

Inextricabilia

magical mesh

exhibition June 23 – September 17, 2017

la maison rouge

fondation Antoine de Galbert



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curator: Lucienne Peiry

Since its creation, La maison rouge has often shown together works from different genres and periods, disregarding art history classifications. Lucienne Peiry's proposal, which encompasses western religious art, African ritual art, art brut, contemporary art and folk art on a single theme of *inextricabilia* (inextricable things), carries on this tradition.

Between 2001 and 2011, Lucienne Peiry was at the head of the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, and art brut, particularly the work of Judith Scott, was her starting point for this exhibition. Little

by little, she assembled a body of works and objects from different lands, cultures, expressions and eras which nonetheless exhibit surprising overlaps in the materials and techniques used, and in the process behind their creation. The individualistic, isolated praxis of the practitioners of art brut must be distinguished from that of healers and diviners, just as the context in which these works are produced should be held separate from that of contemporary artworks. And yet when placed in the same space, these "objects," these "works" enter into conversation to form compelling dialogues and interactions.

Beyond resemblances of form or technique, these objects share a powerful symbolism and, for some, a spiritual, religious or magical dimension. They expose us to a non-rational view of the world, and elicit not just the mind but our sensations and emotions.

We begin the exhibition face-to-face with a patchworked head by **Louise Bourgeois**, made from the type of fabric we might use to bandage wounds. Above it, another head by **Michel Nedjar** shares the same expression of suffering and vulnerability. One and the other have the power to repair.

Bispo do Rosário and symbolic garments

The sumptuous *Manto da Apresentação* (Presentation Cloak) – master work of the Brazilian outsider artist **Arthur Bispo do Rosário** – is an item of ceremonial clothing. The elaborate stitching, twisting and intertwining of multicoloured threads, strands, braids and an exuberance of other trimmings fulfil a specific purpose: that at the end of his time on earth, he should be worthy to present himself before his Maker, so that He might see his representation of the "land of men", that is, his entire work.

Alone inside his room at a psychiatric hospital on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, refusing any form of treatment, this former boxer and sailor set himself the vast enterprise to collect and classify objects from the industrialised, urban world. Day after day, throughout the fifty years he spent at the hospital, he gave himself body and soul to this obsessional task. He took whatever materials were available to him, or that he was able to swap, including sheets, blankets and clothing he recovered from the hospital's garbage, and embroidered them with a wealth of texts and patterns, often using blue thread which he unravelled from patients' uniforms. This self-taught seamster kept his cloak with him at all times, so that he might always be ready for the day he would be called before God.

Shown to the left of the cloak, **Giuseppe Versino's** clothing and accessories have similarly symbolic value. After finishing his round of cleaning duties at Turin psychiatric hospital, he would take used mops and rags back to his room, wash and unpick them, hand-weave them, then assemble the resulting fabric into a complete outfit – a protective envelope which, despite its more than 40 kilos, he would wear throughout summer and winter alike.

The work of **Judith Scott** sparked the reflection that gave rise to this exhibition and as such is given a central role, with some twenty works on show. The American art brut creator began by retrieving, sometimes pilfering, all manner of heteroclitic objects (umbrella, magazine, bicycle wheel, keys) that would form the heart of her compositions. Once assembled, she bound them in wool, thread, string or cord in order to completely conceal and protect their core. The anthropomorphic, zoomorphic or organic forms of her early sculptures gradually morphed into the abstract shapes of the latter

years; most have no specific direction, with no discernible top or bottom, front or back.

Threads wound in and out, over and around each other produce a knotted, textile web of uncontained intensity, giving rise to a completely unprecedented technique. These multicoloured, cocoon-like sculptures are intimately linked to Judith's personal history.

Judith Scott, who carried the extra chromosome of Down's syndrome, was just seven years old when in 1950 she was taken away from her family and placed in an institution. The little girl suffered from this separation from her parents and two brothers. Most of all, however, she missed her twin sister Joyce, with whom she shared an extremely close bond. Unable to communicate verbally (Judith was deaf and dumb), they used a mainly sensorial language. The two sisters were inseparable, and Judith was particularly traumatised when this bond was broken; by this loss of a part of her body, a part of her being – a trauma accentuated by forced exile and clausturation. Joyce got back in touch with her twin in 1986, after thirty-six years apart. Following her emotional and physical reunion with Joyce, Judith began to experience dreams that enabled her to channel the fact of being wrenched from her home into something positive. Entirely self-taught, she produced more than two hundred sculptures.

