

# A tribe of clay



The mysterious ceramic figures created by the Belgian artist Fabienne Claesen carry, says *Nesrin During*, a powerful sense of the elements that make us human



Fabienne Claesen among her sculptures

**T**he sculptures of the Belgian clay artist Fabienne Claesen are elongated, ancient-looking beings. They appear to wait, sentry-like, motionless and tranquil. They are dignified, but also fragile, vulnerable. At first glance, they seem to be neither man nor woman; but a closer look reveals elevations for breasts on the women, genitals on the men. They come from no especial race. They are human beings, with a past. Some coloured slips pretend to clothe them here and there. Their bare skins are aged, wrinkled, fissured, like the

bark of trees; trees that grow slowly, marked with scars, but with an aspiration to get to the light, a purpose, a dedication to reach high. The figures have no arms, or rather they do, but they are stuck to their bodies, engraved into their figures. When they have fingers, they are thin and look like fine roots. All Fabienne's clay people, from the early single figures, to the couples and then the groups, are full of human sensibilities. They somehow express emotions. Among others, we see desire, seduction, domination and desperation.



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#### WAY OF WORKING

Fabienne starts her work by first cleaning her studio: arranging, creating an empty space for her mind and work. Her working space is the entrance floor of her house. The first floor is her living space, as well as a 'home' for the finished clay people. For her clay work she does not draw or sketch. She takes clay in her hands and forms it. She likes the feel of the material. She says she 'plays and plays and plays, and sometimes she dances with clay' (she has danced for years: classic, modern, jazz and improvisation). When she started working with clay, her first work was a selection of big clay tiles, which she joined together to form wall hangings. These pieces are reminiscent of the African Kuba tribe, and of the women's raffia textiles. To make the tiles, Fabienne shaped a sheet of clay with her thumb, in a repetitive fashion, like

