

Encountering the Wyvern

Élise Girardot

[Élise Girardot, curator and art critic](#) attended a performance by artist Elize Charcosset titled TENDREATH on 3 June 2023 at Le Bel Ordinaire. The following text is the result of this encounter.

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A hand moves across the thin sheet of paper, and red ink traces the outline of either a tibia, femur, or vertebra. These silhouettes depict figures standing, sitting, or lying down, with their skulls occasionally appearing to gaze in our direction. Elize Charcosset wanders around the room, observing those who draw near. She is equipped with a tablet and a quill pen, engaging in a back-and-forth movement with the inkwell. In this process, the artist transforms into a hybrid creature, blurring the lines between human and animal. The scales of her fragmented armour at times cover her hand, neck, and foot. People gather around her briefly, for several minutes, or even for several hours, finding comfort in her presence. TENDREATH unfolds within a gentle, musical, and subdued ambiance, accompanied by the rhythmic clicking of scales. The light envelops both us and the artist, its rays passing through a floating black veil. On the paper, the red is omnipresent, serving as a constant reminder of the interior of the body. TENDREATH is a communal drawing experience, unveiling a gesture to us. This secret and intimate action typically unfolds within the artist's studio, away from the gaze of others. Here, she individually draws each person who visits her, while simultaneously envisioning the distinct characteristics of their joints, offering an X-ray-like glimpse into our inner selves. As a result, the line transforms into an interpretation of vibrant, living bodies. In 2023, Elize Charcosset travelled to Belgium and the Netherlands to explore the world of art. While in search of classical paintings, she examined the works of James Ensor and Hans Holbein. It was during her visit to the Rijksmuseum that she first encountered the work of Gesina ter Borch, a watercolour painter and draughtswoman. Gesina's art featured mundane, yet grotesque scenes infused with humour, along with abstract, repetitive motifs like spirals integrated into her texts and musical scores. Notably, the presence of skeletons scattered throughout their works suggests that these three artists share an obsession with the theme of bringing death to life. For several years now, Elize Charcosset has been exploring the figure of the skeleton in her drawings, often pushing the boundaries of this motif to approach the realm of painting. After spending three months in Brussels, she travelled to the Dordogne in the spring and discovered the mussels of the Dropt, a tributary of the Garonne River that flows through the South-West of France. This river branches out into a myriad of streams. Mussels were cultivated there for their pearls. The fragments of their shells, arranged like scales, suddenly appear on the artist's body. The mother-of-pearl shimmers in shades of silver and grey as the design gradually emerges. In this transformation, the animal exoskeleton shapes the human skeleton. In classical painting, mussel shells can be found scattered here and there, discreetly present in still lifes to suggest the richness of shared meals. Elize Charcosset and her collaborators reworks this natural material into a sculptural form. The volume serves as a tool and scenographic element wielded by the artist to enhance the gesture, allowing it to take on a hybrid character – the Wyvern.

These details together make up the composition of a performative scene. The artist's research, however, has always been oriented towards the non-spectacular. Yet, how does one present a non-spectacular performance? By bringing people together for a three-hour performance and allowing them to come and go in the dedicated space, Elize Charcosset manages to subvert the conventions of overbearing staging. We are called upon to maintain a direct closeness with her by sitting just a few centimetres away. On the floor, some become models, while others remain contemplative. Sometimes, the roles are reversed. In the culmination of this drawing, which takes about ten minutes to complete, a tacit agreement is formed between the observer and the observed. This invisible link becomes tangible once the skeleton has been completed and presented to its specific model. Temporality expands... Elize Charcosset conveys to us her vision of the timeless core, our skeleton, that which will remain after the flesh has been stripped away. Looking to express a tender gesture, TENDREATH is the contraction of "tenderness" and "death". With every stroke, we are reminded of the medieval dances of death, or danses macabres. We can hear the sheet being torn. Detached from the Chinese paper scroll, the drawing catalyses the transmission as it returns to its model. Elize Charcosset embodies the Wyvern, a mythological creature, alternately a bipedal dragon or winged serpent, at times the guardian of an underground treasure. The Wyvern is often found close to water, inhabiting rivers or marshes. In some stories, she even transforms into a mermaid.

Élise Girardot, August 2023