



CONTEMPORARY ART *'Jesus doesn't sell any more'*

Belgian provocateur comes to MONA

BY **STEPHANIE BUNBURY**

EVERY Cloaca machine, says Belgian artist Wim Delvoye, has its own personality. The Cloaca is an alchemist's contraption of glass tubes and metal pipes that turns food into poo, just as we do. "I don't like to eat meat," says Delvoye fondly, "but the machine loves it." He shows me logos for five of the machines, each based on a real trademark but featuring a muscular mascot man whose intestines trail from his severed waist. Have Chanel or Ford sued, by any chance? "No, isn't it funny?" muses Delvoye.

There is a Cloaca in Australia; David Walsh bought one for MONA in Tasmania. Now MONA is presenting a survey of Delvoye's work as its first temporary exhibition. In Delvoye's studio complex in Ghent, the last of the packing cases headed across the hemispheres are being spirited away, surrounded by shovels and gas canisters painted with Delft-style blue windmills and a pile of tattooed skins from his pig farm in China.

Upstairs, 10 assistants toil at computers modelling templates for laser-cut steel sculptures of bulldozers and tip-trucks, carved to resemble Gothic cathedrals. Centuries ago the same people might have been knotting lace or blowing glass: Ghent grew rich

on studios like this one.

Delvoye loves virtuosity and meticulousness; his family, he says, were like the Von Trapps of drawing. It didn't win him any points at art school. "You know, the teachers were teaching us how to roll a joint and how to throw the plaster models out of the window," he says. "It was more about having an attitude. I grew up in a time when being avant-garde became formulaic, a completely empty ritual of styles opposing each other. Most contemporary art is very academic. It's promiscuous and therefore people think it's not, but you can be a promiscuous academic."

The irony here is that Delvoye is all these things himself: promiscuous in his pursuits and set firmly within an avant-garde tradition. It is nearly 95 years since Dadaist Marcel Duchamp exhibited a urinal in a gallery and called it a "ready-made"; Delvoye's decorated shovels and gas canisters also cock a snoot at art's proprieties. "I adore people like Duchamp," murmurs Delvoye. "Often I think: would he approve of me?"

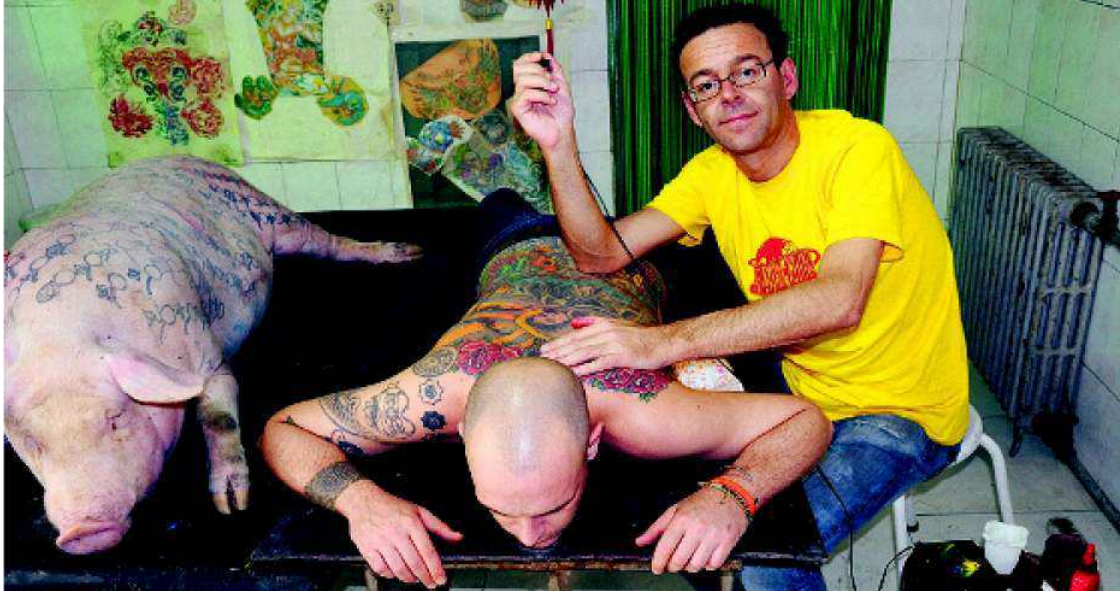
These days, he reasons, "the most Dada thing to do" is buy Old Masters because they're not fashionable. In his own work he uses Jesus as a subject for the same reason. "He's a reject. Jesus doesn't sell any more. Even men with beards don't sell! Because there is no expertise any more,

no memory, no education, just people making a quick buck, buying and selling."

Delvoye is regularly accused of commercialism. Not only because of his marketable trinkets — his S&M leather-clad bird-boxes or drawings of the crucifixion using Disney characters — or his press-friendly quotability, but because his enterprises are so obviously about doing business. But then there are the Cloaca machines he won't sell (for fear they won't be maintained properly) and the elaborately decorated pigs he can't sell. "They are alive, so you can't collect or buy them and then re-sell them — not without difficulty, anyway. I like that, because it escapes the market."

Many cultures also reject pigs; he likes that too. Delvoye holds to a 19th century idea of eternal beauty, but filth is part of that. "When I see an art piece I see a social struggle," he says, "even if it's a painting of a calm sea, because it is all about buyers who want to legitimise their position of social power." He likes pushing the barriers, too. "Let's see how far I can go! Later I find that some people bought it. Maybe not for the same as a Picasso, but a really high price for a shovel or a piece of poo."

The Wim Delvoye exhibition opens today at MONA, until April 2, 2012.



Belgian artist Wim Delvoye and his controversial human "artwork", *Tim* 2006-2008.