

FLORENCE COENRAETS

Florence Coenraets is a Brussels-based artist whose practice marries art, craft and embodied experience. Originally trained in architecture, her work demonstrates a deep sensitivity to material, atmosphere and the subtle relationships between form, balance and space. Working primarily with feathers that she collects, sorts, dyes and assembles by hand, she creates immersive, tactile pieces that explore the connection between the physical and the intangible.

Words by **Florence Coenraets** Photography by **Karen Hilmersson**

LIFE IN BRUSSELS

I live in the south of Brussels, close to the centre, in a lively neighbourhood, Saint-Gilles, yet also near parks and the forest. I live in a typical Brussels house with very high ceilings and two rooms arranged in a row. My studio is on the ground floor, bathed in beautiful light. The French doors opening to the courtyard are quite special. The begonia is offering its final blooms as I write and in a few weeks, the roses will flower.

It is an intimate place, my bubble. My studio is a kind of sanctuary: the place where everything begins, where everything is prepared and created. A place that reflects who I am.

It is entirely white, even the floor, because I love working with colour. This gives a contemporary dimension to my work, to this material, feathers, so rich in varied cultural references. I try to bring my own vision to it, and the white supports this research.

Brussels is vibrant, with a rich cultural offering: concerts, dance, exhibitions. The artistic scene is equally diverse, from local open studio events to international galleries and institutions. It is a rich and abundant landscape. I feel at home here. I have my bearings, yet I can still be surprised every day. I am curious, and Brussels offers endless ways to nourish that curiosity.

I like to structure my days in a simple, almost traditional way: mornings feel open, full of possibility; evenings turn inward, either calm or social. My rhythm is shaped by school schedules, by attending sculpture classes at the academy and by long hours in the studio, preparing, sorting, working, reading. Being close to materials is essential for me. Having my hands in matter – feeling, touching, assembling, transforming – is fundamental. It is a dialogue with material.

FROM ARCHITECTURE TO INTUITION

Architecture involves many constraints. At first this helped me, but gradually it began to limit my creativity. I wanted to express myself more freely. In architecture, you respond to a brief. In my current practice, I am free to create what I wish; the encounter with others comes afterwards. Sometimes, I create in response to a place.

Architecture created a deep connection with material. It gave me the tools to engage with it more consciously. During my studies, I developed a strong sensitivity to atmospheres, to what emanates from a place, an object, a material: a plank of wood, a stone, a feather. In architecture, materials are assembled, and this is also what I do in my practice.

Balance is a key idea I have carried over: both formal balance and the physical balance of the elements I assemble, particularly in the mobiles of my *Atmosphere* series. Precision is important to me, as are light and transparency.

I am attentive to the qualities of the materials I use. I assemble feathers, keeping them as raw as possible, in the spirit of modernist architecture: nothing hidden, nothing artificial.

Architecture embodies thought. It taught me to look at a landscape as a whole: its uses, its geological materials, its relationships between humans and beyond the human.

MY PATH TO CREATIVITY

My creative journey included many important stages, which eventually led me to working with feathers.

During my master's in art at Sint-Lucas in Brussels, I developed a participatory project around headpieces. I invited people to wear pieces I had created as a way of redefining and reinventing themselves through the object.







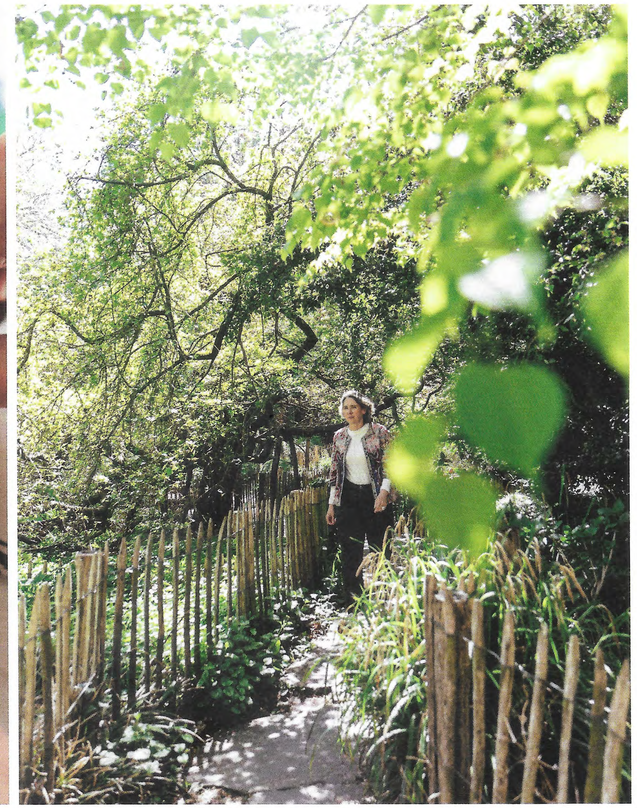


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Questions of identity – who we are to ourselves and to others – have always fascinated me. Through this project, I introduced play into these questions.