In a ritual she repeated for over twenty years, Judith Scott simultaneously buried and resurrected – acts that can be seen as having therapeutic virtues.

The "**Bonneval dress**" in the centre of the gallery was secretly imagined by an institutionalised woman who embarked on its creation on learning of her husband's death. Her intention was that

it should allow her to be free, to forget the past and confinement, and be ready to move on to the next world.

Talismans, amulets and other charms

Embellishments of a different type cover the **African talismanic** or **ceremonial tunics**. Certain of the covered amulets that have been stitched to the chest region contain Arabo-Islamic texts. Made for marabouts and healer-diviners, they have a protective and conjurative purpose.

The therapeutic and apotropaic (the ability to ward off evil) function reveals itself as one of the essential virtues of these intertwinings and knottings, with groups of fetishes, magic bags and objects from several Central and West African countries. Symbolic entwining is also central to the work of **Michel Nedjar**. During his travels – to Persepolis, Easter Island or Bali, for example – the artist gathers different debris, plant fibres and used objects which he then transforms into amulets. He also creates small dolls which are either made from or wrapped in textiles and fibres. Both dolls and amulets dialogue closely with the amulets which anthropologist Alain Epelboin salvages from rubbish dumps in Dakar. Fashioned for the most part from animal horns, they serve to conceal talismanic texts or various substances before being wrapped in fabric and entwined with cord. These objects, "receptacles of forces", establish a connection with the invisible.

Anthropologist Nanette Snoep explains how, in Mali and in Benin, enveloping certain objects in layers of fabric is a means to "put mind and body in order, to bandage, repair and stitch them back together." The same is true of the **Minkisi bags** and **objects** from

Congo and Angola. Secreted inside them are plant, animal and organic matter (chicken's feet, skin, bones, roots, wood), instilled with magical powers. One example is the divination bag (n°62), shown open (in ordinary circumstances, it would be closed). Its exact contents are known only to the diviner-healer who created it, and it is this inaccessibility that contributes to its mystery, and gives bag and owner their power. The inside of the knotted gauze bandage (n°51) by artist **Erik Dietman**, meanwhile, remains forever unknown. Other ingredients are placed in a mesh of fabric strips and cords so that the diviner, the healer or the shaman can control and master the forces.

Like the vast majority of these African amulets, the art brut talismans of **Antonio Dalla Valle** and the **Philadelphia Wireman** are made from modern-day salvaged materials, gleaned from their everyday surroundings, then wrapped and bound. **Jean Loubressanes**, in contrast, favours natural materials for his amulets. All these objects have a protective value; their makers frequently wore them close to their body, or would keep them within reach.

Next to them, **portable** Christian **relics** containing fragments of saints' bones have been delicately tied with ribbons, and silver or gold threads as a way to maintain a bond with the dearly departed. A part of the prayer ritual, they protect the faithful in their daily lives and offer salvation.

Entangled votives

Belgian art brut artist **Pascal Tassini** has imagined a mode of expression comprising exuberant, knotted forms in a multitude of colours and projecting shapes. Several of his works are aligned

here alongside a **"braid" of votive threads**. On April 23rd, Saint George's Day, thousands of pilgrims, for the most part Muslim and Christian women, unwind balls of thread along the road that leads to the monastery on the island of Büyükada, off the Istanbul coast. Each of these tangled threads represents a wish, a prayer.

Similarly, a **profusion of knotted strands** (a fragment of which is shown here) covers a wall in Ephesus, the town in Turkey where the Virgin Mary is believed to have died. Thousands of pilgrims from all faiths visit the town each year and attach a ribbon of fabric, paper or plastic to the wall, which stands next to the shrine dedicated to Mary. Many of these ribbons carry an inscription asking that a prayer might be granted.

Anthropologist Manoël Pénicaud has collected some of these ribbons and made two documentaries about this tradition, which are screened here.

Deviant needlework and knotted fervour

Needlework implies a constant succession of slow, measured, repetitive gestures. Often, these can induce a trance-like state and, through this, a release from oneself and reality.

Certain art brut creators spent their life in an asylum – synonymous with exclusion, confinement and humiliation - and this experience rendered the need to produce these works all the more vital, all the more urgent. They are a means of survival, a salvation in the strongest sense. They are a poetic act of resistance.

