

# TEMPLON



HANS OP DE BEECK

JULIET, May 12, 2026

## Hans Op de Beeck. Danse Macabre

by EMANUELA ZANON • 12 MAY 2026 • REVIEWS

One of the most fascinating figurative themes in the history of art is that of the danse macabre; unlike our own contemporaneity – as bellicose as it is obstinate in removing the images of death and pain with which it is submerged – medieval humanity had a daily relationship with the passage into the afterlife, rooted deep in the religious convictions that permeated the natural order of things. Between epidemics (memorable was the Black Death in Florence in 1348), wars and famines, what counted was not so much the life of the individual as that of the community, burdened by the harshness of the struggle for survival and terrified by the Last Judgement, customarily frescoed on the rear facade of churches as a final warning to the faithful before leaving. To this familiarity is owed, in the central centuries of the Middle Ages, the enormous iconographic fortune of the contrast between life and death throughout the European area.



Hans Op de Beeck, "Danse Macabre", 2021. Sculptural installation, 2021, 950 × 950 × 650 cm. Steel, aluminum, wood, polyester, polyamide, polyurethane, PVC coated nylon, plaster, coating, ph  
Leonardo Morfini, courtesy Associazione Culturale Dello Scompiglio

The Church, which at the Second Council of Lyon (1274) had legitimized Purgatory as a place of penance, did not oppose the proliferation of macabre images on the walls of sacred buildings, since they reminded the Christian to concern themselves with the fate of their soul at a moment when the pedagogical utility of Hell appeared weakened by no longer being the only alternative to Paradise. From the second half of the thirteenth century, therefore, macabre themes spread as a literary and figurative archetypes in three principal variations: the dialogue between three living and three dead, the triumph of death and the danse macabre. The latter – the last to appear (the first example, now lost, dates to 1424 and was located in the Cimetière des Innocents in Paris) – consisted of a procession of dancing figures, each followed or guided by their skeletal double, heading toward the tomb. It was a quiet procession, where representatives of every social class were leveled, not without irony at the social hierarchies of the time, by the ineluctable common fate. With the Renaissance, existential meditation shifted to the individual and the idea of death became that of the *vanitas* and the *memento mori*, melancholic expressions of the relationship between the individual and their own destiny.



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This is the iconographic and imagistic arsenal from which Hans Op de Beeck (1969, Turnhout, Belgium) draws in the work *Danse Macabre* which, after an outdoor debut at Bruges Triennale in Belgium (8 May – 24 October 2021), now finds a new evocative setting in the temporary exhibition room of Tenuta Dello Scompiglio in Vorno, Capannori, a precious incubator of contemporary artistic research in the countryside around Lucca. The monumental sculpture, monochrome, hyperrealist and surreal at once, reproduces a life-size period carousel inhabited by skeletons in nineteenth-century costume who enjoy themselves on festively adorned carriages and horses, here immobilized in a mysterious eternity. The exhibition project offers the Italian public the rare opportunity to enter the poetics of an enigmatic artist whose works succeed in creating around themselves a bubble of existential suspension even in the chaos of the art fairs where they are usually encountered, in the booths of his prestigious representative galleries, including Continua (San Gimignano, Beijing, Les Moulins, Habana, Roma, São Paulo, Paris), Galerie Daniel Templon (Paris, Brussels, New York), Almine Rech (Paris, Brussels, Shanghai, New York, Monaco, and Gstaad).



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The entire artistic production of Op de Beeck could be framed as an inexhaustible exploration of the theme of *vanitas* that departs from a sensitive distillation of the atmospheres, even before the iconographic models, of the historical precedents of the genre, in order to rediscover and restore their instances in the fragments of daily life he chooses to crystallize in sculpture. What he seeks, assimilating the introspective condition evoked by them to the existential meditation induced by *vanitas*, are the "in-between moments" of everyday life, such as the nocturnal hours, in which action is suspended and the subject can come into contact with what flows beneath the skin of reality. For the artist this is an elusive dimension that troubles us for its proximity to the fundamental questions about human existence, such as who we are and what we can do in this ridiculously brief life.



