simply an object to me: I would come to recognise it as a prerequisite to being fully human.

I realised that I had been drafting a new language of signs over the years, that kept returning in different forms in divergent sculptures. From the thousands of manual and computer-aided drawings I made, it seemed that I always saved a few specific details to use in the continuation of the narrative.

For me, the *SKIN MUTATION* series has been a puzzle more than anything, one that interfaces movement and stillness, violence and tenderness, and humanity with animals and nature: a battlefield of opposing yet parallel forces. I wanted to arrive at highly expressive beings that evoke the eternal mutation of humans and all things

by stretching skin across this energetic battlefield and adding colours, whether pale or bold. I thought that future technology may mean the development of a multifunctional skin, a covering that would give us extra power, and protection against cold and disease, so we become cousins to my cyborgs, become no longer shrouded in fragile and shrivelling skin. Perhaps a new form of human will emerge out of the necessity for new dermis and epidermis just to survive.

CAPUT 6. MASKS

I have become increasingly interested in the wondrous shape of the line in recent years, in graphic patterns of presence and absence, and therefore also in the alternating worlds of repleteness and emptiness that they effortlessly conjure. At first, the line seems to be perfect for depicting right knowledge – rational knowledge that results in a model of reality that allows us to understand things more deeply. But in fact, this same line can lead us into exotic, fictional worlds and prick our imaginations until we end up unable to keep up with ourselves. It presents truth and falsehood in equal measures, it is a tool that enthrals us, but the fact that it always remains an enigma is problematic.

On an emotional level, the line expresses a deep-seated human desire for connection, to not be alone, but at the same time, at some point it stops and the connection is abruptly broken. For me, the line offers the creative potential to make human life more bearable and forms the basis for our imaginative access to ourselves.

Over the years, I have experimented with the line in all sorts of forms and materials, in simple drawings, made by hand or entered into 3D multimedia software. The three-dimensional printing of lines and drawings delivered new spatial objects that would not have been previously imaginable or feasible. Perhaps the longest lines I've ever drawn can be seen on the large side entrance of Casino Blankenberge. There, a huge, 225 m² print presents a fantastic landscape that appears to have stepped out of the Belle Epoch (ca. 1890-1910), a period that represents the heyday of this seaside resort (OLBERNIUM, 2017).

The classic representation of time and space explodes in this vision of the line. And so, the line mutation project evolved into the Mask mutation project. Masks that floated and swayed within a kind of cosmic indeterminacy - to the rhythm of all-encompassing nature.

The masks had something of the crustacean, reptile and coral about them. They brought to mind the scarab beetle so beloved of the pharaohs (TANASANGKA, 2017). On the other hand, the alien traits seemed to trump the insect, and when the crustacean-like mask was placed on the chest (TANALTILSURIA, 2017), the alien from Ridley Scott's movie, designed by the Swiss artist H.R. Giger, came immediately to mind: I related strongly to Giger's work from very early on.

For those who are not science fiction fans, the masks opened up less sinister avenues, since the energetic pathways had a remarkable similarity to the energy pathways that allow the vital life force (qi) to flow—

deeply, invisibly—through all our organs. The masks thus provided a view of everything that allows our endoskeleton to respire and energise. In this sense, their fluid lines were a further elaboration of the Rubenesque body *SNIBURTAD* (2011-2012), which inhaled and exhaled.

Other unformed, energetic spheres have shown up in many of my works, such as the *NOITEM* series with its Rorschach inkblot effects, or the Plant Mutation Project with its stream of mutating viruses.

As westerners, our eyes seek out recognisable shapes, and so we thought we could discern animal limbs, shoulders, a horned bull, winged demons and the eye of a cyclops. As westerners, we also recognised a museum reference in the way the masks were pinned to the wall like butterflies and other insects. I was reminded of the taxonomy found in school biology books.

We have been accustomed since Linnaeus to categorising plants and animals on the basis of the known, but how do we do that with the complete unknown? I produced my new series of masks as an exhibition model in the reduced format form of insects (*ASEFNIMOS*, 2017) on a simple black background, giving them a new, equally mysterious aesthetic. I tried to make them even more heterogenous by giving them names that sound like they come from ancient cultures, for example, *TAYTEZUMA* (2017) and *TEZLETOML* (2017).

The symbolic visual language of some of these ancient cultures, such as Aztec and Maya, with their use of points, lines, circles and squares, never fails to amaze me. The origin of lines had not yet been subjected to radical doubts and so their archetypal images formed the perfect sparring partner to test western design against.

People all over the world used masks to associate themselves with gods and idols. I have often portrayed this impulse, first in the form of shiny blob sculptures and then, in the *NOITEM* series, as dreadlocked warriors and spatial cobwebs. In the course of history, we humans have turned ourselves into demigods, into the immortal butterfly that wishes to fly ever higher until it burns its wings in the sun.

Just like the manga character Magical Teacher, my masks open up amorphous worlds where the unknown person of tomorrow will dwell, partly as a mutant that has made its own prison, partly as a hybrid being that can never be free of its biological nature. In my imagination, masks like *TANARANGPI* (2017-2019), *TANAKERAP* (2017-2019) and *TANATILSUR* (2020) belong in the dark and fantastical setting of a cave, where an ancient shaman on their 3D altar summons their demonic power. In this darkness, the (empty) eyes of my masks look deep into my mortal eyes. Do they demand that we gaze unflinchingly at what is so hard to see, perhaps inner enlightenment?

There is another sort of illumination these days: the latest most sophisticated technology can refine 3D sculptures to a point we have never known before.

The raw material can at times distract the eye from the precision modelling that went into the work, such as in my bronze totem pole, located on the Sculpture Route in Zeist (2020-2022), or in the large-scale relief *GARZGRIOLEJIF* (2020-2021), an evocation in polyester, wood and iron dating from the Big Bang, which was shown in the Jerusalem Chapel in Bruges. But when minute lines are captured in a computer print (*TANABRIAMI*, 2020; *TANABRIZOA*, 2020), you as spectator seem to be as though waiting in the womb of a

cosmic being for a birth or transformation, or inside a fMRI scanner. A spider's web of almost microscopically fine lines—technically impossible until recently—shows the limits of the imageable, the ultimate descent into the material through which the unimaginable becomes imaginable (*TANABRIALO*, 2020).

Since this technology can penetrate so deeply in our bodies, the alienating effect of the masks does not stop at the front or outside, with its human features, but continues on the back, or inside. What will they reveal when we are no longer satisfied with the classical representations? What kind of android masks will we be putting on, what interfaces will be necessary to express our human limitations?

Are my masks part of a transhumanist dream in which senses and feelings have a whole new mode of expression? As an artist, I can feel the hot breath of the mutant on the back of my neck, destroying the certainties I cling to, and turning me away from more traditional aesthetics. I feel called to live fully in the flux, in this Anthropocene era that will be our legacy.

In the end, the masks mask the human being as we have always known them, the archetypal human, and especially the western one. However, masks are also meant to be pulled off. It is now up to the artist and the scientist to come up with new syntheses to match a new era – which may become a paradise or an apocalypse.