The installation on the floor is a textile work by **Marie Lieb** - reproduced here, for the first time, by Swiss artist Mali Genest from two photographs dated 1894, conserved in the Prinzhorn Collection. Using torn strips of linen which she saved from her

sewing and darning work, part of the female patients' obligatory tasks, Marie Lieb covered the floor of one of the hospital cells with a vast constellation of ephemeral, dream-like shapes.

Jules Leclercq's works are far less abstract. This self-proclaimed "occult medium, bringer of fire" was interned at Armentières psychiatric hospital. Assigned to the laundry room, he would smuggle out old shirts which he secretly unpicked then embroidered with military and erotic scenes, transforming them into figurative standards and banners. **Borbála Remmer** and **Lisette H.** salvaged threads, offcuts of fabric and seaweed (varec) to produce extravagant compositions, intended for their own use or some imaginary entity. Through these creations, these men and women were doubtless able to transcend the internment imposed on them. As for **Jeanne Tripier** and **Rosa Zharkikh**, they claimed to be in contact with the deceased, spirits or an "invisible force", and produced mediumnic works through which they explored a parallel world.

Artist **Cathryn Boch** assembles, stitches, "heals and grafts", in her own words, to produce tangled forms on maps, road maps and photographs, some of which she colours with Betadine, an iodine antiseptic. Her work clearly demonstrates curative virtues.

Almost a diary, **Teresa Ottallo**'s long, embroidered letter (with a transcription of the full text) allows her to "reconstruct herself in memories" or to invent an imaginary existence.

Prayers and incantations are implicit in these creations, as they are in most of **Louise Bourgeois**' very many textile works. They are, to some degree, a reflection of her childhood, as both her parents

were antique tapestry restorers. Her series of heads, one of which can be seen at the start of the exhibition, together with this patchworked body, brought her calm and relief. In her own words, "my work [...] allows me to exorcise my demons". In *Arch of Hysteria*, a wounded, bandaged body – its position suggestive of the photographs Dr. Charcot took of "hysterical" women at Salpêtrière hospital in Paris – floats in space.

Photographs of eyes, mouths, noses, chins... are caught inside a heart-shaped tangle of threads in this monumental work by **Annette Messager**, titled *Mes vœux sous filet*. These fragments of the body recall the ex-voto (images or objects offered to God in gratitude for recovery from illness or to seek grace) that are found in great numbers in certain churches in Europe.

Invocation (prayers used to call a supernatural power) is a recurrent theme in this exhibition, and evident in these seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century **domestic reliquaries**. Nuns cloistered in convents, steeped in an atmosphere of religious fervour, painstakingly stitched and hemmed pieces of fabric, which then served to wrap fragments of bones belonging to saints or important church figures, as though in a shroud. An expression of devotion as well as a means of veneration, death is constantly present through these reliquaries, and through this relation with death comes hope for salvation and mercy. The strength of this religious sentiment is such that these perfectly symmetrical works are awash with a multitude of attached, bound or interlocking decorations, sometimes to the point of saturation.

Heide De Bruyne uses a majority of natural materials such as branches to give form to her nest-like cocoons, which she makes at the Créam creative studio in Liège.

Suspended from the ceiling, *Lumière innocente* is a child's bed lit from within, a work which contemporary artist **Chen Zhen** imagined months before his death. He describes it as "A transparent organic form... A silent life attached to a thread in the void, nascent and vanishing. A cocoon of light...". This installation is suggestive perhaps of a cocoon or the life-containing womb; it can also indicate a dead child (the hospital bed) who now shines like a star... an echo of the star shapes in Marie Lieb's work.

The exhibition continues in the basement with a work by **Man Ray**; an ambiguous piece, as the American artist intended. In his mind, the conjunction of items with no obvious connection between them can spark unexpected poetic encounters. The wrapped and tied object here – the undivulged artwork steeped in mystery and uncertainty – is a sewing machine.

The material **Sheela Gowda** has chosen for her work becomes clear on close examination. The Indian artist uses knotted ropes of human hair – hair that was ritually shorn as an offering to the gods then woven into talismans to ward off evil and ill fortune, which she in turn has assembled into this impressive braid.

Next to this are large-format photographs which Swiss artist **Virginie Rebetez** took in a Soweto cemetery, decontextualised by the black background. They reference a South-African funeral ritual. Following burial, the deceased's family swathe the tombstone in

fabric or plastic, held in place by ropes, until a second ceremony when the gravestone is "unveiled" to reveal the identity of the dead person, and celebrate life after death.