This work led me to two further trainings: millinery, to learn the techniques needed to construct forms that could be worn, and art therapy, to deepen my relationship with participants. There, I explored topics ranging from the sacred dimension of art to ethics and group dynamics.

I first encountered feathers during my millinery training, where they are traditionally used as ornament. At the time, I was creating expressive headpieces from natural materials: wisteria branches, pine needles, even peanuts. When I discovered feathers, I immediately recognised them as an extraordinary natural material, both for their aesthetic qualities and their physical properties.

For me, a feather carries a profound emotional power. It is also connected to a rich field of symbolism: it links sky and earth, much like the bird itself. It evokes the relationship between the profane and the sacred, between matter and spirit, between life and death. It is also tied to writing, to text, to narrative.

Its otherness fascinates me. A feather comes from a life that is not my own. It suggests other lives, a form of cohabitation, encounters with the unknown.

Then there is its plasticity: its texture, its softness, the way it reflects light, its strength and fragility, its colours, its forms, its patterns… An entire world opened up to me.

They possess a quiet strength. They do not impose themselves; they simply are. This moves me deeply, and it made me want to enter into a dialogue with this material.

From there, the material itself begins to lead my thinking: its origin, our relationship to the world, to other beings. And then, how feathers interact with other materials and what emerges from those encounters.



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KINAESTHETIC MEMORY

My memory is deeply linked to sensation. A scent can instantly bring me back to childhood; a place returns to me through the temperature of the air, the wind, the quality of light. This is what we call kinaesthetic memory – memory anchored in the body.

These are the sensations I draw on when I begin a new piece. I'm not trying to express an idea, but rather a feeling. The feather, through its physicality, supports this.

I return to my body, to my sensations, in order to give form to memories of landscapes or lived experiences in nature: the summer breeze, the morning dew, the smell of rain on warm earth or the sound of leaves and branches underfoot in autumn.

For example, in *Immersion Bruissement*, as in the other large *Immersion* works, I return to a sensory memory of being in woodland, the roughness of branches against the skin, the coolness of leaves, the warmth of sunlight breaking through. I reconnect with these sensations, and from there I move into a preparatory drawing, which I refine before developing it further.

What I seek to express is the felt experience of the body, to bring it into the present moment. With feathers, I can work texture and colour in a single gesture.

CONNECTION

I feel a deep connection to the world. When I walk in the forest, I have the impression of being part of it, of being the forest. When I work with my hands, I am in communion with the moment, with the material and with what I wish to express.

It is a state of care and attention. Life is precious; this material is precious. I want to share that sense of preciousness.

I create in order to express myself, to exist, to say things without words, to share.

My work allows me to discover myself, or rather, it invites me to be as close as possible to who I am. It is a long process of learning. I am gradually building trust in what I do and in the process itself. It has taken time, but it is there now. Patience and perseverance have been crucial.

PROCESS

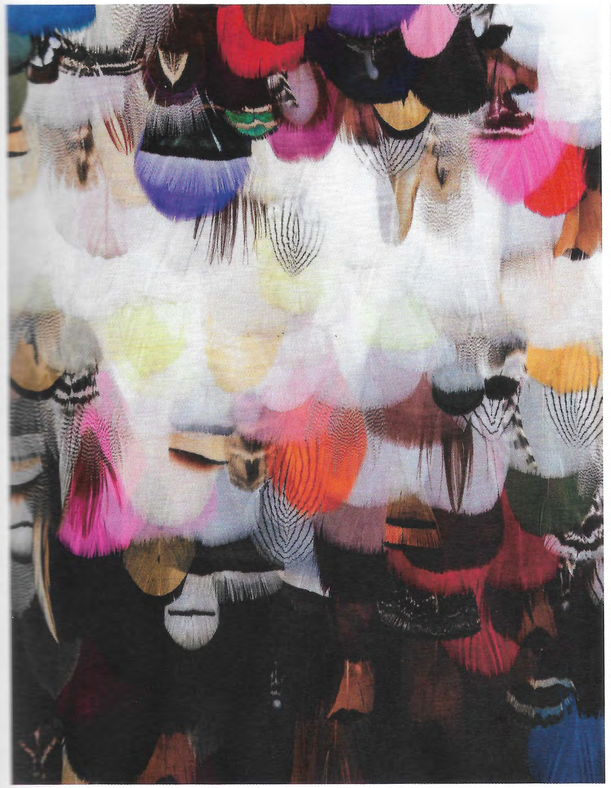
Sorting is the beginning of my dialogue with feathers, a beginning that is constantly renewed. Above all, it is an act of observation. I need to be attentive, receptive, absorbing information.

