

# The Washington Post

## In 'Leaving Paradise' at Connersmith, rare chickens move into art gallery

By Maura Judkis, Published: May 2



(CONNERSMITH) – Koen Vanmechelen: Leaving Paradise. 2013 installation (Red Jungle Fowl, plants, wood, wire, wood chips, water, food). Dimensions variable

The two chickens that will take up residence at Connersmith gallery in Northeast have crossed an ocean, not a road. So naturally, the process of getting to the other side has been fraught with complications.

To bring two Red Jungle Fowl, one of the oldest chicken breeds in the world, from Belgium to Washington, artist Koen Vanmechelen — who is more than a decade into a chicken-breeding conceptual art project — learned a lesson about the politics of American poultry.



(CONNERSMITH) – Koen Vanmechelen, “Mechelse Silky 14th Generation - C.C.P. 2011.” taxidermied chicken, 15.5 x 10 x 12 inches, unique with Mechelese Orloff and Chinese Silky.

“If you send 1,000 chickens, it’s not a lot of problems, but if you send two chickens, there are a lot of questions — ‘Why two chickens?’ [Customs] treats it in a different way. They are more scared for two chickens, I think, than for thousands,” Vanmechelen said by Skype from Belgium.

So, why two chickens — and why these particular ones? The birds are part of Vanmechelen’s artistic exploration of some of the biggest topics in humanity: globalization, multiculturalism, genetic engineering, and biological and cultural diversity. When the artist considered how far the bird had come from its ancestors (and how far those ancestors had come from their original ancestors, the dinosaurs), he put two and two together, breeding a French chicken with a Belgian chicken. He has been mating their offspring with other purebred chickens from around the world ever since, in a grand experiment to bring the chicken back to its biological roots and to turn the project into a metaphor for human society.

“My goal is to breed it to diversity, but it becomes lighter, quicker — it can fly again. These are all the ingredients that the Red Jungle Fowl has,” Vanmechelen said.

Red Jungle Fowl are chickens from Asia that were first domesticated thousands of years ago and from which scientists believe many contemporary breeds of chickens have descended. When the chickens began to live among humans, the artist said, they left not only an ecological paradise but also a biological one: After centuries of inbreeding, modern chickens are often unable to fly and can suffer from infertility. Because countries have developed national and regional breeds, the many descendants of Red Jungle Fowl look far different from their swift and lean progenitors.

Vanmechelen’s Red Jungle Fowl will live in the gallery for the duration of his “Leaving Paradise” show, surrounded by photographs, sculptures and genealogical records of the hybrid chickens. At Vanmechelen’s last show at Connersmith in 2009, he was 13 generations into the project; now he’s working with his 17th generation. As the breeding

has progressed, he has noticed that the chickens have begun to regain traits they had lost, which has sparked scientists' interest in analyzing their DNA. Vanmechelen's foundation, the Open University of Diversity, is analyzing the scientific and philosophical questions that have been raised by the project.

"For me, what is important [is] that as an artist, you give comment on society," Vanmechelen said. "I have no real point. My point is art."

Pairs have an additional significance to Vanmechelen. His menagerie of 3,000 chickens on eight farms on three continents are all the outcome of an experiment with just two breeds. Extending the metaphor further into humanity, the title "Leaving Paradise" and the pairs of birds that now have thousands of descendants can be seen as the story of Adam and Eve.

"In paradise, there is only paradise, but you are alone," Vanmechelen said. "Leaving paradise means that you create another world, and out of this world comes another world, which is maybe paradise."

For future versions of the project, Vanmechelen said he is working on sculptures based on the chickens' DNA and is considering releasing some of his birds into the wild. As for the chickens in his project, they live out their days in gardens and fields on his farms. And to consider another form of biblical paradise — heaven — the birds all die of natural causes and their taxidermied remains become part of the exhibit.

"When they die, I give them the status of sculpture, which I think is very high," Vanmechelen said.

**Koen Vanmechelen: Leaving Paradise**

Saturday through June 29 at Connersmith,  
1358 Florida Ave. NE. 202-588-8750. [www.connersmith.us.com](http://www.connersmith.us.com). Open Wednesday-Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and by appointment. Free. An artist talk will take place Saturday at 5 p.m.