

*Vanity Fair*

EXCLUSIVE

## Belgium's Princess Delphine on Surviving Scandal and Looking Forward

The artist on overcoming a painful legal battle with her father, former Belgian monarch Albert II, to be officially recognized as his daughter, and her new exhibit—fittingly titled, “What Is to Come Is Better Than What Was.”



BY JULIE MILLER

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Princess Delphine attends the National Day ceremony in front of Belgium's Royal Palace in 2021. BY OLIVIER MATTHYS/GETTY IMAGES.



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hen **Delphine Boël** was 17, her mother took her to her favorite restaurant in London secret: Delphine's father was not the man she thought he was. He was actually **Prince Albert**, the Belgian royal family member next in line to the throne.

This did not come as a surprise so much as a relief. Delphine had known Albert her entire life as a close friend to her mother, **Baroness Sybille de Selys Longchamps**. She had fond memories of Albert, a nickname for him (Papillon, the French word for butterfly), and a sense of comfort and connection with him that she never had with the man she previously believed to be her father, the industrialist Jacques Boël.

Growing up, "I felt very alone," Delphine, now 54, tells *Vanity Fair* in her first American interview timed to her solo art exhibition at Linda and Guy Pieters Foundation in Saint-Tropez, as well as the three-part documentary *Delphine: The Secret Princess* that aired in Belgium earlier this year. "I didn't feel like I belonged to anybody or anywhere."







Delphine as a child in 1973. COURTESY OF DELPHINE.

Delphine was not the result of a brief affair but, as she and Sybille recount in the documentary, an 18-year romance that began in the 1960s, when Albert and Sybille met through Sybille's father, the late ambassador Count Michel Francois de Selys Longchamps. At the time, according to Sybille, she and Albert were unhappy in their marriages—Sybille was estranged from Jacques Boël, and Albert had been married to **Paola Ruffo di Calabria**, an Italian princess with whom he already had three children, since 1959. Though Albert always returned to Paola, he was a regular in Sybille and Delphine's lives—sending gifts and cards, visiting mother and daughter in their Belgian apartment, and taking them on holidays. At one point, according to the documentary, Albert even proposed leaving his wife to move to London with the duo—but Sybille talked him out of making such a politically disastrous decision.

Even though, at that fateful lunch circa 1985, Delphine learned she had been lied to her entire life, the teenager immediately understood she had an important duty to the Belgian monarchy. She too had to keep her tie to Albert a secret.

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“I had to protect, first of all, my father. I had to protect my mother. And I had to protect my country. Because if it is known that I exist and I was born outside the marriage of my father, who comes from a very Catholic background, there will be a big scandal, and my father could maybe lose his throne,” recalls Delphine, speaking on Zoom from her art studio in Uccle. “However angry you are, you shut up because the [fallout] could be terrible.”



Delphine in her art studio in Uccle. BY JIM O'HARE.

**I**n the years that followed, as Delphine would later tell the press, she acted as “a little soldier,” refusing to disclose the identity of her true father to anyone—even the therapist who treated her as many as three times a week during a serious battle with anorexia as a teenager, she says.

“I started dating around 18, and boys ask you questions: ‘Who’s your dad, and what does he do?’ And you’re like, ‘Well...’ and you change the subject or you lie. I don’t like lying,” says Delphine. “It was



definitely very, very difficult, but it was such a powerful duty. I knew I had to keep that secret. But it's not healthy."

She was so loyal that she did not even tell **Jim O'Hare**, the American she was dating and would later go on to have two children with, about her actual lineage. He found out when the rest of the world did—after an 18-year-old author named **Mario Danneels** published an unauthorized biography of Queen Paola in 1999 that included a single line referencing an unnamed illegitimate daughter of Albert's. **Speaking to V.F. in 2020**, Danneels said the line was enough for press and anti-royalists alike to pounce.

