

Créer en creux / Delving into Art

The Labyrinthine Wonderland

What exactly are we entering when we go into these exhibition rooms? Into a labyrinthine wonderland or some kind of *précis* of forms? Should we leave all our expectations behind or, on the contrary, find reasons to hope and believe in the tacit renewal of contemporary art? If we do make a somewhat random decision to circulate in this labyrinthine wonderland, our reference would have to come from antiquity: Daedalus and his son Icarus, overwhelmed by the Gods and their metamorphoses. As in the myth of the old architect and his son caught in a trap of their own making, there is another story here about feathers stuck on where they do not belong, but in this case, there's no risk of losing the thread through overheating, for the story also tells of a mythical time when the air, land and animal world were all closely linked; of the brutal, all-invasive struggle against matter and material of whatever kind, for there are many different kinds of material along this itinerary. This allows the viewer to access another element and enter it, although he does not actually move (yet); for this delving inwards is the portal promising access to an emptiness that leads to the emergence of contradictory poetics; the relationships between opposites are definitely there, though complex and unstable, and it would be an insult on our part to suggest cross-checks the curious onlooker can do for himself. But a platform allowing the construction it upholds to be found in more or less identical form on the ground beneath it, immediately recalls Italo Calvino's "invisible cities": "Cities are like dreams, they are made of wishes and fears – even when the main thread of their meaning is hidden – and their absurd rules and deceptive perspectives; everything conceals something else"¹. In Caroline Le Mehauté's work, every proposal hides another or even several others. Each piece conceals a reflection or the actual double of itself inside it, or it can be turned inside out like the finger of a glove. The forms shown by the artist are often the fingers of a glove you think can be turned inside out, but when you do just that (mentally of course), the inside form no longer resembles whatever we perceived on the outside. This is the skilled trick achieved by *Négociation 29 : Je levais les yeux*. A straight wall is studded with small cavities whose bottom is invisible to the naked eye – they could be animal burrows, crypts or troglodyte dwellings. The mystery of not knowing either the shape

¹ Italo Calvino: *Les villes invisibles, Points Seuil*

inside nor what unappeased creature might be lurking there, fires the imagination. It has one believing in a work made up of tubes plunging underground and is tantamount to imagining the sculptor has the key to its multiple hells.

Bestiary and masonry

These sculptures are able to construct their own imaginary, off-centre world, which can lead to our construing them as a nature reserve or a zoo of so far unidentified forms. Their ability to move slowly like a wave raised by the draught from a passing viewer, ooze gently away and then recompose themselves into almost identical forms in a space alongside, offering chasms of uncertainties in their holes and pockets, can induce belief in secret lives and fearful, unknown dramas unfolding before your eyes. Even though nothing suggests a plan or even a concerted strategy, you feel obliged to advance in a certain way that has nothing to do with merely putting one foot in front of the other, step after step. Not perceiving or really recognising anything at all nor whatever might be happening there is frankly disturbing, but can open the previously blocked way to comparison and incentive. The animal, so often evoked without being described, finally slithers away between the artworks without our being able to flush it out. We have to be satisfied with a tiny glimpse caught from the corner of the eye or the mind, and must imagine some action on its part, since we can't attribute any form to it. So many gleaming feathers are offered to us, so many dyed sponges and rabbit burrows or mole-tunnels that open or close (it's hard to tell the difference) that eventually deduction filters in between our artistic judgement and sheer fantasy. Our choice is extended by the strange proposals offered by nature – for example, the encyclopaedias tell us that a certain form of marine life, the holothurian, has very strange ways of behaving. When it senses it's being attacked, it is capable of producing long, sticky filaments or even expelling its internal organs and turning itself inside out like an empty pocket. The resulting sticky mass then manages to cover its presumed opponent. Even without its internal organs, the holothurian will continue its movements, draining water into its almost empty body until the said organs reappear again. Placing images that are so far from the smooth, finished, immobile and friendly aspect of each work alongside this itinerary could seem like the projection of a really anxious or perverse mind. Yet each finished form contains its opposite – so what other reason could there be to try and make a hand or the viewer's gaze plunge into what seem to be nests or disturbing empty spaces, if not to reveal something else beside whatever is visible? The reassuring strangeness of Caroline Le Méhauté's sculptural declarations might well conceal