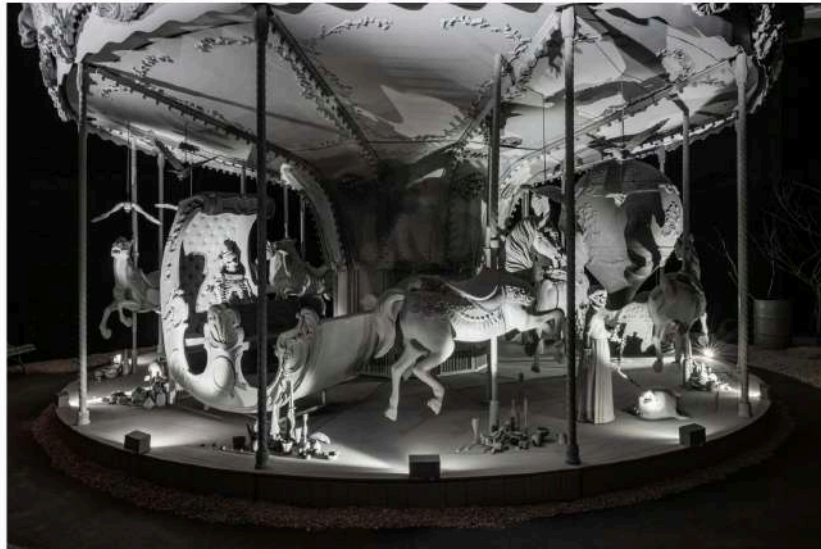
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If we manage for a moment to look at reality from this perspective, the circumstantial urgencies that always beset us vanish like color in the mental universe of Hans Op de Beeck, who in his works adheres to rigorous gradations of black, white and grey. This abstract palette, developed in his youth when he was the author of graphic novels, is the principal instrument with which the artist distances his subjects, almost always reproductions of ordinary situations, in order to extract their existential structure and restore them in universal terms, amplifying the emotional implications that in real life remain beneath the surface. The particular shade of grey that covers all the sculptures, resembling an ash solidified into a uniform patina, plays a substantial role in constructing their hermetic fascination, emphasized by the contrast between this chromatic uniformity and the Flemish clarity with which every detail is chiseled.



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For these reasons, the subject of the carousel presented at the Scompiglio assumes an emblematic significance with respect to the artist's production, laying bare his intentions and making explicit with refined virtuosity the rethinking of historical sources at the foundation of his research. The installation occupies the entire room, transformed for the occasion into a fictitious nocturnal landscape of disturbing plasticity. One enters it as one steps onto a film set: crossing the threshold, one finds oneself in an urban park immersed in half-light, where gravel covers the floor muffling every footstep, bare saplings with twisted branches project sharp shadows, motionless pools of water (also artificial, like everything else) mirror the faint light of garden lanterns that accentuate the sense of abandonment. Oil barrels converted into braziers diffuse a warm and intermittent glow that, together with the car tyres scattered around, reminds the visitor that they are in a residual space, at the margins of organized life. The winding path that crosses this landscape leads toward the center of the scene: the monochrome, motionless, silent carousel. Seen from a distance, through the bare branches of the trees and the columns that punctuate the room, it appears as an abnormal mirage, inhabiting the space with the disturbing naturalness of a lucid dream, resistant to any blinking of eyes. Close up, the Baroque architecture reveals all its precision: the richly ornamented canopy of volutes and garlands from which skulls and putti dangle, the horses rearing in parade trappings, the crescent-shaped carriages with quilted backrests, a toy hot-air balloon, all covered by the impenetrable leaden tone that annuls every distinction between materials and confers upon the whole a geological connotation, as if it were an artifact from a parallel civilization. Here grey is the color of time's indifference, of the neutralization of every hierarchy, the same democratic leveling that in the medieval *danse macabre* was the province of death. On the carousel platform, populating horses and carriages, as already mentioned, a consortium of skeletons caught in the midst of an enjoyment now crystallized.