"She was an open secret with the Belgian media," Danneels explained. "They knew who she was, they knew where she was living, and my book was the excuse that they needed to go all out on this.... The next day it was in the British paper *The Times*—the headline was [something like] 'Love Child of Belgian King Living in London,' and a huge picture of Delphine on the front cover."

By then, Delphine had graduated from the Chelsea College of Arts in London and been working as a painter and sculptor. But the book's publication immediately ended any semblance of a normal life. She was no longer a secret princess—in her mind, she says, she was "a political hostage." She had no security or protection from the palace, so the press freely stalked her, and strangers in the street chastised her very existence, blaming her for weakening the monarchy.

"[Danneels] was used and I was used," Delphine tells me. "We were political punching bags.... When I would go out to the shops, people who are royalists would say, 'You're disturbing the country. You're a scandal. You shouldn't exist because you are a problem to the country. If you exist, it makes the royal family fragile.'" Some people even believed she was a national threat: "If the royal family doesn't exist in this country, there is a possibility that the country divides—meaning Flanders and the French speakers—and there's no more Belgium," Delphine explains.

Rather than acknowledge that Delphine was Albert's daughter, as *Delphine: A Secret Princess* recalls, a Belgian palace spokesperson called the report "**malevolent gossip**," and, in a national holiday address, Albert vaguely **referred** to a "crisis" that occurred in his marriage in the late 1960s—the time of Delphine's birth. Sometime afterward, around 2001, a 33-year-old Delphine telephoned Albert. To her shock and heartbreak, she says, the voice on the other end of the line suddenly claimed that—in spite of their decades of fond memories—he was not her father.

"I think he was influenced at some point—someone saying, 'Look, you have to cut ties with your daughter, and say it never happened,'" says Delphine. "I think there were some unfortunate human beings there that didn't like the idea of my existence. So they thought it was better to get rid of me, which doesn't work, unfortunately, in life. You can't just get rid of a child once you've had them."





Delphine pregnant, with her partner Jim O'Hare, in 2008. BY OLIVIER POLET/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES.

**F**or years, Delphine attempted to privately reconcile with her father—confused and heartbroken over the parental rejection. When she had two children with O'Hare, **Joséphine** and **Oskar**, the confusion and hurt only deepened—how could any parent so coldly reject their own blood? Delphine also grew frustrated by the effect her status as an illegitimate child of the king had on her life and career—art shows of hers were mysteriously canceled, and invitations were rescinded by people who were worried about upsetting the king, according to the documentary. Delphine says she even discovered that she and her young children had been marked “dirty” on a list of “politically exposed people”—meaning that some banks refused to do business with them. Disturbed and frustrated, Delphine launched what would become a seven-year legal battle to be officially recognized as Albert’s daughter.

In 2013, the year that Albert abdicated the throne to his son—**losing his legal immunity**—Delphine filed her lawsuit. The legal saga fueled Belgian tabloids and culminated with the court ordering Albert to submit a DNA test. Though he initially refused to cooperate, Albert eventually **complied**, and later **acknowledged**, in January 2020, that he was indeed Delphine’s biological father. In the 2020 interview with *V.F.*, Danneels pointed out that Delphine was never after financial gain—the man she initially believed to be her father, Jacques Boël, who passed away earlier this year, came from a family worth a reported **\$1 billion**—“far, far more than what Albert is worth.” For her, the battle was just for rightful recognition.

