

TATLER

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**THE
LITTLE
BLACK
BOOK**
THE 200
SEXIEST DATES

WHY EVERY
SMART
BOY WANTS
TO BE
MEDALLION MAN

**BALTHAZAR'S
STORY**
HOW A GETTY
CAME BACK
FROM THE EDGE

**BACK
ON TOP**
THE BOND GIRL WITH
MAN-CRUSHING THIGHS

**BEHIND THE
THRONE**
MY LIFE AS
A ROYAL
LOVE CHILD



TATLER

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Famke Janssen photographed by Alexander Deutsch. Styled by Ann Caruso. She wears moleskin coat, £1,020, by Louis Vuitton. For details, see Stockists. Hair by Danilo for the Wall Group. Make-up by Matin at Artists by Timothy Priano, using Yves Saint Laurent products: Energie Teint No. 5 in Porcelain; Semi-Loose Powder No. 1 in Ivory; Rouge Pur Transparent No. 9 in Diamond Dust; Nu Eau de Parfum



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PHOTOGRAPHS: HARRY BORDEN; DANIEL JOUANNEAU; ILLUSTRATION: PETE N DAVE



Untitled, 1968

She makes thrones into art, but Delphine Boel could be sitting on one. Rachel Campbell-Johnston meets the king of Belgium's love-child

Take the throne,' she tells me. So I do, ascending to the seat with as much pomp as circumstances will allow me – which isn't much. Thrones may be meant to be stately.

They may be meant to lend an aura of elegance to their occupiers. But not this one. This one is an artwork by Delphine Boel. It is unequivocally carnivalesque, obviously absurd.

For a start, it is made of papier-mâché. It has a pair of improbable fowl instead of feet, a couple of bespectacled blue elephants in place of armrests, and a serpent twining up its back. This is a chair for court jesters, not for kings. Anyone ensconced amid its squiggles and mad candy colours is instantaneously plummeted from the sublime to the burlesque. This is the pleasure of the piece. It is also its irony, because two years ago, its creator, 33-year-old Delphine Boel, was publicly outed as the illegitimate daughter of Belgium's King Albert II.

I glance around from her throne. The surroundings are hardly regal. I am in a beaten-up studio block at the back end of Bayswater. Outside the window, cars thunder along the Westway, trains rattle past on their way to Paddington. But, inside,

Delphine Boel
outside her studio,
in Bayswater



Delphine, resplendent in paint-spattered dungarees and platform boots, presides over her menagerie of artistic creations. 'What do you get if you cross a farmyard with a piece of furniture?' One of Delphine's pieces could be the punchline to that joke.

'I'm not sure if I could call my work sculpture,' she tells me. 'I usually just describe it as "funny-looking papier-mâché things".' Scarcely surprising, then, that Sir Terence Conran should have invited her to contribute to his *Funny Peculiar* show, an exhibition which, on the occasion of his 70th birthday, was staged to celebrate his delight in the quirky and unexpected, the humorous and bizarre. Delphine's contribution was recently shown at the Hulton Getty Gallery in Chelsea.

She is quietly confident as to its quality. 'It's more free than anything I've done before,' she says. 'Perhaps that's because I am more free, because, for the first time in my working life, I'm not having to guard a secret any more.'

In Belgium, where Delphine was brought up until the age of nine, her parentage had been an open secret. Her mother, Sybille de Selys Longchamp, was married to steel magnate Jacques Boel when Delphine was born, but the marriage ended soon afterwards. European high society more than suspected who the real father of Sybille's tomboyish blonde daughter was. 'Even I knew, even as a little child,' says Delphine. 'You have a feeling about these things and, though I wasn't told until my early teens, it didn't come as a shock when my mother finally told me. I just felt pleased – not because my father was a king, but because I felt a completeness. I think I had instinctively sensed our connection all along.'

