

JOËLLE

DUBOIS

I am my mother

ther's daughter

THE BUTTERFLY,

THE ALCHEMIST

AND

THE PAINTER

It's a sunny day and I am sitting on a bench waiting for Joëlle Dubois. In front of me, a butterfly is whirling from flower to flower and the soft ballet movements of the scarlet red-winged insect bring to mind *An Omen*, the self-portrait with the enormous moth on the artist's forehead. Knowing the deeply personal story of the painting, I wonder if the presence of the butterfly is a coincidence? While in an artist residency in Gargilesse-Dampierre, France – the picturesque *village d'adoption* of novelist George Sand in the Indre – a giant moth took refuge for several days in front of Dubois's door, so fearless and trusting, to a point that it even allowed itself to be touched. When it decided to leave, news from Belgium arrived requesting the artist's presence at her mother's bedside.

Dubois is known for her edgy, vibrant and colourful paintings. They usually depict groups of intimidating people or stern-looking individuals. Either alone or engaged in activities of explicit sexual intercourse, her characters are frequently absorbed by a screen of some sort. In these compositions, Dubois fleshes out the codes and symptoms of interpersonal relationships in an age of advanced technology, self-optimisation and heightened desirability. She exposes the fakeness of the promises of friendships and relationships made on social media, and pinpoints the loneliness that permeates contemporary society. Dubois is bold enough to include herself in her work, but even then, she eerily manages to stay in the observer's safe space.

Now, a softer side is unveiled. Addressing the sickness and loss of her mother, Dubois delivers a highly personal and fragile – yet universal and emancipatory – body of work which alternates between numbness, anger, distress, but also hope and deliverance. In *Let Me Finish My Drink First (Homage to Nicole Eisenman)*, a scene reminiscent of Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, the mother-figure is seen in a game of seduction with Death, holding a glass of wine, in a conversation that will delay and hopefully rescue her from her plight. With her black and white ceramic vases, the artist toys with the idea of vials that contain the elixir of eternal life. The painted umbilical cords, tunnels and hourglasses are a testament to the efforts to keep the mother-figure alive and sound in body and mind. Dubois tries desperately, like an alchemist, to work out the formula for immortality. But the outcome is inevitable.

Paint is the medium *de préférence*. Nonetheless, Dubois is unafraid to step out of her comfort zone and explore other artistic forms. In her latest experiments she explores the moving image and, in collaboration with Florinda Ciucio, has created a video installation, *The Memory Machine*, which makes use of the endless hours of footage of her mother she accumulated over the years. A digital vault against the evanescence of memory.

Dubois talks of her artistic process in this latest body of work as being cathartic. A visceral and therapeutic exercise that brought acceptance and closure with the reality of death. She allowed space for her suffering, stayed attuned to messages that came in her dreams, and filled the canvas with symbols, metaphors and allegories.

The art historical references are multiple: Dalí, Botero, Lucas, Emin... even Aztec codices are referenced in the *Reincarnation* series, an intimate and delicate series of pencil drawings, a probe on internal struggles and the circle of life. But the fairy godmother must be Frida Kahlo, even if Dubois is not thinking of her during this process. Her first encounter with Kahlo occurred when her mother took her, at a young age, to an exhibition in London. Then, when she was an adult, her mother gifted her with a book on the Mexican painter. An omen! Dubois's paintings are vibrant in colour. Her work is autobiographical, with a visual lexicon of signs and symbols, but mostly it is unafraid to speak of suffering in total and disarming honesty.

By addressing the psychological states one goes through when losing a parent, Dubois continues to explore loneliness. Whilst in her previous works she kept her distance as an observer, here, her embodiment of loneliness is palpable. Her paintings and drawings exude an other-worldly presence that cannot be missed, and we feel almost uneasy to be witnesses to this extremely private moment. Yet, sharing this personal journey is intentional. Like Joan Didion, Dubois writes her story using a wide variety of media, with the aim of healing – herself as much as the viewer – from the crushing realisation of the fleeting nature of life and the parting from the people we love most.