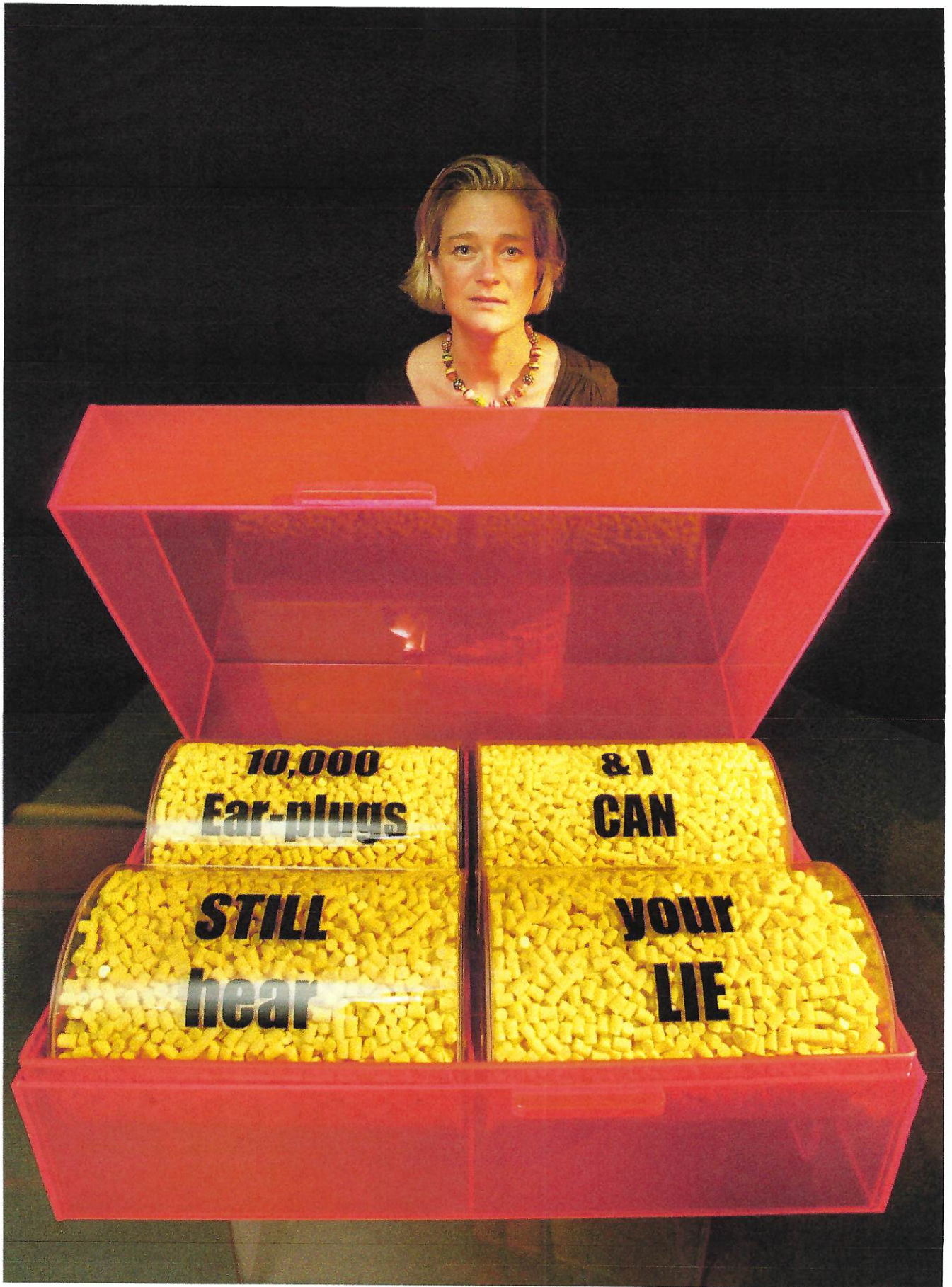




Delphine going to court in 2014. BY WILLIAM VAN HECKE/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES.

**T**hroughout those decades of secrecy, Delphine looked to art as her salvation and therapeutic outlet. When she was still in touch with Albert but unable to reveal she was his daughter, Delphine says, “I started making thrones, and frogs with crowns on their heads, and [channeled it into] my art because it is a very difficult thing to keep a secret.” When her face was plastered across newspapers after the publication of Danneels’s book, she created a piece featuring a washing machine with her face inside—her interpretation of being the royal family’s dirty laundry. Before she sued her father, she painted a piece emblazoned with the words “Bla, bla, bla, bla, bla.” It was titled *My Duty to Remain Silent*. Says Delphine, “The titles are very important. They say a lot.”