By that time, Delphine was living in England. Her mother, who came from a diplomatic family, had found life in Belgium too confined and so moved to London. 'We were adventurers when we arrived, discovering things as we went along.'

Delphine was far from academic. She never lasted more than a year or two at any educational establishment, neither the genteel girls' boarding-school in Bath which she first attended, nor the London tutorial college where she ended up taking O-levels. 'It wasn't that I was expelled from

boarding-school,' she laughs. 'I just wasn't encouraged to come back. I liked the midnight feasts but not the restrictions. At the tutorial college there were no restrictions. It was my responsibility to make sure I turned up at lectures... so I didn't.'

But Delphine was always creative. 'I think it came from my childhood,' she says. 'Because I was an only child, my mother tried to make sure I wouldn't be spoilt. So, when someone gave me a present, she gave it away. Instead, I was left to my own devices – which I loved. I would play with paints, do colouring, or make things from paper and glue.' Her childhood enthusiasm developed and in due course she went to the Chelsea School of Art.

London has been her home ever since. Delphine couldn't speak a word of English when she arrived, but now – despite a slight French accent and the odd 'Ooh la la' – she has all the easy-going manners, laid-back style and upfront charm of any common-or-Ladbroke Gardens boho-princess.

'London inspires me,' she says. 'The quality of life might be appalling, it may be expensive, and women may not be treated very well, but no other place has its cosmopolitan variety.' Sure, at weekends she prefers to pop over to visit her mother in Provence rather than queue on the motorway for some draughty country retreat, but she intends to remain in England. And she recently sold the country house in Belgium where she was brought up because she didn't ever want to go back there to live.

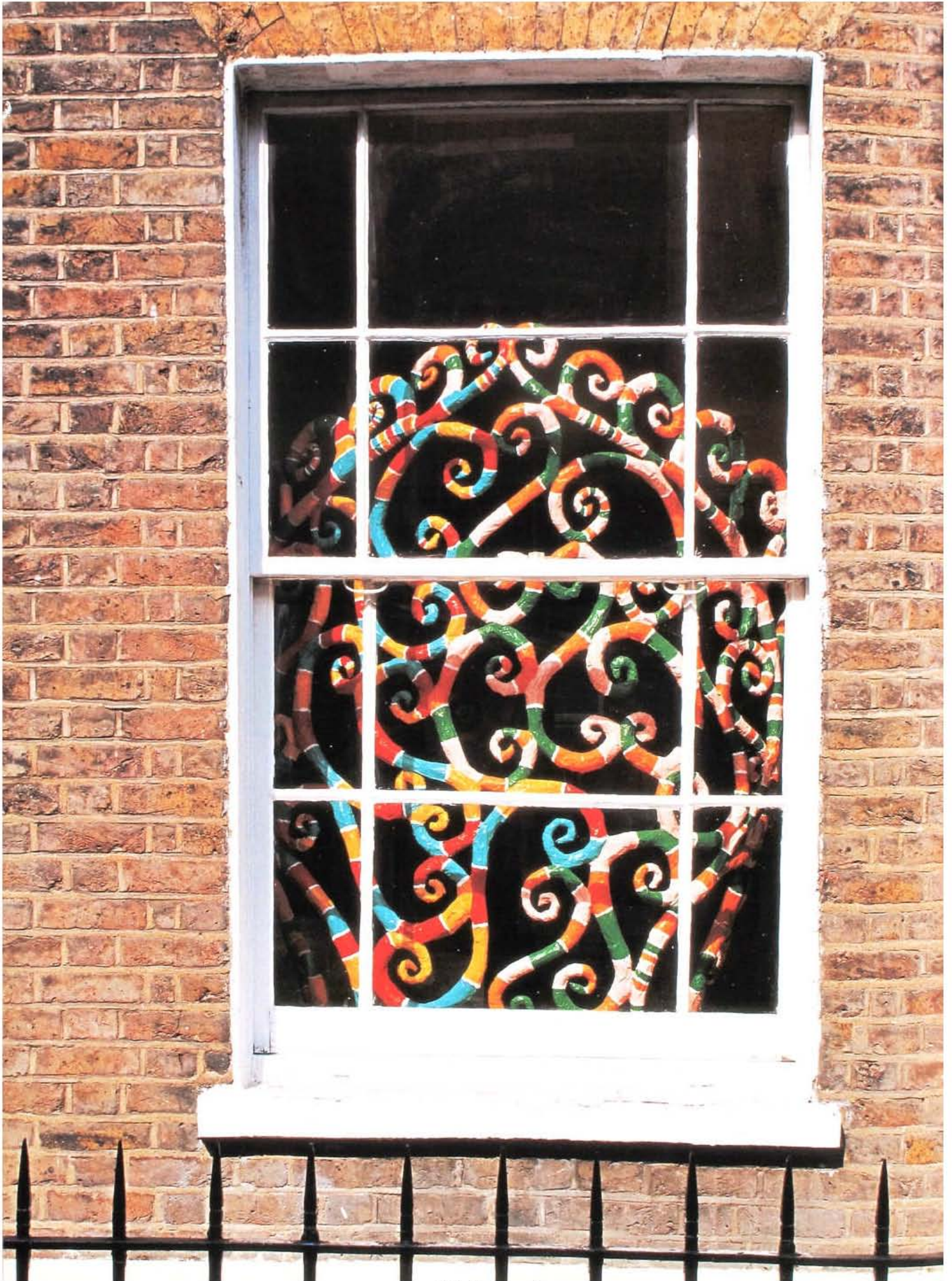
'When you are a foreigner in London, people don't judge you on where you come from,' she says. 'I think that's what attracts me. People don't worry what your name is. Back in Belgium, they can be very conservative – they expect you to act in a certain way. They classify you by your surname. "Oh, I know your cousin, or your aunt," they will say when they meet you. It gets on my nerves. I wouldn't want to be in their shoes. I'd rather be in my paint-spattered platforms. Why should I be identified by a surname? You are who you are. That's why



