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Inside artist Koen Vanmechelen's temple of friendship — to a tapir

The Labiomista project, an hour from Brussels, brings together science, art and animals to examine who we are and how we can better live together

Future Garden, home of Koen Vanmechelen, his partner Chido Govera — and Dionysus, the tapir — sits at the centre of Labiomista, which is part wildlife sanctuary, part contemporary art destination and part scientific research centre

Lee Sharrock. Photographed for the FT by Kevin Faingnaert

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"It all started with the tapir," Belgian artist Koen Vanmechelen tells me with a smile as we sit at his vast wooden dining table carved from a fallen maple tree. "I wanted to build a temple of friendship."

It sounds enigmatic. But the tapir is very real.

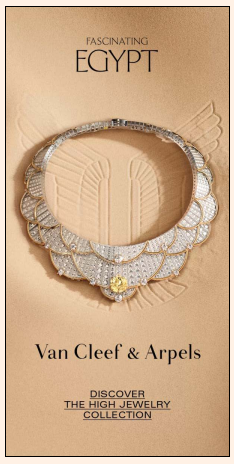
On the site of a former coal mine and later zoo, in the quiet industrial town of Genk, around an hour from Brussels, a radical project is evolving. Labiomista — part wildlife sanctuary, part contemporary art destination, part scientific research centre — is a sprawling creative universe conceived by Vanmechelen and his partner, Zimbabwean food activist and social entrepreneur Chido Govera.

At its centre sits Future Garden, the couple's home: an angular, bamboo-clad building inspired by Mayan temples and designed around the coexistence of humans, animals, art and science — and a tapir called Dionysus. Friendship is the philosophy that underpins it all.

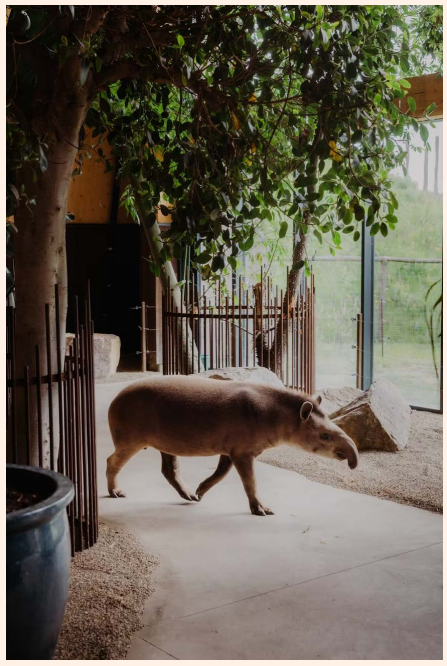
Vanmechelen relaxing in his 'La Mamma' chair, designed by Gaetano Pesce in 1969

The carbon-neutral building was designed by Vanmechelen alongside local architect Buro B and local craftspeople. In worn slippers and a simple jumper, and with an unassuming, warm demeanour, he leads me across a rope bridge over the wildlife park on to the roof terrace. His array of sculptures overlooks the grazing llamas and zebras.

Vanmechelen's work is currently the subject of a substantial solo exhibition during the Venice Biennale, at the Palazzo Rota Ivancich. While he had no formal training in either art or biology, his father was an artist and his uncle an ornithologist. This fostering of passions culminated in Vanmechelen's breakthrough work: the 1999 "Cosmopolitan Chicken Project", an attempt to breed a chicken with genes from every one of the planet's domestic breeds. It's a comment on the obsession with controlling nature for aesthetics or food production, and the detriment that inbreeding has on the lives of animals. By reintroducing genetic diversity, each subsequent generation of chickens the artist creates is, he says, more resilient, lives longer and is less susceptible to disease.



