





# **ARNE QUINZE**

with photography by Dave Bruel

**Lannoo**

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I hope to plant  
A seed in your mind,  
and inspire you to be  
more empowered by  
the powerful-fragile-beauty  
of nature

Ame Quinn

# Xavier Roland

Manager of the Museums Hub and Director  
of the Museum of Fine Arts of Mons (BAM)

## Introduction

From 2015 to 2021, a monumental sculpture was installed in Mons, just a few steps away from the Grand-Place. It was the work of Arne Quinze, now regarded as one of the most prolific Belgian artists in terms of creating works of art for the public space. Dozens of his sculptures have been installed all over the world, in Paris, London, Shanghai and beyond. His journey as an artist has not been typical. He began his career on the streets of Brussels as a graffiti artist before going on to create monumental sculptures, always outdoors. Published to mark the occasion of a retrospective exhibition at the Mons Museum of Fine Arts (BAM, Beaux-Arts Mons), this catalogue sets out to explore his plastic approach, which often overlaps with his urban work. Indeed, we quickly become aware of the impact of modern cities, from his first creations to those of today, always set against the backdrop of nature, which gradually takes possession of the work. This exhibition also seeks to draw the public's attention to how, through his monumental sculptures, Quinze is able to bring life back to the heart of our cities. It was therefore impossible – even in the context of a museum exhibition like this one – to evoke such an artist without summoning the city to take part in the exhibition. Hence the installation of three monumental sculptures on the Grand-Place, and two more that welcome the visitor on the BAM forecourt. In keeping with his practice, Quinze deliberately blurs the distinction between the museum space and the public space.

In the work of Arne Quinze, the possessive pronoun 'My' resounds like an enduring echo. The titles for a number of his early works are peppered with the English pronoun 'My' and its variants: *My Home*, *My Safe Home*, *My Secret*

*Garden* . . . The title of the exhibition *My Secret Garden* affirms the refusal to separate his public work from his identity as a man, which has contributed to disrupting the usual lines of division between the private and public space. This movement back and forth between the two helps to shape his ability to constantly renew his work. The exhibition brings together more than 100 of his works. They range from his earliest pieces dating back to 2010, to his most recent creations from 2021. It is possible to distinguish between a number of different stylistic phases. In Quinze's early works, he is forging an identity in the face of a disillusionment with modern cities. This is why the city occupies a central place from the very start of the exhibition, with works such as *Bidonville*, *Cityview*, and *Stilt House* . . . The title also suggests an initiatory journey into his intimate, creative and memorial universe. The studio, which is quasi-recreated in the exhibition, appears in the tour as a place to become immersed in the intimacy of creation, where we better understand how he moves from the micro to the macrocosm, from the private space to the public space. The final parts of this retrospective tour literally plunge us into an explosion of colour. He is profoundly inspired by Monet and Impressionism, which he revisits in his own way. The garden – a major source of inspiration – is in a state of osmosis with his oil paintings. The fresco he has created on the windows of the BAM, with a real garden that he himself planted a few months before, now certainly comes into its own! Nature occupies a central place in the story, as we discover throughout the course of this exhibition.

We would like to thank Arne Quinze and his team, Dave Bruel and Lien De Brabander, for their commitment to this project, which has not been easy to carry out in the context of the pandemic that formed the backdrop to the preparation of



**The Passenger**, 2014  
Public sculpture in wood  
Rue de Nimy, Mons, Belgium



**My Home My House My Stilhouse**, 2009  
Composition of drawings  
Museum of the Saatchi Gallery, London, UK

the exhibition. The scenography and graphics were provided by Yesmine Sliman Lawton from Okidoki and her assistant, Aurore Lebutte. I would like to thank them for the quality and professionalism of their work. Last but not least, I would like to thank BAM's project officer, Alice Cantignau, who – with the help of the Museums Hub team – has coordinated this exhibition in brilliant style.