Clockwise from left, Delphine after the paternity scandal broke in 1999. Delphine with her mother. King Albert II of Belgium. With Tim O'Hare



'Artist Delphine is love child of king of Belgium'



as an artist I just use the name Delphine. And I treat other people in the same way.'

Guests at Delphine's last art-show opening party included Prince and Princess Nicolas Guedroitz, Vicomtesse Philippe de Spoelberch, a brace of Bismarcks and a constellation of Astors. But, she says, you are just as likely to meet the removal-van driver or the local shop owner there too.

Perhaps her wariness of this type of classification is understandable, having for so long been known by a surname which she, and many others, felt wasn't her own. 'But even though people alluded to my parentage, or made hints, I ignored them,' she says. In Belgium, rumours were dismissed (although not denied) until, after the publication of an unauthorised biography of Queen Paola of Belgium, a scandal was whipped up.

It came – and probably not by accident – when Prince Philippe of Belgium had just announced his engagement to the glamorous and aristocratic Mathilde d'Udekem d'Acoz, and they had set off on a prenuptial tour of Belgium. This so-called '*joyeuse entrée*' had been diplomatically choreographed to include French- and Dutch-speaking areas in equal measure. The monarchy was at a peak of popularity. This annoyed hardline Flemish separatists who, wanting to break away from the poorer south, saw the monarchy as an obstacle to effecting this split. Anything they could do to discredit the ruling family was seized upon.

'It was horrible when the news broke,' says Delphine. 'I wasn't prepared. I was being used as a weapon by people who

so earnest in her intent.) Delphine corrects herself quickly and changes 'masses' to 'people who are not as lucky as some of us. I really see no difference between a royal and someone who is sweeping the streets.'

She continues. 'I was in Provence when the news broke. The press immediately flocked there and I hid underneath my mother's desk for almost six hours. But then I had to return to London. I had a flight booked, and I thought, "I am not going to let them chase me out of my home."'

