

UNIDENTIFIED ENDLESS MOVEMENT

“The sole purpose of arts is neither description nor imitation, but the creation of unknown beings from elements which are always present, but not apparent. [...] The true purpose of statuary is first and foremost monumental. The artwork must live as an ornament, remotely, through the harmony of volumes, plans and lines –the subject matters little.”

Raymond Duchamp-Villon

Expressing the visual dynamism of shapes: here is the recurrent ambition of Grégoire Scalabre, a sculptor-ceramist who has attracted collectors over the past few years after a fruitful residency within The Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres between 2008 and 2011. This key step on the way to institutional recognition went along with an evolution of his formal vocabulary. From scattering and accumulation —small forms meticulously thrown and combined in vertical or horizontal landscapes, rippling and swaying—, he moved towards a more abstract synthesis of sculptural form, multiplying vertiginous perspectives within a single monumental and intricate shape. When considering the virtuosity of his latest creations displayed at NeC Gallery, one recalls old arguments about the independence and posterity of the first Cubist sculptures, in the early days of the 20th century. Some critics saw in them the far too ordinary three-dimensional transcript of the separation of plans at the core of the pioneers’ drawings and paintings, particularly Picasso. But pretty fast, major “Cubist” sculptors —Gargallo, Laurens, Lipchitz, Zadkine among others— explored and imposed the explosion of the figure’s formal unity and the conditions of a true spatial liberation of sculpture. In a less theoretical way, but guided by insatiable curiosity and intuition, Grégoire also explored the possibility of instilling within his shapes a harmony that can paradoxically result from a chaos of opposite movements. To bring up a physical sensation, or better still, the idea of a dormant mutation at the heart of this monumental fixity, appears to have become the artist’s obsession. With clarity, he lets avant-garde sculpture nourish —but not jeopardize— his inspiration. In the manner of Duchamp-Villon, first proclaimed “Cubist” sculptor with his famous “Cheval Majeur” (1914) with numerous intersection points and multiple perspectives, while probably admiring the Italian futurists (Boccioni) for their combination of static and dynamic, or the “Purists” (Le Corbusier and Ozenfant) for their plastic synthesis of industrial aesthetic and modern typography... Grégoire has let his imagination wander along various iconographic inspirations, gleaned here and there, especially raving over the famous “British Sculptors” generation in the 1980s, including Richard Deacon and Tony Cragg. Contemplating both contemporary “masters” contributed to his desire to defy clay physical properties even more —materiality, heaviness, malleability— up to a superior level of extravagance, freedom and formal sophistication.

Focusing today on unprecedented convolutions, oscillating between physical fluidity and geometry, Grégoire Scalabre resolutely maintains a highly thorough craftsmanship which has henceforth become his signature, as well as a finely mastered savoir-faire. In addition to his long-standing virtuosity in throwing and his excellent knowledge of more industrial techniques of moulding and casting, the ceramist has been using for these latest artworks an ancestral and patient slab-modeling technique that its precision and scale alike make staggering — even innovative. One could be surprised by the strong muscular effect (effort) carried out by the artist to build his formal vocabulary, which may come from Fernand Léger's visual experiments for his "Ballet mécanique" (1924), or claim a connection with the scenery and costume of Oscar Schlemmer's "Das Triadische Ballet" (1922). In an original way, Grégoire seems to constantly draw sculpture and ergonomics closer, search for a possible combination between a constructivist logic and the archaic comfort of caves typical of Bachelard's reverie... How can it possibly be that his sculptures breathe this way, expand like living organs, as if any object arisen from geometry dogma was seeking one day to escape from industrial standard in order to finally throw itself forward and become pure energy? Why do his mechanical forms mesmerize us so much that we can imagine melting into them? If surfaces and structures constitute a great praise to elegance and mechanics accuracy, these artworks yet radiate a true corporeality, of variable tension, which makes them alive: rising and fixing clay has been achieved by hand, not by any machine! Built by dint of groping and approximation, the dream of shapes is not founded on any digital programming —but on successive sketches that anticipated their completion. Although these forms conjure certainties from statics and dynamics, the intertwining of curved and languid lines confuses and mislays us, as they appear to brave traditional geometric equilibriums.

Interlocks, sharp and intricate junctions, precise and skillful coils, sensual curves, intimate folds or smooth bulges that evoke the double braid on traditional leather sofas, inspiration from Haussmann style moldings or Art Nouveau long and twisted banisters... All these lines are whispering the secret language of the body. But shouldn't these slowly handcrafted forms keep alive the memory of the porous sensitivity of skin? Why would one erase this whole patient manual labor, these swirling intuitions and apprehensions, at the risk of falling into an expressive coldness? The original clay is now concealed: it resembles bronze, leather armor, *Urushi* lacquer... Or else the final texture is obtained by throwing successive layers of marble powders on fired clay, then by sanding it for a long time. This results in an unsettling patina, and a confusing redefinition of the identity of the artworks... Some of them are even treated with a precious fetishism, covered by dark feathers: orifices and bulbs, whether convex or concave, seem to converse with a surrealist and wild eroticism —in the Meret Oppenheim manner. What will happen to clay, after this imaginary swerve towards the eternity of marble, the strength of steel, even

the haute couture luxury? This question arises when looking at these attractive artworks, made of clay but not longer clay-like -while the artist expands his forms and techniques by using exogenous technical resources and assistance, on a quest for a change in scale and new markets. Without knowing until where (and when) he will carry on his artistic path with this material of choice, his early and committed dedication has earned him full recognition as a sculptor and as one of the most eminent representatives of the French ceramic scene.

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