Christel Tsilibaris,
Curatorial Project Manager at Bozar, Brussels



ME

FORGET

NOT







age for future generations



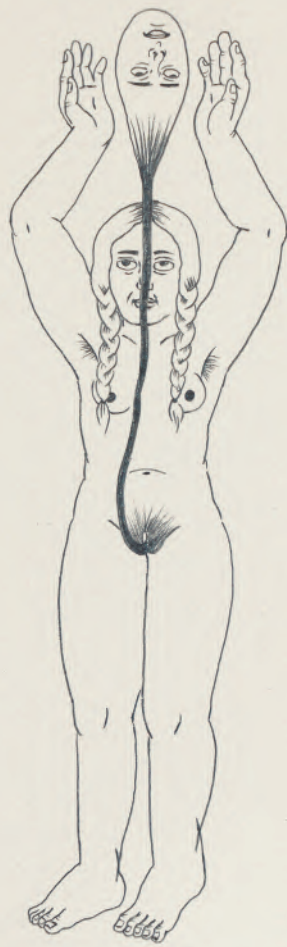
Joëlle Dubois



THE EGG PRESERVES
LIFE AND BEING.
THEREFORE KNOW
THAT AIR IS NOTHING
OTHER THAN CHAOS
AND CHAOS
NOTHING BUT THE
WHITE OF AN EGG
AND THE EGG IS
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ABOUT

TRANSFORMATION,

THE ARTIST'S GAZE

AND

ALL THINGS SHINY

Katrina Schwarz: You've said that this is the third chapter of your work – the final part of a kind of triptych. Can you tell me more about that?

[p. 8] → Joëlle Dubois: A few weeks ago, I realised this exhibition is actually the third chapter in a trilogy – a triptych of solo shows. The first was *Forget Me Not* and explored the theme of forgetting. It was about my mother, who had Alzheimer's. The show in 2022 reflected on how to cope with her condition – how our relationship changed. She had always been the caregiver – the mother who raised me. But then, suddenly, I became her mother. In a way, it felt like everything had come full circle.

And the second exhibition followed soon after, shaped by this relationship as well?

[p. 88] → Yes, *From Here On Out* in 2024 continued to explore these ideas, but it was created under very different circumstances. My mother passed away while I was preparing this exhibition. Her passing was so sudden that it changed the vibe of the show mid-production. The strange thing is, I don't even remember making them. It was as though I was painting in a trance. Grief does strange things to people.

[p. 136] → At the exhibition opening, I stood there looking at all these works on the wall – and felt like an outsider. They were mine, but they felt distant. *Rekindling* is the third part of this story – a post-mortem. It's really all about transformation.

You've spoken about even forgetting the technical process. Was this 'amnesia' specific to this period of grieving?

I often forget how to do anything when I start painting. Every time I paint, let's say, a hand or an eye, I feel like it's a new experience all over again. I'm like, 'Wait, how did I do this last time?' It's ridiculous. But the knowledge is still there, somewhere in my unconscious mind, and it always comes back again. With this trilogy, though, it was a different kind of forgetting. It was about the whole painting – not just the technique.

I often don't like my paintings while I'm making them. It's like a battle. I love the quote by Philip Guston, because it's so recognisable: 'Frustration is an important, almost crucial, ingredient. I think that the best painting involves frustration.' I share a studio

with my best friend Nina Van denbempt, and she laughs when I make these guttural noises of unease while I'm painting. She then says, 'Keep going baby! You can do it!' Sometimes I just want to cover the whole thing up, or repaint it, or bin it – but I never do.

What stops you from doing that? How do you know a painting is done and ready to share?

Deadlines! [laughs] I'm not sure if it's ever really done. I need to walk away and abandon it for a while. I guess it's finished when I feel the image starts to come to life, that's usually how I can tell... I can't stop until something unexpected happens, and everything suddenly fits. All of a sudden, there is a certain unity – then it's done.

Do you ever come to appreciate the work later?