Vanmechelen's huge sculpture, 'See Me', of a giant bird on top of a hand, greets visitors on arrival at the park

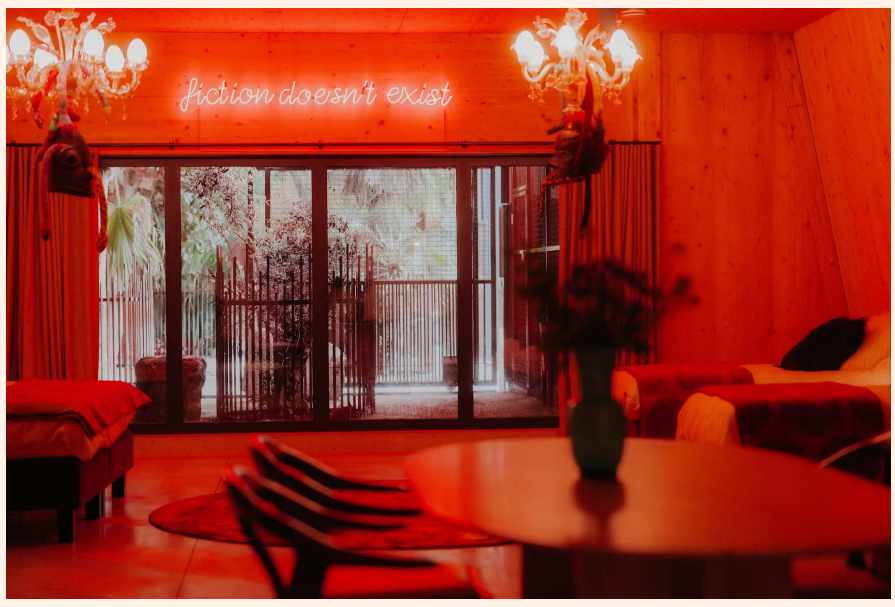


'I want to build a temple of friendship,' says Vanmechelen of Dionysus, the tapir

His work, which takes in conceptual projects, installations and sculptures of hybrid animal-human figures, has been shown at the Uffizi in Florence, and the Biennials of Havana, Dakar and Poznan. He has spoken about his chickens at the World Economic Forum and TED conferences.

The 60-acre site is a collaboration between the artist and the city of Genk; it came about following a conversation with the local mayor when Vanmechelen was being forced to leave his former studio, in 2016. The private zoo had closed in 1997, but Vanmechelen had visited as a young boy, so when the mayor offered him the site to rejuvenate and restore, it felt like fate.

His reimagining of the space — populated by llamas, emus, dromedaries, ostriches and birds of prey, who live among Vanmechelen's installations — opened to the public in 2019, operated by trained keepers and veterinarians alongside a team of conservators. The park operates with other registered zoos to co-ordinate breeding programmes for endangered species, pooling expertise to keep bloodlines healthy and genetically diverse. DNA collection and analysis — that contributes to open biodata banks — is in collaboration with organisations including Hasselt University. Entrance fees to the wildlife park are reinvested in the local neighbourhood.



All that separates guests from Dionysus's enclosure is a glass window, above which hangs a neon artwork by Vanmechelen declaring 'Fiction Doesn't Exist'

Vanmechelen and Govera chose not to live in the marble-floored 1920s villa that was once home to the director of the mine and later the family who ran the zoo. Better, they thought, to use it to host educational installations and exhibitions.

Instead they built a home of their own: a temple to their colourful, idiosyncratic life. Inside the pale-wood, Scandi-minimalist space is a confluence of global and local design influences. In the main living area, I am invited to sit in a bright red "La Mamma" chair, designed by Gaetano Pesce in 1969: a womblike shape with a matching ottoman resembling a ball and chain, a comment on both female confinement and fertility. Belgian mid-century furniture sits alongside a multicoloured Missoni sofa; African craft beside an abstract rug produced by Moooi from a drawing by the artist.

In the main living area, a Missoni sofa, African crafts and an abstract Moooi rug sit alongside Vanmechelen's art, including 'The Eggcord'

Nearby hangs "The Eggcord", one of Vanmechelen's works in Murano glass, its suspended string of "eggs" representing DNA, fragility and future possibility, he tells me. A version is currently on display at the Venice exhibition, "We Thought We Were Alone". "I use glass as a metaphor for the future," he says. "The eggs are transparent because they represent something still becoming."

