

Atelier Van Lieshout - *Sacrifice* (2021)

To most westerners, war is a historic phenomenon. Most World War II veterans have passed away and their experiences during the last armed conflict on Dutch soil have become lore. Most of the time war is spoken of figuratively: battles against drug addiction, cultural wars conducted on social media and even the fight against Covid-19 has been framed in military terms.

But these conflicts lack the physical immediacy of an actual war. In his classic novel *The Darkroom of Damocles*, Dutch author W.F. Hermans argued that individuals only show their true nature while under extreme duress – war being the ultimate crisis. That's when they show their best qualities, and their worst. Unheard of cruelty and betrayal as well as limitless self-sacrifice and friendship. War may lead to genocide but can also spawn social and technological progress.

That certainly holds true for World War I, a strong point of reference for Atelier Van Lieshout's installation *Sacrifice*. The Great War sped up the acceptance of women's suffrage and the development of aviation. However, this came at the cost of 17 million lives, most of which were lost in the trenches of the Somme, on the Gallipoli peninsula or in the Belgian heartland.

Sacrifice shows the reduction of individuals to cannon fodder, human bodies turning into organic waste. In this chaotic abundance, heavily armed soldiers and nurses stand side by side with clowns and gods. Body parts are severed and sometimes reconnected but not always correctly. *Sacrifice* pairs gritty realism with absurdity and freewheeling creativity.

Sacrifice is the result of a period of unfiltered productivity. A universe of human strengths and failings was created inspired by the hundreds of sketches Joep van Lieshout makes weekly. Mannequins, costumes and other objets trouvés were often used, enabling high speed and an intuitive, expressive looseness more akin to painting than sculpture. High art motifs have been combined with base nastiness and even anti-art: sculptures wilfully turned into lamps or candlesticks.

This installation is the precursor to AVL's *The Maze*, a sculptural playground containing AVL works from every period that will be constructed at AVL's soon to be built storage facility. *Sacrifice* also invites visitors to wander among the sculptures and become part of this carnival of death. But the negativity also summons up contrary emotions: deep love, religious enlightenment and the feeling of truly being alive. This is typical for the ambiguity that runs through all AVL's work.

Sacrifice downplays our overinflated sense of personal importance. Keyboard warriors fight anonymously or make demands without conflict or opposition. Pampered by helicopter parents and overregulating authorities, people are barely capable of making sacrifices anymore.

Sacrifice is not about the glorification of war, but it does stress the fact that true change usually comes with violence and victims. No evolution without destruction. It's what makes us human, and extremely dangerous.