

Joëlle Tuerlinckx: the artist who makes puzzles out of meteorites and Sellotape

With sculptures made of biscuit tins, an alien probe and a room full of pebbles from around the globe, Tuerlinckx's WOR(L)D(K) IN PROGRESS? show is as baffling as it is inspiring



• [Adrian Searle](#)



'Everywhere you look, there is something going on' ... Joëlle Tuerlinckx's WOR(L)D(K) IN PROGRESS? at the Arnolfini, Bristol. Photographs: Stuart Whipps

Writing about an artist's work always has an element of mimicry about it. I'm terse with the minimalists, wild with abstract expressionism and florid with the baroque. I am considering writing this in the style of [Joëlle Tuerlinckx](#), whose work has been baffling me for more than a decade. Attempting to describe the Belgian artist's work, I'll have to keep all the words I've crossed out and put them in a pile to use later, along with all the commas, colons, semicolons and full stops I've dropped. Currently they're all under my desk, sprinkled among the pencil shavings and bottles that litter the floor. What's that length of rope doing there? I must have accidentally carted it home from Tuerlinckx's show at the Arnolfini.

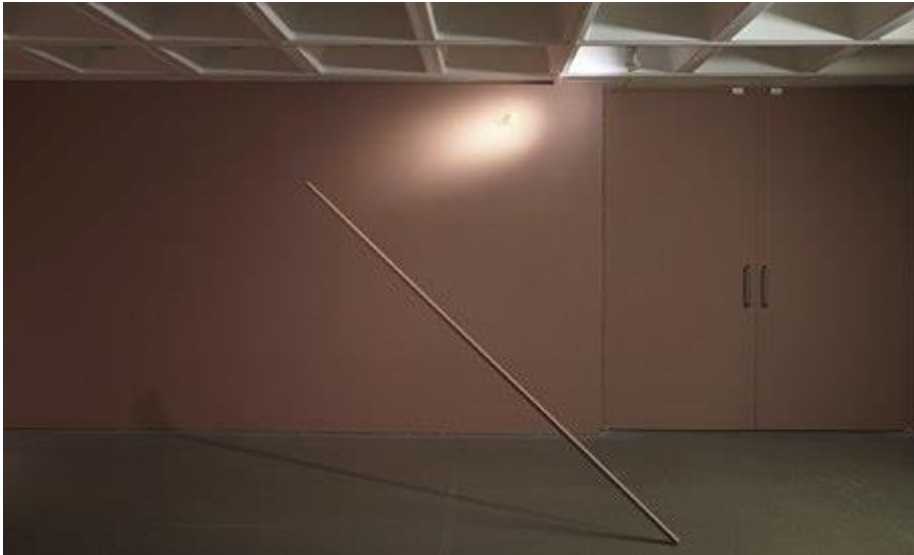
At some point I'll have to paint my desk with white emulsion, then invert my laptop and shake out all the dead skin, hair, biscuit crumbs and dried tears I've somehow shed over the keyboard. All this stuff must mean something, possibly more than the things I commit to the page.

Keep going like this and I might become an artist, but probably not, nor will I ever be Tuerlinckx. She has systems, for a start, where I have none. Where to begin? Room after room, work after work, Tuerlinckx has been perplexing me since I first wrote about a memorable show she made for the South London Gallery years ago. You can stand in front of a Tuerlinckx for a long time and never get the measure of it. Her exhibition at Arnolfini is called [WOR\(L\)D\(K\) IN PROGRESS?](#) This too is a puzzle.

The third part of a retrospective that began in her home town, Brussels, travelled to Munich, and which has now arrived in Bristol, Tuerlinckx's show has shifted its focus from venue to venue, and the title has shifted with it, just as works are rearranged from venue to venue. I think she treats showing and making works as part of the same unending process.

One room has been papered with a pattern taken from the brick walls of her studio, printed on fluorescent orange paper that comes by the roll in Belgium, and which is used as an eye-catching background for property sale posters. It is also much used for wrapping presents. These lurid orange walls are hung with images, and a ladder leans against one, leading nowhere. Among the images is a drawing the artist did as a five-year-old, of a goldfish in a bowl. Almost indistinguishable from the other things she has made over the decades (Tuerlinckx is now in her 50s), she might have drawn it yesterday. The circle, as a container for shapes or words or numbers, has become a signature motif.

Tuerlinckx has recreated several fragments of shows she has made around the world over the past 20 years. Everything flows into everything else. Sometimes she works with newspaper photographs (there are lots of politicians making emphatic hand gestures), at other times with bare cubes, paper, lengths of timber or biscuit tins.



Mysterious materials ... Tuerlinckx's's pink room, containing a length of wood, suggests 'a stuffy sort of boudoir'

Things flow, halt, then move off again in a new direction. Several lumps of rock occupy the floor in one space. A lump of stone from the Retiro gardens in Madrid, a cobblestone from Brussels, pebbles from Ireland and Austria. A meteorite. Lines of clear tape along the floor connect these found stones. There's writing on the tape, and she has taped a large rectangular space in the middle of the room. I wander about, trying not to bump into things, as I look at the words written on the tape: "A space that doesn't exist ... all that you make here doesn't exist ... when you sing here ... when you cross here you don't exist". As I walk the line, I realise she's marking her territory. Cross it and you disappear.

Everywhere you look there is something going on – drawings, reproductions of pages from old books (including nice old diagrams of plumb lines, a solar corona photographed in 1909), a book jacket image of Glenn Gould. Here's a big black rectangle with the word CULTURE printed in collaged paper in the centre. Culture in a void? Who knows. On a chair in the same room sits a headless man, just clothes stuffed with paper, like a bonfire-night Guy. "It's just for kids," Tuerlinkx told me when she gave me a quick tour.

The more I look, the more her drawings grab me. Here's a delicate plant, the leaves drawn pale and thin, with a heavier wiry line drawn right over it, like the life-force that drew the plant from the earth. Hmm. I almost kick a globe of the world, like an abandoned football that has skittered against the wall.

Upstairs is even more of a riot. I get snagged on stuff as I circumnavigate Tuerlinckx's world of boxes and tables and vitrines. What's this pendulous thing like an alien probe hanging from the ceiling? And why this little black chamber, like a kiosk, from which you can view the rest of the room through a pinhole? I think it's here just to allow us a different view.

Somewhere, a recording of seagulls in Bristol docks is playing, interspersed with voices reading Tuerlinckx's writing, which form a sort of lexicon to her art. By the door, a suspended bucket hangs overhead, as if it is about to spill goo on unsuspecting visitors.

There are tables lain out with objects, empty cubes outlined in wire, a plethora of things it would take too long to list. It is like an armoury of stacked up materials as much as groupings of finalised works. One room has been entirely painted a nasty dull pink, the colour taken from a roll of kitchen paper that sits on a shelf. A length of wood, also pink, leans on some fishing line strung across the space. It is a stuffy sort of boudoir. Looking out, back in the gallery, a whole world beckons.

I had to have a lie-down on the floor for a bit. Why has she stained a wall upstairs with tea, and prematurely aged some of her own catalogues and posters and gallery hand-outs? Is it to show what things look like when they age? Or that when they age in a museum, they do so differently? Tuerlinckx does such odd things, though there is a logic to them all, even if it is her logic rather than ours. Art that is only a puzzle is boring: solve it and it's over. Tuerlinckx continues to tease because her works resist solution. Mystery remains.

• This article was amended on 13 December 2013. An earlier version said that Tuerlinckx's retrospective, currently at the Arnolfini, began at Munich rather than Brussels.