Delphine at an exhibit of her artwork in 2007, after King Albert claimed he was not her father. BY MARK RENDERS/GETTY IMAGES.



“My art is a lot about text,” explains Delphine. “I write on my canvases and often it’s the same word over and over again. In the past, I did years of ‘bla, bla, bla,’ which was about gossip. It was very therapeutic.” During the court case, she began working with the word *love* as a way to “brainwash myself.” She explains that the years battling her father in the courtroom could have turned her bitter, but she wanted to open herself up “and love myself more.” Even though the court case is over, she confesses that some days, “I need to still brainwash myself: *Delphine, keep loving life. You must love life. And make the most of every single second of it.* That’s what’s helping me to heal.” It’s been so effective that she has even begun printing her designs on silk scarves, dresses, and ponchos to create **wearable art**. “These words are so powerful. I thought, Wouldn’t it be nice if people could actually wear these words and wrap themselves in them?”

The October after the 2020 judgment, Delphine **reunited with Albert** and met Paola at Belvédère Castle in Brussels. “I didn’t know how important it was for me to actually see him again, physically, and for him too,” Delphine says of the face-to-face meeting. “You can feel a great relief. It was a very, very difficult time journey, but it was definitely worth it.”



Delphine with her stepmother Queen Paola and father King Albert in 2020. BY ROYAL BELGIUM POOL/GETTY IMAGES.

Delphine is tight-lipped about her relationship with Albert these days, explaining, “It is a time that we have to learn to trust each other. It was many years in combat. There’s been a lot of hurt. It takes time



to get to a point of trust—me towards him and him towards me.” She acknowledges that she is still recovering from the traumatic journey.

“It’s a roller-coaster. You have to accept that as a human being. I cry still. You have to accept that it hurts, and if you accept it, I think it’s a little quicker healing. But it will take time.”

These days, Delphine is still adjusting to her new status as official royal and princess—a title she requested toward the end of the legal battle.

“I never thought I was going to ask for the title,” she explains. “Even my lawyers went, ‘What?’ But I realized that I had to so that I would be the same as my brothers and sisters. It was a great thing to ask for,” she says, explaining that it has set legal precedent for “other bastard children to be treated the same as legal children.” The title has thus far had one clear advantage, when it comes to bolstering the charitable causes she has long supported. In addition to working with the Make-A-Wish Foundation, she has been pushing for the integration of artwork in healthcare to benefit patients, doctors, and nurses via a fund in her name at the University of Ghent Hospital. “Now I have much more weight with my title. I realized how useful I can be.”

Delphine makes clear, though, that she is still very much a working artist who logs long hours in her studio seven days a week.

“I am a royal family member that is not paid by the government, which means that I have a certain amount of freedom compared to my brothers and sister,” says Delphine, who is currently showing her artwork in a [solo exhibit at the Linda and Guy Pieters Foundation](#) that is poignantly titled “What Is to Come Is Better Than What Was.” She says, “I hope that it will give a lot of hope for everybody because we need it.”

As much as Delphine is adjusting to her new life and family, the artist points out that her new family is still adjusting to her as well.

“My brother **Philippe**, who is king, seems to be very supportive. It could be very worrying for them, because they have this new family member representing the Belgian royal family, and if I do something stupid, that brings them all down. So I think it can be rather scary for them sometimes,” she says, explaining that she—in her colorful outfits—doesn’t necessarily fit into the aesthetic mold of a traditional royal. “I think, with time, my family will realize how serious I am and that a little bit of my flamboyance or a little bit of my authenticity and arty-ness is good. I hope that they will appreciate it. But it’s a bit soon, I think, for them to completely say, ‘Hey, this is great.’ You know, it’s another world. If you look a bit at the English royal family or the Belgian royal family or the Dutch, we’re not the biggest communicators.”