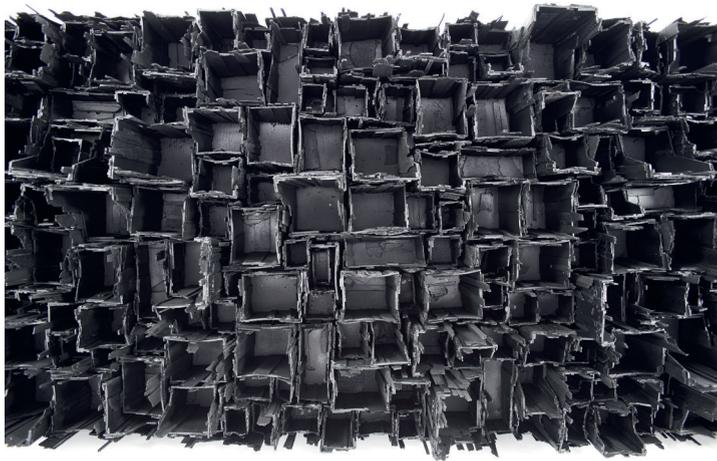
### Arne Quinze : My Secret Garden

How is it that Arne Quinze is able to install a memorial trace in our collective memory with ephemeral sculptures like *The Passenger* at Mons that he installs all over the world? It requires quite a journey to understand all the stages that the artist has gone through in his life. From his travels around the world to his private garden, it is as much a question of the limits of the enclosed space of the work as it is of its permanence in time. We believe that it is this cross-reflection on time and space that helps to anchor his works in the territory they occupy. The question that arises in the background concerns the legacy that these ephemeral sculptures will bequeath to us. For what is terrible is perhaps not so much that the sculpture disappears, but that its disappearance might be in vain, without consequence!

### The Disenchanted City

Arne Quinze left the countryside, where he spent a large part of his childhood, and discovered Brussels at the age of 16. He was fascinated by this new urban world, and at the same time depressed by the greyness and monotony of the streets, the façades and the architecture. In the early 1980s, he gathered around him a community of graffiti artists that is still active today.

'With graffiti', he says, 'I wanted to change things. One day, after tagging a metro train, I saw that it provoked a dialogue between passers-by who would otherwise never speak to one another. Some were in favour, and some were against'. His work as a graffiti artist certainly cannot be reduced to the one-dimensional question of degradation or provocation. On the contrary, he instinctively seeks to gain entry to the urban interstices that everyone has forgotten, with the desire to create a feeling of beauty where all traces of humanity seem to have disappeared. And so he began to travel the world in search of other things, other cultures, other cities. 'The more I travelled in search of different cultures, the more I was disappointed when I came back home. Unfortunately, I came to the conclusion that cities around the world were all much the same in their greyness, their architecture . . . The urban



**Bidonville View 230**, 2008  
Wood, polyurethane, 80 x 250 x 27 cm  
Private collection

and cultural difference I hoped to find was just a figment of my imagination'. The photographic work he undertakes during these many trips constitutes a sum of archives intended to nourish his creativity. These photographs bear witness to an artist who immerses himself in urban landscapes from one end of the planet to the other, as if intent on seeing and recording it all, in order to establish a personal memory of our modern world. Not just any world, but the one in which humans have taken up residence on a massive scale: the world of the modern city. These graphic and visual archives have nothing to do with theory or aesthetics; they are simply the accumulation over time of immersive and sensitive data on an urban world that he records through his traveller's eye. While these visual archives are simply the result of a solitary process, and while these views are almost invariably neutral, deserted and monotonous in their composition, they constitute a veritable reservoir of inspiration for him. Whether they bear witness to a history, a form of knowledge, an archaeological trail or an ancient memory, the fact remains that this reservoir of images makes a lasting impression on Quinze's consciousness. These intimate archives are carefully preserved as the starting point and the anchor for a body of work that is devoted to modern, dehumanised cities. From Shanghai to Queensland, these cities made of concrete stretch



**Natural Golden Chaos**, 2014  
Rose gold, 130 x 125 x 155 cm  
Pforzheim, Germany

out before his lens. The photos have a cold, hyperrealist style: the viewing angles systematically reveal strict constructions, rigorous lines and colours ranging from orange to yellow, with façades that are sometimes pale blue. As a result of his many travels, he came to the conclusion that all cities derive from a single urban plan, composed of square shapes that seem to repeat themselves endlessly. This sense of monotony, confinement and disenchantment is expressed in several works that he calls *Bidonville View 230*, a series of black, calcined prints. For Quinze, colour is now essential in his work, expressing nature, life and beauty. Monochrome works like these are rare. But it is important to pay attention to them, because this dark state of mind is the source of his struggle for life. From this spleen, which is the result of everything he sees during his wanderings in the slums, he creates these haut-relief scenes that are very much the result of an archaeological dig. They represent nothing more than the trace of ancient architectural foundations, but strangely without any streets, alleys, squares or crossroads through which life could infiltrate. Everything is black. When we know that life, for Quinze, is inscribed in the in-between of things, we understand how deadly these first traces of cities are. The whole enterprise of his work lies in this quest for life, which he tries to infiltrate into different neighbourhoods of the world's major cities.

