THIERRY FONTAINE: SINGULAR PLURALS

'Le zouave' by Thierry Fontaine, c. 1997.

SINGULAR PLURALS

An exhibition bringing together more than 30 photographic works shot between 1995 and 2018 by this multi-talented artist. The works celebrate the career of artist Thierry Fontaine, who was born in Reunion in 1969. The exhibition aims to make palpable the creative dynamic of this unique oeuvre, whose singularity comes from the diverse artistic, cultural, political and poetic resources Fontaine draws on.

METHODOLOGY

In the mid-1990s, Fontaine made an important decision: to bring his sculptures into the realm of photography and image. Since then, the artist has developed a hybrid, nomadic approach that cultivates the aesthetics of diversity and incorporates sculpture in a broad way (from objects to installations, interventions and performances). He nevertheless continues to use photographic devices such as fixity, realism and polysemy.

The photo is all that remains visible of the artist's creative process; that which is ephemeral disappears on its own, and the objects themselves - the sculptures - are destroyed. The shots are systematically situated outdoors in specific sites. However, the centered, tight framing of the subjects makes it impossible to identify their location. Each of his silver gelatin prints, whose effects draw upon multiple references, is the result of detailed research and rigorous staging. Though imme-

diately understandable, special attention is nonetheless needed to decipher their multiple layers of meaning.

SCULPTURE X PHOTOGRAPHY

The changing positions of Fontaine's sculptures in the photos opens a vast space for exchange between the two mediums. In several pieces, the photo sets and freezes moving bodies clad in one of man's oldest materials: clay. Some have clay or plaster faces that are barely sculpted. Deprived of meaning and words, they are unfinished, like the roughly-hewn prototypes of Prometheus, inventor of statuary and creator of humanity. Is the artist an actor or the creator of these images? The answer is ambiguous. Yet, these bodies given over to the ritual of creation nonetheless evoke the complex construction of Reunionese identity.

Echoing these statuesque living sculptures, a series of photos of African masks, entitled Collection (2018), highlights the ambivalence of these sculpted figures. Though still at first glance, they nevertheless embody a spirit or being and, as they are empowered to act, can intervene during ritual, social or religious ceremonies. The artist's photos attest to this: the masks were recently used and cry wax tears.

The photos do not merely document or reproduce the sculptor's acts; rather, they translate and interpret them. This exercise in translation pushes Fontaine to test the limits of the forms of expression he uses. Thus, in Zouave (1997), he sought to physically represent the detail of a painting reproduced in a book. Balancing on an old cannon facing the ocean, the artist himself is part of the image, posing as an Algerian lieutenant in the French infantry as painted by Van Gogh (1888). He does not attempt to put himself in someone else's shoes but rather to bring to life an exotic image of colonial Europe.

Reciprocal links exist between the works. In Spirits (2014), a dark-skinned woman looks at us intensely. She seems to be the maker of the multitude of human-sized bead skeletons that surround her in a geographically unidentifiable place. Curiously, she takes the pose of Michelangelo's sculpture La Pietá. The intrusion of a 15th-century, Italian biblical reference is what distinguishes art from craft, here from elsewhere, and present from past. Is its symbolic power capable of bridging this seemingly unbridgeable cultural gap?

CHALLENGE

For Thierry Fontaine, translating is acting. Diversity proliferates throughout his work, and in each photograph he cultivates antagonism, combines irreconcilable references and juggles with polysemy. Though difficult to classify, we nonetheless find borrowings from classic genres of photography, which the artist uses, but not without challenging their principles.

DE-NATURING

The self-portraits discussed above defeat the genre's primary purpose. The figures encased in clay or plaster are impossible to identify, whereas the still-life works seem to respect the conventions of a genre linked to life and death. Yet, even here the artist creates unusual alliances: a living tree has been taken over by animal hearts, sea urchins take refuge in a pair of street shoes. What is more, they depict a denaturing (or even transfiguring) of nature, like the flowerbed of black strawberries, the plastic bottles or the fish that an alchemical process has transmuted into gold. As for the landscapes, one of them, Une île de plus (2003), carves out a tiny piece of the ocean framed by a fuzzy hand. Elsewhere mirrors, which are meant to reflect reality, instead fragment and displace unrealistic environments.

DIFFERENCE, DIVERGENCE, DISSONANCE

Some images upset the laws of the genre. Here, a series of nudes, Études (2016), is reminiscent of the documentary photography of an archaeological mission, with images in keeping with ethnographic photography and attesting to the richness of an unusual vernacular craft. However, being

more centred on the objects (a wooden phallus or coconut footballs) than on their authors, they are not unlike tourist photography. Further on, other shots capture curious phenomena, such as flames powered by light bulbs or dancing along a metal chain. Differences, divergences and dissonance resolutely cohabit in all of these images.

DIVERSITY & EXCHANGE

Using a broad range of devices, Thierry Fontaine tries to offer us the experience of the world and its diversity as well as the exchange between eclectic, sometimes contradictory registers. His photographs express an active, polyphonic, worldly approach that is both plural and singular.

BIO

Thierry Fontaine was born in 1969 at Saint-Pierre (La Réunion island). He is represented by Galerie Les Filles du Calvaire, Paris.

DETAILS

Public opening:- Saturday, October, 6 - 3 PM

Talk with the artist, Thierry Fontaine & writer, Gilles Clément:- Saturday, November, 24 - 3 PM

(Free shuttle buses to both events upon request)

Address & Contact Details: Centre Photographique d'Île de-France (CPIF) 107, avenue de la République 77340 Pontault-Combault 01 70 05 49 80 contact@cpif.net www.cpif.net

Exhibition Dates: 6th October until 23rd December 2018

Curators : Dominique Abensour (Art Critic/Curator) and Nathalie Giraudeau

Exhibition produced with the support of Galerie Les Filles du Calvaire (Paris), Musée Français de la Photographie / Conseil Départemental de l'Essonne (Bièvres), Centre national des arts plastiques / Fonds national d'art contemporain (Paris-La Défense), and with the participation of Atelier Cadre en Seine (Aubervilliers).

[Credits: Feature image - Collection - 1 by Thierry Fontaine, c. 2017-18 (courtesy Galerie Les Filles du Calvaire, Paris); CPIF - Centre Photographique d'Île de-France Press Office; artsy.net]