Jim O'Hare and Princess Delphine (L) alongside her siblings Princess Astrid and Prince Laurent during the military parade for the 2002 Belgian National Day in Brussels, Belgium. BY JAN DE MEULENEIR/PHOTONEWS/GETTY IMAGES.

Now that she has been officially recognized, with the new title of Delphine of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, she has begun to reclaim her narrative. She worked with filmmaker and journalist **Chris Michel** and Warner Bros. International to make the three-part documentary *Delphine: The Secret Princess*, which has already **aired in Belgium** and was **picked up** by HBO Max to air in several other countries in Europe and SBS to air in Australia. The project, which does not yet have U.S. distribution, recounts Delphine's decades-long battle with the circumstances she was born into, with her mother Sybille appearing on camera as well.

"I think my mother feels kind of bad about what happened, and about her choices. She didn't realize how it was going to harm me so much, and harm her too. I'm her baby. Her choices were, at that time, possibly not the greatest, but I don't blame either [her or Albert] because it was another time and another life."

Their story is supplemented by gorgeous archival video and photography, as well as photos of Delphine's artwork—a fascinating creative parallel to the story line. Delphine said that she initially agreed to make the documentary for her children so that they could one day understand her complicated journey. When she first began filming, she says, "My children were being bullied at school by people saying that their mother is crazy, she wants attention, or God knows what. It's very



unpleasant for children to hear that about their own mother. So I really wanted to have the truth told through this journalist.”

She hopes that the documentary will dispel taboos around being a child born out of wedlock. It opens with a title card reading, “Rich or poor, a child should never be a victim of parents who go through problems or decide to cover up their past. Children have the right to know the truth about their identity and to be treated fairly. I am sharing my very personal story with the hope it can help and inspire others to resolve family challenges in a civil way.”

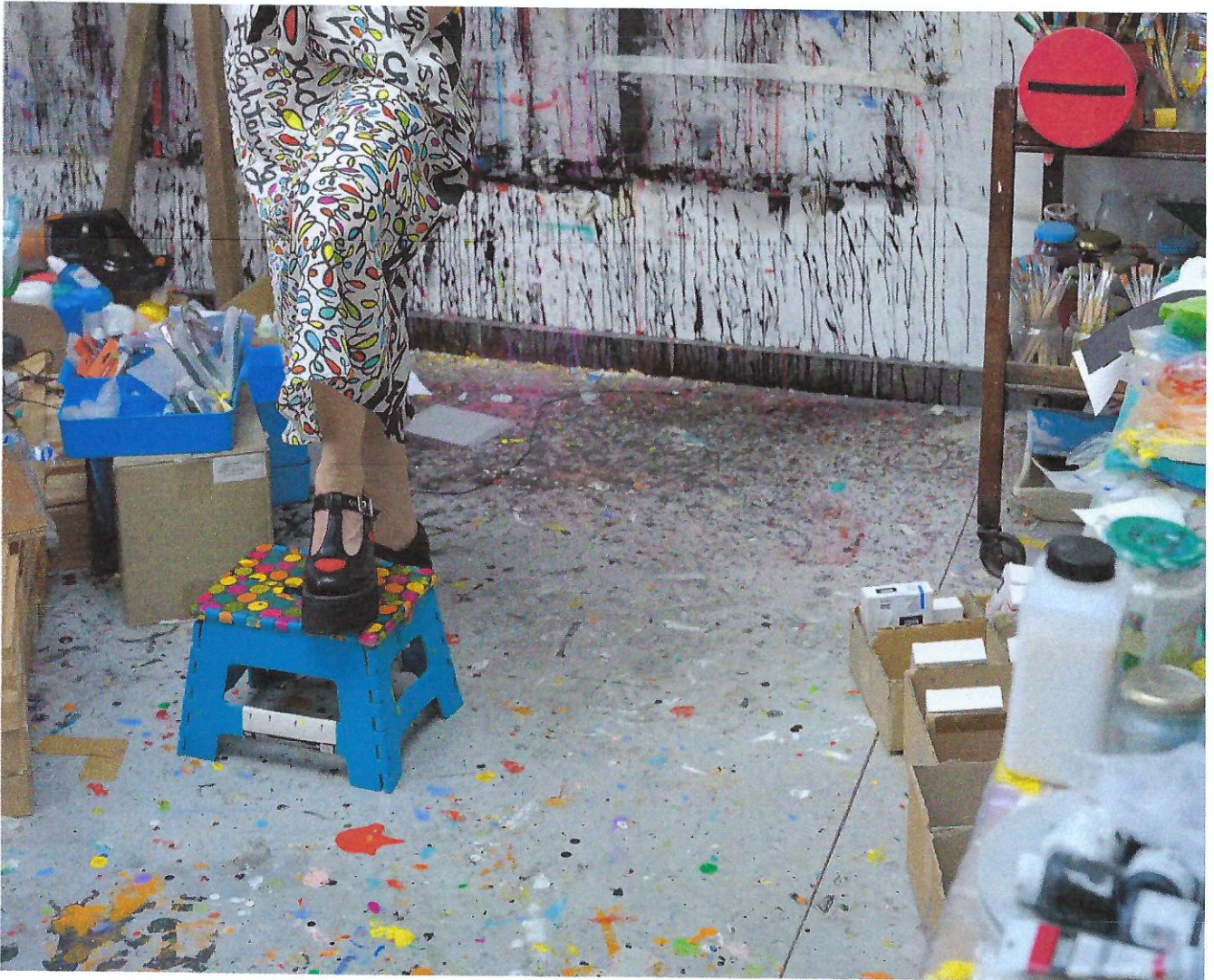
Delphine also speaks of her anorexia for the first time in the documentary.