Yes, once it has left the studio. Sometimes when I see a piece again, I think, 'It's not *that* bad.' Especially when people tell me they're touched by it – that's when I realise, okay, maybe it does work. But I don't know, it always remains the most puzzling thing to me. I often work around the clock whenever a deadline is creeping up. I have to keep going until it's done – that's what works for me, really. And then I think, 'Wait, what did I make?'

Let's talk about this new chapter and the new exhibition. I know it features both new work and selected pieces from private collections. In the second show, you shifted to a mostly monochrome palette – is that something you've continued here?

That's right. Yes. After my mother died, everything became very loud – my memories, emotions, thoughts ... I felt the need to silence the noise in my head, so I started using just one colour, to bring everything back to its essence. I try not to think about it too much.

Does the subject determine the materials you prefer using?

Ideas often come to me when I am in my bed, and I kept having flashes of objects and scenes from the house I grew up in. For example, we had many doors and windows with stained glass, so I've designed

[pp. 149, 185] →

two stained-glass pieces in honour of that past. After my show *Forget Me Not*, I became fascinated by alchemy and its historical obsession with immortality and the mystical quest for the 'elixir of life'. It was believed that alchemy could cure all diseases and even defy death, and that fascination with this ancient desire is present in my recent work. In 2022, I painted three ceramic vases titled *Elixir of Life*. And now, for *Rekindling*, I made three bronze sculptures – *Catharsis* – each in an edition of eight, all influenced by these ideas.

[pp. 24–5, 64–5, 74–5] →

[pp. 140–1, 156–7, 180–1] →

What draws you to move away from the walls and work with sculpture?

I always feel like I need to shake things up from time to time, and how that manifests itself – well, nobody knows. It comes naturally – the subject determines the material. It's honestly more about feeling and enjoying the process, transforming raw substances into form, almost like channelling a process of transmutation. It begins with this desire – a powerful urge to see what you've imagined. I might think, 'Wouldn't it be fantastic to...' And then I simply have to go for it. There's no such thing as an idea that's 'too crazy'. The wildest ones are often the most important to pursue.

This isn't your first time bringing installation into your shows. Can you tell me about the tent or 'fort' you built for your solo exhibition in 2022?

[pp. 42–5] →

That's right, *Moon Cave* was inspired by the universal act of children building makeshift shelters with sticks, sofas, blankets... I believe it's about safety, and I connect the image of the womb or a cave to it. I made a fort that was inspired by K'NEX [a toy construction system that consists of interlocking plastic rods, connectors, gears, wheels, etc.]. I covered the house-like form with a white sheet overlaid with lace. In Belgium, and Flanders in particular, lace is a traditional craft passed from grandmother to mother to daughter, but it also has a sexual connotation and highlights the combination of fragility and strength. This tension continuously runs throughout my work.

Inside the installation were silk forget-me-not flowers – like the kind you'd put on a grave – and a pink UV light, the type used to help flowers grow. But of course, these flowers are artificial, so they will never grow.

And they will never die?

Exactly. You could also hear my mum's voice, talking about how she felt after receiving her diagnosis – but her answers were muffled, like the sound of a mother's voice in the womb. Visitors had to come close to hear. When I create installations, I like to play with all the senses.

Why is it important to engage all the senses?

Because it allows the work to become an experience rather than just an image to look at. It allows people to fully immerse. I like to believe it goes straight to the nervous system.

The way you have described your mother, and painted her, makes it clear she had tremendous energy. Did that make her illness – her retreat from life – especially painful?

Yes, my mother was very proud, outspoken, and rock 'n' roll. My parents always hosted dinners and parties for their friends, and this energy was present in the interior of our home as well. Every wall was painted a different colour – pink, lilac, blue. I was also allowed to paint on the walls. That past is visible in my work. I guess it's where the bright colours come from. Colours and music were always very present and important. It was chaotic and free. But I liked it. It shaped who I am.

You also grew up surrounded by esoteric influences – your father practised Buddhism, you've spoken about tarot and symbolism, and also the influence of comic books. Does that run through your work as well?