Turn the wall and three statuettes, each showing a pair of figures, come into view, tucked inside niches. The central statuette is by **Judith Scott** (one of the first she ever made). It testifies to her conscience of having a twin and to the importance of the reunion with her sister, following which she began her artistic practice in earnest. To the left, a **Tomeligi amulet** from Lomé comprising two figures wrapped in blue fabric is instilled with magical powers by thieves who use it to facilitate their crimes. To the right is a **bla bocio**, two statuettes face-to-face which have been bound together (*b/a* means "to tie") to promote understanding between two individuals.

Ritual objects

Michel Nedjar's dark dolls and **Marc Moret's** haut-reliefs are a frantic entanglement of organic and mineral (soil, stone, blood, hair) as well as thread, cord and scraps of used textile. They are receptacles for "a force from the world of the dead." Nedjar confides that "the doll [...] is to make knots with the Kingdom of the dead. To weave and solidify the fabric of our EXISTENCE."

Marc Moret hails from a small Swiss village. Certain of his creations – reliquaries he makes in the privacy of his home - incorporate objects once owned by deceased relatives. One of these pieces – *Collage à maman* – contains threads, sewing needles and knitting needles from his mother's workbox, which he assembled following her death. Each evening, he sits before it in

quiet contemplation. Personal devotional objects, this is the first time these pieces have left Switzerland.

Michel Nedjar lost a large part of his family in Nazi concentration camps, and he too summons the world of the dead. His rag fetishes are soaked in earth and animal blood. Like those of Belgian artist **Peter Buggenhout** (who makes use of similar materials and debris), the sculptures of Moret and of Nedjar question death, the beyond and oblivion, chaos and disorder. They join the Nigerian bocio, an example of the statues that stand guard over vulnerable spots around the house, in the village, at a crossroads, etc. to drive away any dangerous spirits. Next to it, the **Nkisi magical object** from Congo represents a deceased person, wrapped in a similar woven fabric to the one used to shroud the dead. This figure, part of divination ceremonies, served as a material support for conferring with the spirit of the deceased who should, in principle, watch over his or her descendents.

Irrespective of whether their fibres serve to bind or enclose, bond or weave, whether their fabric is intended to hold or hide, there is a kinship between all these different textile works, despite the thousands of miles, decades or centuries between them, and regardless of the different cultures and beliefs that produced them. They present numerous similarities in technique and style, and in many instances a formal resemblance. They develop profound spiritual affinities, deploying therapeutic, apotropaic, prophylactic or talismanic virtues. They heal, repel and ward off evil. They exorcise and protect.

Hélène Delprat

I Did it My Way

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Hélène Delprat

I Did It My Way

This is not the first time Hélène Delprat's work has been presented at La maison rouge; her video *Works and Days* (2005) was shown in the Vestibule in 2007, and several of her works were included in the *Sous influences* and *Le mur* exhibitions in 2013 and 2014 respectively.

There are two distinct phases to Hélène Delprat's journey as an artist. After graduating from the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, she was offered a residency at the Villa Medici in Rome. As of 1985, she joined the artists represented by the

prestigious Galerie Maeght (which also showed Giacometti, Braque, Gasciorowski and Calder, among others). By the early 1990s, H el ene Delprat was a recognised artist, exhibiting her painting all over the world. Then, in 1995, she decided to leave Galerie Maeght and change direction. For over ten years, Delprat worked alone, without a gallery, concentrating entirely on videos, theatre, installations and radio works – prioritising, in fact, everything but painting, although she did not abandon it entirely. The artist has occasionally described the two aspects of her work as resembling an iceberg – literary works, films and documents have always been there, the sources that inspired her painting, but until 1995 they formed the submerged part of the iceberg; now they have become the more visible part; painting is still there, but underneath.

This exhibition is not a retrospective: it focuses on the second part of her journey as an artist. As her first solo show in a Paris institution, it offers a kind of carte blanche, an open playing field as La maison rouge has given the artist the opportunity to create new, large-scale works. Using paintings, films, scenery, sounds, drawings, photographs and installations, Delprat asked film set designer Beno t Pfauwadel to help her build a veritable pathway through and within her works, rather than just hang them. The title, *I Did It My Way*, refers both to the exhibition (a hugely personal project controlled by her alone) and the unusual path that this uncommon artist has travelled.