something else we surely don't want to know. So many deft constructions, premeditated frameworks, labyrinthine passages going where we know not where, are all probably as meaningful as the works themselves, which may – and indeed, do – seem innocent enough, but are actually hiding some piquant bits of fantasy for whoever wants to take a whiff of them. So as to go over for a moment from the reassuring clarity of a recognisable assemblage to the dark and tortuous power of the imagination.

Précis of forms and negotiation

For the term *négociation*, the illustrated Petit Larousse 2007 gives this: the act of negotiating, discussing business between parties with a view to an agreement on terms, negotiating a contract. Since Caroline Le Méhauté announces that all work is, in essence, a question of negotiation for her, our next question follows quite legitimately – who is the other party she's negotiating with? The sub-title of the title of each work gives us some elements of reply, whether it's a question of 'Splitting a little on one side, 'Carry the surface', 'Alternative' or 'Take the air', the other part of the negotiation can only be the sculpture itself or its constitutive elements. Negotiating with a gesture that can lead to weakening or deterioration, with the surface area of the work and its host site, or with the various alternating movements allowing the work to renew itself, or all the oxygen and draughts causing vibrations or other movement in an otherwise unstable work, is obligatory, given the dimensions of today's exhibition spaces. It is no longer the object that makes its presence felt in a given place; it conveys part – and only part – of itself to the artist who conceives it, its host site and the viewer who at times has to endure or tolerate it.

As for 'Timon and timon', 'I lifted my gaze' and 'Longitude or latitude', what's being negotiated here is a place in the space – not so much the place or position of the work of art, but one of several named positions: a hitching-up place represented by the shaft² (repeated by the insistent title), the space underneath where we the viewers place ourselves and the space above occupied by the object, and the longitude and latitude of its position on the globe, not to mention the freedom to act or reach a decision implied by the very word 'latitude' .

The titles of some drawings or series of drawings still need to be dealt with (they are not or no longer constitute negotiations as such): *La descendance*, *Troisième temps* and *Les*

² 'Shaft' in English can be translated by 'timon' in French (Translator's note)

nocturnes. It is clear that the artist's concern here is length of time. She's been in the sculpture, been in space and now decides to move through time, from the future of descendants (its descendants?) to the non-specified position of a third, ambiguous time that would seem to circulate freely from front to back or day to night. Paradoxically, the piece of paper is the space where she places the sort of time some people interpret more often than not as a fourth dimension, the fourth dimension.

All that remains now is the title of the exhibition and that of one of the pieces of peat stuck in a passage between two exhibition rooms and called *Cocotrope*. There's a change of register here, for in this particular case, Caroline Le Méhauté is up against the domain of rhetoric – a trope is a stylistic device where a word is used in its figurative sense. It's fun to take a look at the various figurative meanings of the word 'coco'.

Title with a double meaning for an open-ended exhibition, the twofold sense of the word 'timon' to designate a piece that harnesses two blue cones and peat, the twinning of pieces that confront each other, the mutual reflection of things that could resemble each other, though actually each one presents a vaguely different form – there's no end to the cases of duality and duels present (sometimes through their absence) in this exhibition. The different aspects or states of the double overlap one another both in the artist's treatment of space (and from outside and inside, from above and below, from front and back), the titles and their inaptness or double meanings, the stable and unstable forms and everything that hasn't yet been touched on here.

So this whole group of works can be assembled under a single quotation from Oscar Wilde, a connoisseur in his knowledge of culture and the nature of the double: "Do not look at things or people. You must only look in mirrors, for mirrors only show us masks"³.

François Bazzoli

³ *Oscar Wilde: Le portrait de Dorian Gray, Le Club français du livre*