By the time she returned to Provence, the paparazzi were crowding her doorstep. 'It was awful. It was not my place to confirm or deny anything, I didn't want to cause trouble. But they hounded me. It was so difficult – I'd go to the loo and think that they were going to pop out of the pipe. They would insult me when I came out of my home, shout at me and call me a bastard. If I'd been younger, I don't know how I'd have dealt with it, but I was 31 and more confident. I knew I was loved, so I tried not to let them hurt me. My story is beautiful. I am a love-child. I am not a bonk.'

'In retrospect, they also made me laugh, in a way. I wondered at how silly people could be. I didn't understand what was so fantastic. My story might seem like a fairytale to some people but, if you *live* in a fairytale, it seems normal to you.'

Gradually, the fuss died down. In his Christmas message to the nation, her father spoke publicly for the first time about the 'crisis' his marriage had gone through 30 years earlier. This indirect confession was taken – as it was meant to be – as a move to introduce more openness into the monarchy,

what I love? I am Delphine. I go for it.'"

And so she did. Now she feels relieved that things are at last out in the open. 'Having a secret is hard. I felt like I was always having to live a lie and, whether your father is the king of Belgium or a butcher, you come from something and somewhere and you don't want to have to lie about that. I think that's why I can sound provocative when I talk. I like things to be up front. I don't like people to be chippy.'

Her new-found freedom meant a lot to the fiercely independent Delphine. 'It's a childhood thing,' she says. 'I've always treasured a childish sense of freedom. And it's part of the childish humour that I express in my work. At art school we were encouraged to express an inner darkness and I would get unhappy, it all seemed so black. So instead I started to create my own colourful, funny world. If children had credit cards, I would be very rich,' she says. 'They love my stuff.'

And so she went back to making her papier-mâché pieces. It may seem like primary-school stuff, but it is also laborious. It begins with the welding of a steel frame, which must then be clad with its amalgam of paper and glue. More than 40 layers are needed. The whole process takes weeks. Then the painting begins which takes another fortnight. And then the work must be coated with resin, to make it resistant to water and heat.

The finished objects are, Delphine thinks, quintessentially Belgian in tone. 'Belgium is a tiny country and we speak terrible French so we can't take ourselves seriously. We are bon viveurs. We love parties. And, like the English, we have a wonderful self-deprecating irony,' she says.

She crosses the studio to recline on her favourite piece. This is a chaise-longue crossed with a cartoonish pig and a cow. 'I just love it,' she enthuses. 'A chaise-longue is supposed to be elegant, but look how I've made it – completely ridiculous. It's called the *Four-Legged Monster* after those couples you see doing everything together. If a man got like that with me, I'd kick him out.'

'And look at that throne you're on. How could anyone be pompous sitting on that throne? It has that sense of the ludicrous that is in my Belgian blood.'

So will her father ever sit on it, I wonder? She laughs. 'Maybe. I don't know.' She shrugs. 'I hope so. I hope he might like it.' □

“They would shout at me and call me a bastard. I knew I was loved, so I tried not to let them hurt me”

wanted to make trouble, to emphasise the Flemish-Walloon divide and to destroy the royal family.' She believes a monarchy to be important. 'The masses need someone to look up to, someone who sets an unselfish example,' she says, and then immediately retracts the word 'masses'. (She is always anxious to emphasise that she doesn't feel elevated above anyone else. Her struggles to find the politically correct term would almost come across as comic if she weren't

to loosen the straitjacket of protocol. It was a popular move. 'To talk in public about one's mistakes is not easy, but King Albert II did it with dignity,' one conservative paper said. Delphine sees her father frequently and both are at ease with the outing of her parentage.

After the crisis, she simply went back to work. 'I had stopped for a while,' she said. 'I was too distressed. But then I started to think, "Am I going to let them stop me doing



Delphine in her studio