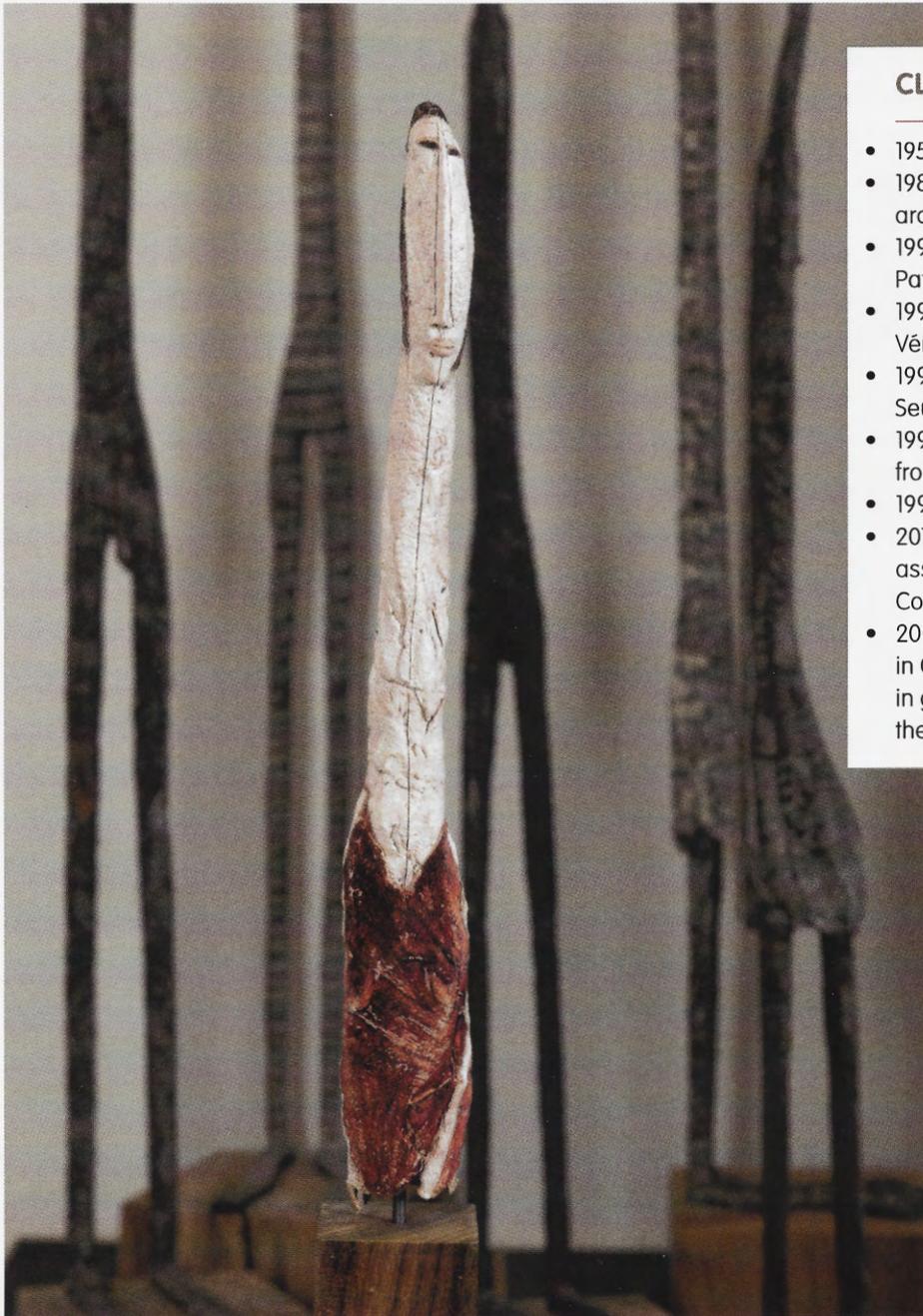
#### WHAT LED TO NOW

Fabienne discovered the nature of what one can do with clay at a young age. As a child she mischievously dug clay from the ground to create wickedly realistic models of animal droppings, which she then placed on doorsteps or through mail boxes. Another favourite activity was peeling the bark off tree trunks. When told that it might cause harm, she continued peeling, but carefully, in order not to kill the trees. In the street where she grew up there lived a woman who made pots. Fabienne would spend free afternoons at her house, modelling clay figures, learning how to glaze and fire them. She went on to study interior architecture at Saint Luc in Brussels. There she learned about materials, their properties, strengths, possibilities, perspectives and proportions. She worked for fifteen years as an interior architect and enjoyed it, but felt the need to slow down, to seek change. In 1990 she started studying ceramics and graduated (in ceramics and sculpture) under the tutorship of Professor J Leyman from L'Académie de Boitsfort in 1998. Fabienne also attended a number of workshops and masterclasses with well-known ceramists, such as Daniel de Montmollin, Patrick Picarelle, Yang Seung-Ho and the sculptor Véronique Choppinet. By then she had discovered the famous French pottery village of La Borne and ceramists such as Linnard and Eva Eissenloeffel. In 1999 Fabienne started her studio, housed in an old converted bakery outside Brussels. Recently, she has purchased the former home of the French ceramist Élisabeth Joulia in La Borne, and has become a member of the potter's association Centre Céramique Contemporaine (ACCLB).



### CLAESEN'S CAREER PATH

- 1959: Fabienne was born in Louvain
- 1981: she graduated in interior design and architecture in Brussels
- 1994: served an internship with ceramist Patrick Picarelle
- 1995: had an internship with sculptor Véronique Choppinet
- 1996: she attended a seminar with Yang Seung-Ho
- 1998: graduated in sculptural ceramics from the L' Académie de Boitsfort
- 1999: set up her first studio, near Brussels
- 2014: became a member of the potter's association, Centre Céramique Contemporaine
- 2006 onwards: Fabienne shows her work in Galerie Capazza in France and exhibits in galleries throughout Europe and the USA



**OPPOSITE, ABOVE:** *Couple*, 2015, black stoneware, engobe, H74 and 76cm

**BELOW:** *Raphaël*, 2015, H153cm; *Anne*, 2013, H182cm; *Christine*, 2011, H180cm; *Salvator*, 2015, H165cm; *Aryami*, 2015, H140cm; all black stoneware, engobe, solid beech

**THIS PAGE:** *Eloïse*, 2015, stoneware, engobe, H68cm

ripples in clay. These irregular waves were later coated with a slip coating, which let the colour of the clay come through. Four or more tiles together made a wall hanging. Later she made other tiles, but didn't use the wave pattern. Instead, she created patches of clay that had been wrinkled, crackled, mixed with sand and other burnable materials, to create a collage of aged and interesting skin. These are the skins she later clothed her people with.

Fabienne uses a simple clay: *terre de chez Hins* from Valonia. It mainly contains grog. For heads or faces, where she wants to show more emotion, she uses clay without grog. The sculptures are constructed lying on her table surface. They are like long tubes or masks. Her kiln is not big enough to fire most of her pieces, which are often 1 to 1.5 metres or more, so while building these she makes incisions, where later she will cut them in order to fit them into the kiln. She covers parts of the surface with a simple slip made of the same clays with the addition of oxides. Some of her figures are made from black clay and are dressed with white slip; others are

made from white clay and dressed with black slip. Most are darkish grey. These are then fired in an electric kiln to 1150°C. After the firing, the work continues. The cut pieces are glued back together into the original shape. If the pieces are not as Fabienne desires, they are then cut with an electric saw. Some are beheaded; others have their legs shortened; some pieces get new parts made, which are added on later. When all is complete they are fixed onto wooden or stone pedestals. Beside her clay work, Fabienne also paints with acrylic colours. Her paintings are again of humans and almost all are of women. These females are fleshy, voluptuous and appear naked and in movement. The contrast, the immense difference between the use of one material or the other, is astonishing. ■

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*Nesrin During is a ceramist, writer and author based in The Netherlands; for more on Fabienne's work see [fabienneclaesen.be](http://fabienneclaesen.be)*