Arne Quinze also produces graphic and edgy drawings, saturated with Bic and sometimes enhanced with colour, which he presents in the form of diptychs opposite the original photo. These sketches retain only the shape and colour of the housing from the original photo. The artist projects a vital, almost sanguine energy into this architectural impression, which he considers indispensable for our survival. These studies are a precursor to a series of window sculptures he calls *Chaos*, created between 2010 and 2015. Quinze sees them as entirely transparent visions of architecture, with no doors or windows, in which he accumulates small strips of coloured wood. The symbolism of colours, already evident and perceptible in his drawings, is also found in his sculptures: red and orange symbolise for the artist the blood that circulates in our veins, the source of life. In *Breeding Life*, for example, a tide of this coloured wood floods almost the entire surface of the house. The glass walls contain this accumulating fountain of youth until it starts to resemble a liquid. When these strips of wood spill out of their glass container, we are not surprised to see them flood into the urban space, which remains the starting point for Arne Quinze's work. This gives rise to installations such as *The Passenger* in Mons, which create a veritable flow of organic and chaotic life, while the street space measures this power of the deluge against the stability of the inert mineral façades. *The Passenger* will certainly destabilise the urban order in the city of the Doudou festival, but the installation will also create a disturbance, first and foremost, in the life of the neighbourhood where it is installed, all the more so since the Rue de Nimy is one of the main historical arteries of the city of Mons: it leads directly to both the Grand-Place and Mons Town Hall. Strangely enough, few people have questioned the placement of Arne Quinze's sculpture in the city of Mons. The chosen location is indeed

symbolic, to say the least, in the spirit of the work: the chaotic and rhizomic sculpture rises and swirls like a tide of wood suspended between the Palais de Justice and the Church of Sainte-Elisabeth, where the relics of Saint George are kept. The Church of Sainte-Elisabeth was designed by the architect Claude-Joseph de Bettignies, who opted for the Baroque style in 1714 when he was commissioned to rebuild the building after a devastating fire. The Palais de Justice, meanwhile, is in the neo-classical style with a pediment and balusters that give the façade a strict rhythm. We often think of Saint George as the cultured figure, the civilised man up against the dragon, which symbolises the power of nature. The same can be said



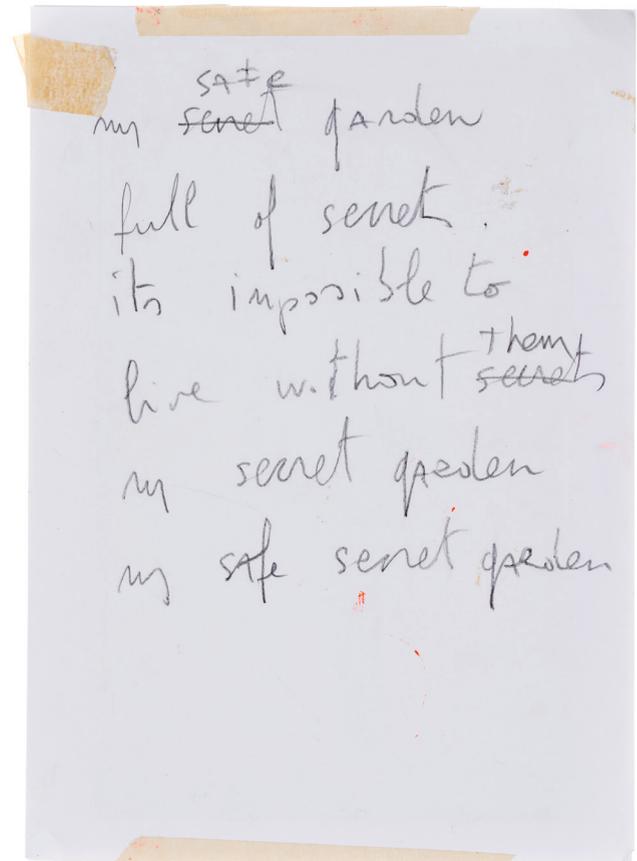
**Breeding Life**, 2010  
Wood, polycarbonate glass  
Presented at Art Singapore, 2013

of justice, which is seen as the guardian of good against evil. Arne Quinze's sculpture embodies and links these two antagonistic symbols of nature and culture, reason and folly, right there in the heart of the city.