Yes, definitely. My mum taught me everything about astrology, palmistry, and tarot, which I often incorporate in my work. And I've been into comics since I was a kid. My dad has a whole collection of Belgian comics like *Nero*, *Asterix & Obelix*, and *Gaston*. When I was about nine, I discovered his collection of [Milo] Manara comics, and it blew my mind – even though I was obviously too young to see this kind of erotic imagery. Not long after, my obsession with manga and anime kicked off. Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* and Hayao Miyazaki's films will always have a special place in my heart.

FROM

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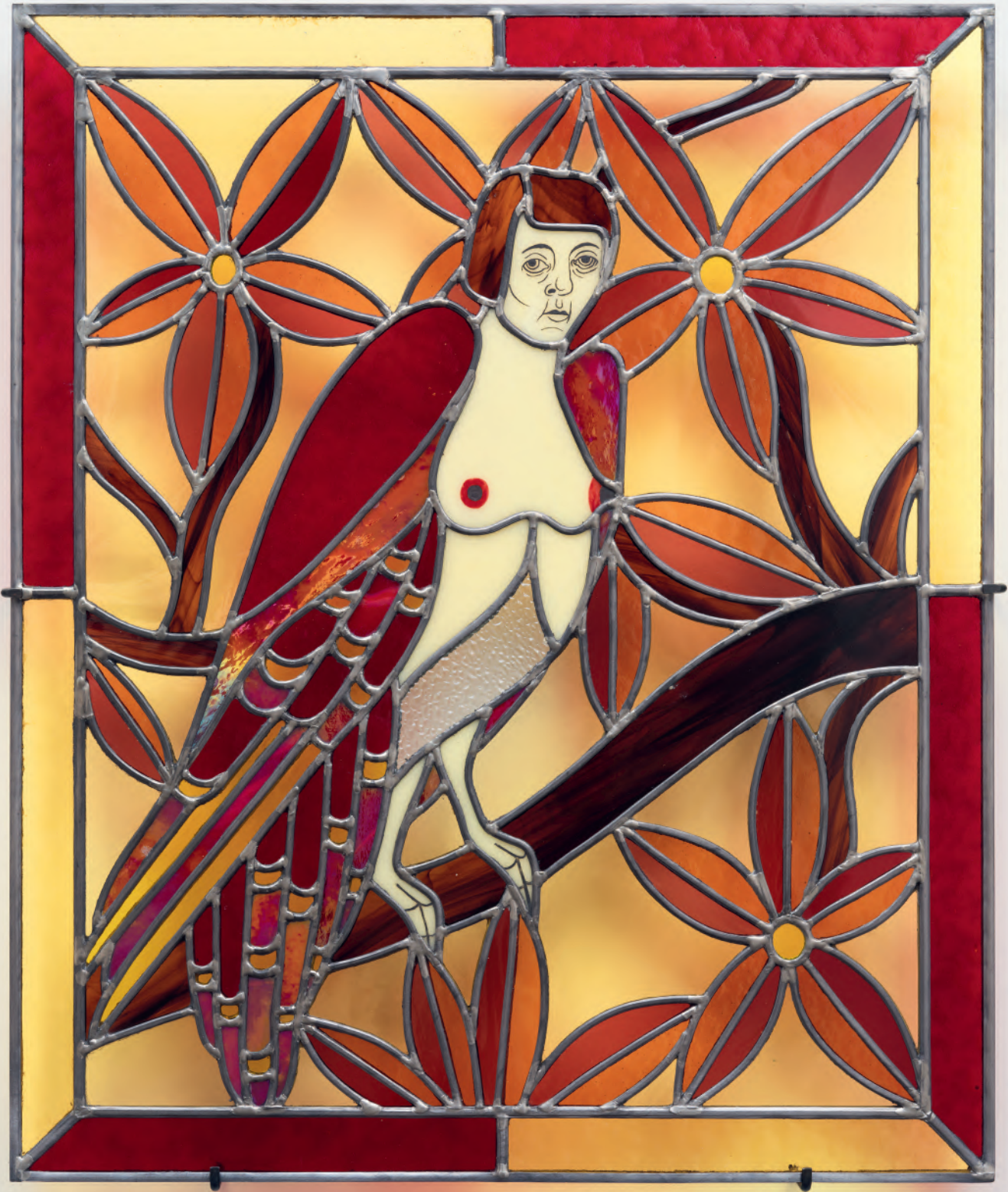
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MOURNING IN FORGETFULNESS