Classifying feathers always requires me to come to an agreement with myself: how far do I want to go? Each feather is different. What are my criteria for selection? Where do I stop? I would compare this step to tuning a guitar. You need to bring order to your palette before you can use it.

I need structure in order to let the organic unfold. My work exists within contradictions, within entanglements. To remain within these tensions feels essential to me. I am not sure I fully succeed, but weaving connections within these contradictions is something I care deeply about.

Allowing oneself to be affected is important. I inherit feathers. I transform them through dyeing and I give them a new place, alongside others.

Art allows me to remain grounded in materiality rather than in pure idea or idealisation. The material leads the way.





COLOUR

In my work, I have noticed that I can use colours that elsewhere might feel too loud or even vulgar. We perceive colours in relation to others, and through the cultural meanings they carry.

Colour is a fundamental component of my work, but it is always intertwined with other qualities, such as shine, transparency, matteness. Multiple pieces of information co-exist within a single material. What feathers offer me is the ability to work with colour and texture in a single gesture.

For each project, I define a palette, a range of tones; this creates the atmosphere. I search for specific colours and dye accordingly. Sometimes it takes several attempts to arrive at the right tone. I am drawn to unusual, complex colours: a slightly dirty pink-beige, a fluorescent green subdued in a brown bath. These create relationships with more assertive tones. I see it as a pictorial process.

These transparencies allow me to connect the feathers to one another, to bring forth, through layering, a new dimension, new qualities within the work. This is made possible by the material itself and its properties.

INTERNAL LANDSCAPES

I am very sensitive to atmospheres, to what happens within the body. When I listen to music, I am physically moved by it. What interests me is our relationship to the world, our physical presence within it. We inhabit the world as much as it inhabits us. This reciprocal relationship fascinates me.

My work exists somewhere between real places and internal landscapes, as if those real places are imbued with my own experiences. We all experience the world differently. I am very sensitive, and in my work I try to make that a strength. It becomes a form of translation.

When I'm making, I feel softness is always present. Attention. A sense of alertness. Lightness. Often, there is joy, something I consciously try to cultivate. To feel peace, to desire peace, there must be joy. It is often the dyeing process that brings this to me.





I work by listening closely to my sensations. I can feel when something is right – it is physical, felt in the body. The intellect does not help me in those moments.

TIME, RHYTHM AND REPETITION

My process allows me the time to be fully in the world. That is a great privilege.

I align myself with the rhythm of my body. When I know where I am going, what I am doing, what needs to be done, my pace quickens naturally. When things are more complex, less clear, I slow down in order to find the way.

Repeating a gesture is meditative in a sense. It is soothing. Through repetition, the work comes into being. It is slow, constructed over time. There is a process, but also an objective. That is deeply satisfying.

I trust repetition. There is something comforting in it, even in its simplicity.

SOLITUDE, CONTROL AND SURRENDER

I love solitude, it enables me to create. Yet I am not alone: I am accompanied by the material. It engages me, activates me. I need solitude in order to listen to what resonates within me so that I can then share it. To be touched in order to touch in return.

My life and my work move together. What I allow myself in life – my beliefs, whether they are liberating or limiting – appears in my work. I aspire to greater freedom, and if I reach new forms of freedom, they will be visible in my work.

I work with raw material. My work is organic, and imperfection is part of that quality. An inner sensation guides me alongside a heightened attentiveness to the material. I think of it as a dialogue, a conversation, a relationship. It requires choices, including those made earlier in the preparation of the material.

I like to place naturally coloured feathers beside dyed ones. It allows me to remain connected to the raw material, to step away from it in order to return more closely. Working this way is a form of 'living with' the material: returning to it, engaging with it over time, allowing for misunderstandings, adjustments and new narratives to emerge.

My practice is a way of staying connected to the living world. I have learned to remain within uncertainty, to trust myself, to dare to be imperfect. I have learned to look more and more closely, to refine my gaze, to truly listen. ♦



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