At their heart, these two buildings also express in their own way confinement, isolation and contemplation. In a

contrasting mirror image, they are also symbols of freedom, encounter and vital energy. By listening to Arne Quinze, we begin to understand the extent to which he is haunted by the question of confinement, of security to the point of isolation, and even self-withdrawal. With him, the possessive pronoun 'My' resonates like an echo throughout his life as an artist. The titles of some of his early works are interspersed with the pronoun 'My' and its variants: *My Home*, *My Safe Home*, *My Secret Garden* . . . The title of the exhibition *My Secret Garden* asserts his refusal to separate his public work from his identity as a man who has contributed to disrupting the usual lines of division between freedom and confinement, nature and culture. This pendulum movement back and forth from one to the other shapes his ability to constantly revitalise his work.

**My private garden**  
**My secret garden**  
**Own-mine**  
**Gone-escaping everything**  
**Continuous present**  
**Open and close**  
**M-nature**  
**MY SECRET GARDEN**



**My Safe Garden**, 2009  
Pencil drawing on paper, 297 x 210 mm  
Arne Quinze Foundation

These words engraved on the wooden surface of one of his works ring out like a warning, the alert to a boundary that must not be crossed. In Quinze's works dated from 2010 to 2015, the barriers of orange sticks that regularly cross the pictorial surface in the lower quarter delimit his secret garden. Indeed, with the creation of *My Safe Garden*, he says, 'I noticed that I had embarked on a mental journey, so to speak, and that I was disappearing more and more into my own world'. Through this type of work, Arne Quinze depicts existence, from birth to death, as a confinement in a world disconnected from nature. By living within the security of our houses, or a garden surrounded by fences, humans have come to forget the existence of the outside world. In each of the works, the mirror not only reflects our image, but also encloses us within these glass boxes with no exit. The Stilthouses are anthropomorphic sculptures often associated with or directly integrated into the Safe Garden. The human body scanning the horizon here takes the form of a house

perched on long, fragile legs that are anchored to the ground. With its head in the sky and its feet on the ground, the human figure is represented in a state of precarious balance.

How we inhabit the world has become an obsession for Arne Quinze, and it is above all a matter of questioning it from the perspective of our daily lives. What would happen if a foreign object suddenly appeared out of the blue in our secret garden? Arne Quinze's approach to the public space is rooted in this reflection; he sees his work as the sudden intrusion of a strange, large and unstable object that disrupts urban tranquillity. *Rock Strangers* on the seawall in Ostend, or the urban installation he has created in Mons, come across like Surrealist *objets*. By this we mean that, like this leading movement of the 20th century, the artist creates associations with his installations that trigger a chain reaction in the imagination of passers-by that has the effect of disrupting our everyday relationship with a neighbourhood. In Mons, for example, such a gesture has transformed the public space into a neighbourly zone, a place for coming together



**Rock Strangers**, 2014  
Public sculpture in steel  
Zeeheldenplein, Ostend, Belgium

or a rendezvous in a neighbourhood whose identity was not necessarily conducive to such a purpose, squeezed as it was between a church and a courthouse. If something happens that is at once fluid, dynamic and unstructured by a community or an institution, then urban planning theories speak of the creation of a place of 'mediation': some kind of third party that leads to a reflection on the collective configurations that modify the habitual patterns and ways of functioning considered normal in a given society at a given time. With this quasi-Surrealist gesture, Arne Quinze has succeeded in creating an 'ephemeral third party', one that has significantly transformed the life and sense of community in this neighbourhood. Now that the sculpture has disappeared, the memorial trace left behind in our consciousness acts as a catalyst to trigger a response to life and how we inhabit the city. The twofold trauma that it creates in the public space – the first when this unexpectedly chaotic and organic form is installed and the second when it is dismantled – creates a genuine void in the consciousness of the inhabitants to the point of creating a call to fill it. This original way of activating memory and the imagination, which he borrows from Surrealist artists, remains the guiding thread for understanding his work, like a leitmotiv that encourages us to give life back to our cities, to regenerate them like a living garden. Therefore, to the question that arises today in the face of the great void left by the disappearance of Arne Quinze's work in Mons: What legacy does it leave to the people of Mons? We reply: Energy, freedom and a need to occupy the public space . . .