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A knight ceremoniously leads his steed, a crowned lady strolls protecting her head with a parasol (but the crown slips, too large for her skull), a little girl keeps a courtly seal pup on a leash. A dandy seated in a carriage placidly smokes a cigarette wearing a (presumably) red clown's nose, a defusing detail of the ridiculous that precedes and accompanies death, a direct echo of the grotesque vein that in medieval *danses macabres* served to temper terror with mockery. At the feet of the horses and along the edge of the platform, sculptural compositions of objects present themselves as canonical variations of the still-life genre, of which they compose a variegated iconographic inventory: piles of dirty plates, overturned goblets, empty bottles, candle stumps, remnants of cakes, full ashtrays, decomposing fruit. These are the residues of a party that has ended, or perhaps never began, and they refer back to the tradition of the *vanitas*, where the still life was always, first of all, a contemplation of transience: the food that rots, the wine that runs out, the candle that goes out. Here the meditation is the same, but the frame is no longer religious. Op de Beeck's *memento mori* is secular, apotropaic in the original sense of the term, since it does not invoke divine protection but seeks to keep anxiety at bay through representation, as if naming transience and giving it a familiar aspect could render it acceptable.



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We too, like the hunters who in the allegory of the three living and the three dead encounter in the forest their own putrefied doubles and receive from them a warning, are directly addressed by the encounter with this solid vision, which ironically compels us not to flee reflection on our constitutive finitude and on what remains when the noises and ephemeral colors of the carousel of life go out. The music that resounds in the environment, composed by Sam Vloemans and performed by the Hermes Ensemble (B), leads to the concluding room of the itinerary, where the animated film *Vanishing Point* is projected. Created entirely in watercolor – the technique from which Op de Beeck makes every project spring before it takes form – it opens on the image of a child lying with closed eyes in that state of abandonment between sleep and dream that the artist identifies as a privileged access to the loss of self that constitutes the prelude and destination of every existential meditation. From there, through dissolves and metamorphoses, the film transports the viewer on a fluid wandering through fictitious landscapes, animated objects and calligraphic characters. The title refers to the vanishing point of perspective, in which parallel lines converge and three-dimensional depth dissolves into the illegible, which Op de Beeck uses as a metaphor for the threshold between the measurable and the unknowable, between what we can name and what escapes us the moment we try to do so.



Hans Op de Beeck, "Vanishing Point". Video, 2024, 18'2" Full HD video, music, ph Leonardo Morfini, courtesy Associazione Culturale Dello Scompiglio

Leaving the Tenuta, what remains is the sensation of having passed through a work that is in no hurry to explain itself, that asks for time but in equal measure bestows it, withdrawing us from the flow of hyperconnection. Op de Beeck interrogates the present by measuring it against the long duration of art history, seeking in the precedents of the masters of the past instruments still capable of processing it. The danse macabre, the *memento mori*, the *vanitas* are for him, therefore, emotionally tested devices, centuries-proven and still capable of producing in the viewer that particular quality of inner silence that art, when effective, knows how to generate. At a historical moment when rivers of pixels circulate on our screens without any possibility of assimilation, Op de Beeck's proposal has the merit of restoring to the image its contemplative dimension, withdrawing it from the speed of the flow and returning it to the slow time of physical presence. The motionless carousel, the silent park, the dreaming child are not, in the last instance, escapes from the real, but expressions of the desire for a different, more ancient and receptive way of relating to it, keeping its mystery intact.

Info:

Hans Op de Beeck. *Danse Macabre*

curated by Angel Moya Garcia

11.4.2026 – 25.10.2026

Tenuta Dello Scompiglio di Vorno (Capannori, Lucca)

[www.delloscompiglio.org](http://www.delloscompiglio.org)