

## Serres Impies

The song cycle *Serres Impies* (impious greenhouses) is based upon texts from *À Rebours*, a novel from 1894 by Joris-Karl Huysmans about a wealthy hedonist who retreats to the countryside outside of Paris, in order to surrender himself completely to the fulfillment of his extravagant desires. A part of the novel is dedicated to exuberant descriptions of the exotic vegetation which is being collected by this decadent hermit; plants that through their eccentric design rather appear to be artificial than natural, and carry both an erotic as well as a nightmare-like character. It are these texts upon which *Serres Impies* concentrates itself.

I had seen the name Huysmans pass by before in the writings of Gabriele d'Annunzio and Oscar Wilde. Moreover, the main character in Houellebecq's novel *Soumission* is a literary scholar specialized in the oeuvre of Huysmans. Since I started reading his work a few years ago, Huysmans immediately became one of my favourite authors, because of his excessive, baroque style, but also because of the mild humour and distance which runs through his writings, and is somewhat reminiscent of Elsschot.

With a duration of approx. 25 minutes, *Serres Impies* consists of nine songs, which meticulously depict the beauty, wilting, infirmity and the ultimate decline of this extravagant flora. The rapture this brings about, in combination with the muggy greenhouse atmosphere, makes the narrating character fall into a slumber, passing into a nightmare in which a bloody syphilis-flower gobbles her up. The title of the piece is derived from a passage elsewhere in the book, where Huysmans describes Salomé, as portrayed on a painting by Gustave Moreau, being 'the grand venereal flower, sprouted on sacrilegious seedbeds, reared in greenhouses of impiety'. In the work of Huysmans beauty and the monstrous are ingeniously interwoven. The end of the piece, a short prayer, is also the final sentence of the novel. In order not to perish from neurotic disorders, the doctor orders the reclusion to be ended, and to consider a return to Paris.

Robert Zuidam, October 2017