Through this pendulum swing that moves from the conscious to the unconscious, from the microcosm to the macrocosm, from the interior to the exterior, from the private – enclosed – space to the public domain . . . we begin to get

a better idea of how Arne Quinze is able to constantly reinvent his work. In this respect, a visit to his house, which also serves in part as his studio, is a decisive moment. Somewhere between a cabinet of curiosities and a laboratory, the artist's living space is filled from floor to ceiling with models of various sizes. Most surprising of all are the animal skulls that hang here and there in the rooms. Finally, there is his garden, which is not fenced off from the street, and which is practically overflowing into his house with the multitude of leaves



**Arne Quinze's studio**, 2013  
Sint-Martens-Latem, Belgium

and dried plants that are hanging all over his interior. With the image of these dried flowers, let us now leave the urban world to linger on the origin and the *raison d'être* of nature, which has always had an essential place in Quinze's artistic work in terms of its relationship with all things urban.

### Les fleurs du désir

We have to go back to 2010, when, on commission from the city of Rouen, Arne Quinze created a series of paintings, *Les Jardins*, directly inspired by Monet. He approaches his first so-called Impressionist paintings with the eye of a sculptor, because what attracts him is not so much the colour as the actual structure of the flower, not its decorative aspect, but its timeless structural aspect. When describing his flowers, for example, he therefore concentrates mainly on the architectural features, such as the form of the leaves and pods, or the veins, which he sees as the framework of the leaf; he never dwells on their evanescent shape. So perhaps he is a naturalist before he is a painter. In any case, the garden is increasingly becoming an exciting and enduring source of inspiration for him throughout the year. In Rouen, he immediately created a series of impressive monumental canvases. In each of them an organic monochrome form emerges, directly inspired by *Water Lilies*, which Claude Monet painted in the gardens of his house in Giverny. With a lively and spontaneous stroke, Quinze highlights the key elements of the painting. The technique is not unlike that used for drawings based on photographs of architecture: he instils a vital energy within a neutral form. He repeats this floral matrix endlessly on sometimes monumental canvases that he covers with splashes and drips of fresh paint. It is through work like this that Arne Quinze created his own garden at home, where, like Claude

Monet, he spends hours observing the plants that he grows all around him. He chooses his flowers according to their shape and colour. Taken as a whole, they have the particular characteristic of changing with the seasons, thus ensuring the permanence rather than the transience of the colourful bloom. The Master of Impressionism inspires Quinze in the way that he paints direct from life, while still retaining his own style. The desire and attraction for the flower have gradually become a force that is constantly reborn in him like a phoenix through his Baudelairean desire to blend the beautiful with the obscure, nature with the city.

The barriers made of sticks that used to line and delimit Quinze's Safe Gardens now disappear from the surface of the canvas, no doubt as a result of his self-imposed reflection on the limits between the pictorial surface, on the one hand, and the external world, on the other. The way he uses framing in his current painting is probably the most telling example of the work he is pursuing on the concept of enclosure, partitioning and the border between one thing and another. Framing in painting determines a self-contained system that includes everything present in the image. The large-format landscapes he is currently producing are covered with successive layers of oil paint that give the impression of a depth of field, but without ever allowing either a centre or a periphery to emerge. Even if a subject sometimes seems to emerge, it is quickly reintegrated into a whole that is never limited by the frame. This very particular way of organising the pictorial space does not allow for differentiation between the primary and the secondary: each moment requires special attention in turn. We usually conceive of the frame as a dynamic form of perception that determines the subject. But in Quinze's case, the frame does not influence the act of creating the surface, because, as he explains, his objective is to paint not flowers, but rather his entire garden, hence the feeling of constant extension and overflow in his painting. In any case, he says, the frame or barrier is experienced as a limitation. Proceeding in this way without framing the subject ensures that the work is anchored. By this we mean that there is no longer a separation between what is seen as the work itself and what is next to, around or outside the work; in a way, the work and the garden in Quinze's work become one.

Ultimately, the modernity of Impressionist painting may seem obsolete, even increasingly alien in the face of the incredible acceleration of our contemporary society in the light of globalisation. But Arne Quinze is here formulating a new way of being Impressionist, inverting this tendency to detach oneself from the ground in order to reconnect with the earth and with nature. For him, the garden is no longer a thing to be seen, but instead becomes the partner in an immersive experience that he captures with his large-format works. What is more, his affiliation with Impressionist themes is also affirmed through his primary instinct as a graffiti artist to take over neglected urban spaces in which he wants to reintroduce nature. In his photographs of shantytowns, which radiate a deep unease, even a sense of confinement, Arne Quinze infuses urban cities with a new form of humanism, which is now measured against the scale of a natural environment in the throes of change . . . If we want to move towards a new equilibrium, he says, we must urgently reconnect with nature; we must find a new way of inhabiting the world in the 21st century.

**Les Jardins - The Water Lillies 04112009**, 2009  
Wood, paint, pencil, 203 x 104 x 10 cm



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