

Wild spaces for the soul

EN A visual artist who is fascinated by the world of plants, Lise Duclaux features in two upcoming Brussels events: a group exhibition at Iselp and a solo show at LMNO. — MICHEL VERLINDEN • PHOTOS: IVAN PUT

"It's bursting at the seams!" admits Lise Duclaux (aged 48) about her enormous space, in which life and artistic practice appear to be one and the same. It's true, with the pots of plants that have taken over the window sills, coloured papers scattered on the floor, recent copies of the newspaper *Le Monde*, books piled up like the tower of Pisa, and washing hanging from the ceiling, visitors have to be careful where they



put their feet. Located in a former mattress factory, the decor in the artist's workspace matches the exuberance of her conversation. Against the wall, there's a carefully framed poster advising: "a snail has no sense of moving slowly". That disclaimer is characteristic of the approach of this French artist who has lived in Brussels for more than 25 years: she is all about offering different ways of looking at the world. Lise Duclaux embraces different rhythms and perspectives.

40,000 SEEDS

The thread that runs through Duclaux's work is her fascination with plants, which she continually draws, photographs, and even performs. Take a project like "Plantes de Bruxelles" (2003) in which participants took fragments of plants from all over the capital and then handed out the cuttings they had taken to new owners during performances/happenings. She doesn't conceal her astonishment at the range of possibilities in the plant world, which has no equivalent in humans: "We place ourselves at the pinnacle of evolution, but what about the miracle of cuttings? It's as if you removed someone's arm and a new individual sprang from that limb. Plants and trees are superior life forms. A simple thistle alone produces 5,000 to 40,000 seeds. Some can enter a dormant state and start growing twenty years later. With other varieties, it's 100 years. There are even seeds that can float across vast expanses of water to plant themselves on another continent."

This love of plants came about in a very simple way. "When I was studying at the ERG, I lived in an apartment with a terrace," she recalls. "People would often give me plants... that's how I became interested in them. Watching them grow and unfold over a long time, I realised what an incredible variety of forms they take; it seemed that they came in every conceivable form, and I became aware of their total otherness." Duclaux would use this green treasure as a medium for talking about life. To do so, the artist attended lots of scientific lectures and went for walks in the city, her eyes peeled for the smallest shoot in the smallest crack in the concrete. "I pay a lot of attention to the science, but what I'm interested in is expressing the poetry of it; I view plants through the amazed eyes of a child," she says.

UNDERGROUND

Just back from a residency in Brooklyn, this artist from the Lyons region stresses the strong links between human history and the histories of plants. She gives the example of the greater plantain, whose scientific name is "Plantago major". "You can still find it today on the streets of New York. It's a plant that was introduced by the colonists in the seventeenth century. The native Americans, who were foragers and thus had a great awareness of plants, associated the plantain with the white man. A trace of this remains in the English language, in which it is known as 'white man's foot'. That anecdote says a lot about the fact that





Lise Duclaux:
green treasures
as a medium for
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plants are tied to our deeds and actions; they are what we are, they are a metaphor for ourselves.”

With its reputation as a “green city”, we imagine Brussels must be a paradise for Lise Duclaux. The response she gives is not simple: “Certainly, if you compare it to New York, we are incredibly lucky. But everything isn’t as perfect as all that.” Having lived here for 27 years, the artist has seen the devastating effects of increasing pressure from property developers. “There are no more vacant sites,” she observes glumly. “It’s very sad that those kinds of wild spaces don’t exist any more. They were like a breath of fresh air in the middle of the city. These days, the political priorities are safety and cleanliness, which infuriates me. It’s a way of suppressing all life. A clean city is a dead city.”

Fortunately, backing onto her studio in Laeken, a 1,350-square-metre shared garden, featuring an impressive persimmon tree, enables her to reconnect with life by working the soil with her hands. “It was thanks to this plot, which we leave relatively wild, that I became aware of the ‘underground’, the part of the plant that is hidden from sight,” reveals Lise Duclaux. “The network of roots, which is often more important than the visible part, is an inexhaustible source of inspiration. Drawing roots opens up a whole imaginary world.” **B**



NL De Brusselse kunstenaar Lise Duclaux is gefascineerd door alles wat groeit en bloeit. Haar weelderige werk is binnenkort te zien in een groepstentoonstelling bij Iselp en solo bij LMNO.

FR Plasticienne fascinée par le monde végétal, la Bruxelloise Lise Duclaux a les honneurs d’une double actualité bruxelloise: une exposition de groupe à l’Iselp et un solo show à la galerie LMNO.