“I could have said, ‘Let’s keep it out, please,’ but I thought, no, at the end of the day, this is about taboos, and I want young people who go through anorexia to not be ashamed. To know that they can come out of it, and it’s not a shameful thing. It usually is because of stress. When you’re young, things are happening around you and are out of your control.”

When the film aired in Belgium, Delphine says that her vulnerability took some people by surprise. “I’m somebody who, from the outside, looked very strong. During the court case, when I was filmed by the press, I was never shown crying. I never showed any emotions. So when people saw what I went through with this anorexia, I think people understood how I suffered because of my story, my father, all these unknowns and secrecy.”







BY JIM O'HARE.

Feeling such widespread warmth is a new feeling for someone whose public identity was enmeshed with scandal for decades. She's hoping that the documentary—which presents her story in full—will finally put an end to the ongoing questions.

“It was really very difficult,” Delphine said of the process of dredging up her past for the film. “What helped was to know that I was helping other people while doing it and helping myself in the sense that, once it's done, I can get on with other things. People will see the documentary, and we can talk about other things afterwards. We can talk about art and we can talk about other projects. If people want to know anything, I can say, ‘Look at the documentary, I don't want to talk about it anymore.’ ... It's still too painful.”

She was so eager to change the public conversation around herself, she explains, that she agreed to participate in the third season of the Flemish version of *Dancing with the Stars*, on behalf of the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

“I think that is one of the reasons I did *Dancing with the Stars*. I was ready to make myself look so ridiculous so that we would talk about what an elephant I looked like, a hippo, a walrus—anything so



that we would talk about something else,” says Delphine, who surprised herself by beating out contestants to come in sixth place. “It was just fantastic—so sometimes now people say, ‘Hey, that dance,’ and then we can talk about that.”

With this painful saga behind her, Delphine looks forward to a life finally free of scandal. But she is not bitter about those long years—she is still painting *love* on her canvases until she feels the sentiment she is spelling out. And she hopes that her experiences can be of service or inspiration to others.

“I’m a believer that it’s not a coincidence that I’ve had this life,” Delphine says. “And it wasn’t so that I could keep it to myself. I hope I’m a good example for others to take their space—that they exist, that they belong.”



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