EPILOGUE

*'I am my mother[s] daughter, but your death has left me feeling alone
I will never see your pretty face again or hear your sweet voice on my phone'*

Gloria Gatica, 2013

I'm reading Karl Ove Knausgård's *A Death in the Family: My Struggle Book 1*, while curating the exhibition that explores Joëlle Dubois's oeuvre. In *My Struggle Book 1*, the first volume of a series of six autobiographical novels entitled *My Struggle* (*Min kamp* in Norwegian), Knausgård sets down a raw, razor-sharp dissection of his childhood and his tense, bewildering relationship with his father. His prose is unsparing, yet never baseless. What remains is not a caricature, but a shadow – something that settled quietly into who he became.

Dubois does something similar, though using a different language: that of the image. For *Rekindling*, her new solo exhibition at Be-Part in Kortrijk, she returns to the mother theme and the thread that connects but never breaks – not even through illness, decline or loss. The title refers to the rekindling of feelings, memories or love, just when the flames were about to go out. Through images, symbols and rituals, Dubois gives form to what we cannot grasp.

The exhibition forms the final part of a triptych about the mother–daughter bond, a cycle that began with *Forget Me Not*, was followed by *From Here On Out*, and now culminates in *Rekindling*. Each chapter marks a different stage of the process of letting go and, simultaneously, holding on. For what disappears from memory continues to exist in image, in colour, in movement.

For nine years the daughter cared for her mother. For nine years she continued to live in the same house close to her mother, and left her hair almost untouched – as a silent bearer of the past, as a tangible string tied to what was quietly slipping away.

As the mother faded away slowly, the daughter held onto images – as anchors, as resistance, as a quiet act of love. Just as Knausgård rewrites his past to understand it, so Dubois rearranges her images and memories to come to terms with them. Not in time, but in art.

Thus, this story ends where it began: with a bond that endures, despite everything.

Where memory fades, art offers form. Not to restore what was lost, but to give meaning to what remains.

Patrick Ronse,

Artistic Director at Be-Part, Kortrijk

Gloria Gatica, *I am my mothers daughter* (2013),
<https://allpoetry.com/poem/10590707-I-am-my-mothers-daughter-by-Gloria-Gatica>.

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All paintings are acrylic on wooden panel / pp. 12–3, 66–7 Ink on handmade paper / pp. 18–9, 26–7, 28–9 Ballpoint pen on handmade paper / pp. 32–7 Paint on mural / pp. 42–5 Fabric, lace, earth, UV-light. Soundscape by Joppe Tanghe / pp. 48–9 Acrylic and pencil on Japanese paper / pp. 52–9 Graphite on handmade paper / pp. 24–5, 64–5, 74–5 Ceramic vases by Jolien Holvoet, painted by Joëlle Dubois, glazed / pp. 96–7 Ballpoint pen on paper / pp. 109–11, 123–5 Mixed media on handmade paper 110g/m², A4 / pp. 139, 144–7, 150–1, 154–5, 158–9, 177–9, 182–3, 186–7 Graphite, dry transfer lettering on handmade paper. Poems by Precious Okoyomon / pp. 140–1, 156–7, 180–1 Bronze / pp. 149, 185 Stained-glass work produced by Veerle Verschooren, artwork and design by Joëlle Dubois / pp. 160–73: *The Memory Machine*, 2025. 2-channel video installation, length 25 minutes. Concept, sound, edit: © Joëlle Dubois, Florinda Ciucio. Camera: Karen Vazquez Guadarrama.

COLOPHON

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BE-PART



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Cover: Joëlle Dubois, *Self-Portrait in Abundance*, 2025

Pp. 2–3: *I am My Mother's Daughter*, 2022, Neon Installation by Erwin (BE), 20 × 170 cm