Future Garden itself feels like an evolving experiment. On an upper floor is a laboratory where Govera — founder of The Future of Hope Foundation, which aims to provide food security and empowerment to Zimbabwean women and girls — researches mycelium and sustainable food systems. Her work has received a National Geographic Explorer grant. There's chicken DNA, says Vanmechelen, but also more. "We're researching immune systems with llamas,

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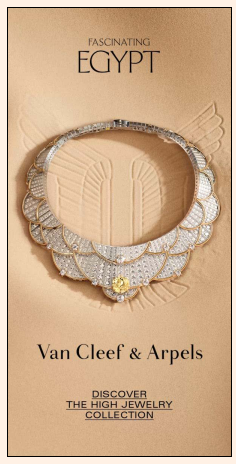
At Home with the FT Add to myFT fertility accessibility, and next will come tapir research."

Chido Govera, Vanmechelen's partner, is a Zimbabwean food activist and social entrepreneur

Dionysus (who at the time of my visit is expecting a mate, Gaia, to arrive), is something of a local celebrity. On the roof is a tapir sculpture titled "Silent Rebel". He has his own inside/outside space: a carefully controlled ecosystem maintained between 16C and 18C, filled with tropical plants, palm and cotton trees. The tops of the foliage peek up through the windows of the first-floor living room. Govera worked with a botanist to select "a combination of plants that could survive without constant sunlight". Dionysus, snuffling about, seems very happy in his boutique private jungle.

But guests sleeping in the ground-floor suite can get a bit of a fright. All that separates the room from Dionysus's enclosure is a large glass window; above it hangs a neon artwork by Vanmechelen declaring "Fiction Doesn't Exist". The room is bathed in a red glow.

The couple need to keep a watchful eye on open doors in the summer. "Sometimes the tapir pees or poos inside," Govera laughs. But she can handle it. "It becomes natural. Traditionally, people lived alongside animals. Then we separated ourselves from nature."



'A table of friendship': the vast table is made of a fallen maple tree

"For centuries we imagined ourselves as the centre of everything," adds Vanmechelen. "Nature does not need our pity, only our willingness to coexist."

Spanning three floors of the historic Venetian palazzo, Vanmechelen's exhibition features more than 40 new sculptures and installations exploring humanity's fractured relationship with nature. Animals appear throughout as messengers confronting human exceptionalism.

At home, conversations about rebuilding such relationships power the day-to-day on a local and global level. While the couple collaborate with scientists, universities and the World Health Organization on research projects related to animal DNA, Govera also hosts workshops for local students; they scuttle into the lab via the rope bridge.

The couple cook for artists, activists, musicians, philosophers and scientists from the local and international community

Govera's lab for her Future of Hope Foundation, which aims to provide food security and empowerment to Zimbabwean women and girls

A small group of people suddenly becomes visible through the panoramic kitchen window, pushing wheelbarrows full of vegetables. Vanmechelen explains they are part of a local initiative supporting people with learning disabilities through animal care projects. "Feeding the animals is the most popular activity," he smiles.

But there's also the art. Vanmechelen's huge sculpture of a giant bird on top of a hand, "See Me", greets visitors on arrival. In the entrance hall hangs a monumental portrait of Govera as Medusa. "For me, Medusa is a healer," he explains. "People misunderstood her. It was never Medusa who turned people to stone, it was the snakes," he believes.

A rope bridge provides access to the lab where Govera runs workshops

'We are a melting pot from different cultures': Vanmechelen and Govera

Murano glass chandeliers have been turned into sculptures featuring multicoloured snakes hand-crocheted by women in Govera's former community in Zimbabwe, alongside African masks. "We are a melting pot from different cultures," Vanmechelen says, smiling at Govera.

The monumental maple table — "a table of friendship" — is where the couple brings artists, activists, musicians, philosophers and scientists from the local and international community together. "The whole building is like this. It's the spirit of crossing memories and friendships."

'We Thought We Were Alone' is at Palazzo Rota Ivancich in Venice until 22 November

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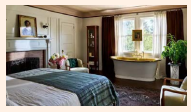

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