A vague silhouette comes to meet visitors about to enter the exhibition (**332**, 2014). It is in fact that of H el ene Delprat herself, easily recognisable by her shaven head which, for a number of years now, has been a distinguishing feature. It is this "character"

who appears, in effigy, throughout the exhibition, in a video or a photograph. Here she leaves the "scene of the crime", as it were – her childhood home – and shows us into a shimmering corridor that serves as a transitional space between reality and the world of her imagination. The corridor is a cinematographic memory, inspired by a sequence in Godard's 1964 black and white futuristic film *Alphaville*: like the film's journalist-cum-spy hero Lemmy Caution, visitors must negotiate a long, reflective corridor punctuated by a large number of doors. Which one should we open? What is behind them? Where do they go? The light-chaser leads us to the exit (which also happens to be the entrance...), as the voice of the artist tells us not to be afraid of what lies beyond: "What frightens us, is the unknown," she says.

The corridor brings us to a rather perplexing installation (***Les fausses conférences***, 2017): a hyperrealistic dummy, made by special effects experts, takes us into H el ene Delprat's studio. The title of the installation (already used for a 2011 video series) is a reference to Marivaux's eighteenth-century play *Les fausses confidences*, which is about truth and pretence, appearance and make-believe – a theme that runs through the whole exhibition. The artist uses this perfect double to show us the solitary, hidden process of "manufacturing" videos, something that has become an increasingly significant part of her practice over the years.

H el ene Delprat's first videos date back to 2001, when she bought a simple digital camera and started filming herself in her studio. Initiating a practice that was part theatre, part film, she made ***Works and Days*** (2004-2005), a series of short films made with very basic resources. Day in, day out, wearing a mask or a

balaclava, Delprat stood before the camera: a lone figure playing, singing, talking, reading the paper, and so on. The sets and accessories are ultra-simple, either found or invented on the spot from objects thrown together or cardboard cut-outs. The use of black and white and the rudimentary editing disrupt the timeframe – we are no longer sure when any of this took place...

Some scenes are archetypal, such as the silhouette hidden beneath a long, black veil, a solitary figure moving through a dark forest in *Le chant du guerrier couvert de cendres* (2006) that takes us into the world of legends and fables – a world encountered anew in *Grotesques* (2000), a vast nocturnal landscape where little people wander around, as though transplanted there from the eighteenth century. *Grand transparent 3* (2012), painted on gelatine (a technique that marks the transition from photography to painting), seems to be its diurnal counterpart.

As is often the case with Hélène Delprat, there are sudden changes of subject. Her references reach far and wide, stretching from new wave cinema to sixteenth-century painting and Walt Disney. *Grrrrrrrrrr* (2017) offers heads with extremely sharp teeth, a wallpaper for naughty children's bedrooms that becomes more of a nightmare vision. Delprat's work continually fluctuates between the serious and the droll.

Behind it, *Peinture pourrie* recalls Odilon Redon's paintings, with its exuberant colour and floating, radiating heads motif.

Opposite is *On dirait que le bruit vient du parterre*, (2009) a "ligne claire" interpretation of a Thomas Gainsborough painting. What connects these two images? These different media?

Dominique Paini talks of “energy-images triggering constellations and arborescences of figurative and conceptual associations”.

The two hirsute devils holding the *Miroir* (2017) like a coat of arms could be straight out of a treatise on heraldry, or the set of a genre movie. The reflection, however, is more reminiscent of a funfair hall of mirrors: deformed, transformed, monstrous, ridiculous or comical.

A Sphinx, more docile than imposing, crouches on a column. In 2001, while working on a commission for France-Culture radio, Hélène Delprat met Nicole Stéphane. The meeting was to be the start of a great friendship with this truly exceptional woman, who was both an actor (she played the heroine in Cocteau's *Les Enfants Terribles*) and film producer, and had also been a member of the Resistance. Until Stéphane's death in 2007, Delprat interviewed her, filmed her, and corresponded with her, all of which resulted in the recent film, *Nicole Stéphane. A displaced person*. This *Sphinx de Nicole Stéphane* (2017) refers to one such exchange and pays homage to a good friend.

For *Les journées* (2017), shown on a light table, Hélène Delprat drew scenes with a felt-tip pen on transparent film, which she placed over a lens in her studio. She then stood in front of the lens so as to ‘enter’ the drawing and seemingly interact with the people she had drawn, thanks to the focal distance effect. Her silhouette can be seen moving amidst naked figures with erect penises, miniature marquises in masks and wigs engaged in erotic, sadist-tinged rituals.

In 2010, H el ene Delprat met gallery-owner Christophe Gaillard and made a decided return to painting, prepared to tackle even the hugest of formats. ***Ce que le Chevalier couvert de cendres a racont     son retour*** (2015) depicts a kind of cave, filled with Greek warriors, Kalashnikovs, a Medusa head, magic flowers, etc. Like Renaissance grotesques, there is an ambiguity between the ornamental and the narrative: pieces of imitation wood, scales, flowers, coloured eye spots, splashes of gold and ribbons of pearls assail the surface and compete with the figures and actions for our attention.

Hair is a recurring theme in Delprat's research. Through her reading and viewing she has accumulated a multifarious collection of evidence on the subject (and its ramifications: wigs, tonsures, etc.), a few examples of which are presented here. She has produced paintings on the topic (***Vers le mausol  e aux cheveux***, 2017), which is also the subject of certain scenes in ***Les (fausses) conf  rences***. Her research extends to the surrealist photographer Claude Cahun, the superfluous, unpleasant nature of hair, popular songs like "Comme un gar  on j'ai les cheveux longs" (or, in English, "I wear my hair long, like a boy") whose lyrics are by the artist's husband, Roger Dumas, and tonsure (ritual head-shaving). A radical gesture for women and one that usually has negative connotations - deportation, punishment, prison, exclusion, disease – Delprat sees head-shaving on the contrary as a powerful act of identification, a means of eluding the gender issue and, above all, an essential part of any self-presentation strategy.

An installation, ***La chambre des oiseaux*** (2017), is hidden behind

the screen. Two bird-headed people, who bring to mind the murky atmosphere of the masked ball scene in Georges Franju's film, *Judex*, seem bored to death as they sit on their sofa watching a duel between William Burroughs and William Shakespeare. They are both grotesque and terrifying, yet the artist's specially designed tartan envelops them in surroundings that are nothing short of ridiculous.

Since 2004, H el ene Delprat has been writing a blog titled **DAYS. Faire un truc par jour**. In it, she talks about what she's been reading, what she's thinking about, whom she's met, what's in the news, her daily life, tennis matches, paperwork, sentences overhead in the M etro, conversations with friends, etc.. These disparate notes are like jottings in a notebook, written black on white to ensure they are not forgotten. The format is always the same: first a picture and a title, followed by text which may or may not be connected with the picture.

A multitude of random splashes, a product of the drip painting technique popularised by Jackson Pollock, create a starry-night effect in ***Si on y r efl echit bien, dire «peinture gestuelle», c'est assez b ete*** (2016). A small white creature emerging from the splattered surface turns the abstract canvas into a snowstorm.

Delprat has a special interest in paintings that feature in films. ***Le portrait corrompu*** (2013) was inspired by Ivan Albright's painting for Albert Lewin's 1945 film adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde. The proliferation of gold splashes is no doubt symbolic of the painting's decay, but their sparkle alleviates the portrait's ugliness. On the back is a photograph: ***Dracula***

(2017), the name the artist gave this clock with no hands, where an imaginary medieval world complete with keeps and watchtowers has been transposed into a popular artefact. The clock also symbolises the advance of time, which Dorian Gray would dearly love to halt, and which is a central element of horror films and B movies.

Delprat's cinematic references are not restricted to borrowing scenes, atmospheres or characters from films. She also employs film techniques such as tracking shots and spotlights, used here to randomly illuminate the walls, as though this were a film set, or a cabaret...

On the wall, *J'adore Barnett Newman* (2017), an almost ten-metre long canvas, pays homage through its title to the American abstract expressionist painter, yet in a most unusual way, as nothing in this picture - teeming with colours, decorative elements, imitation wood and bricks, emojis, squared wallpaper, floating heads and heraldic beasts - in any way recalls the quiet moderation of his colour field painting.

The polystyrene gateway that leads through to the next part of the exhibition could be the entrance to a castle on a film set, or the evocation of a dream. It is the archetypal gateway, complete with ironwork, columns, medallions and vases. The installation portrays the artist's liking for "the gothic novel's cardboard gloom", with its stereotyped situations and scenery: an imposing wrought iron gate, a lonely castle, nighttime scenes covered in a thick carpet of snow... The title of the work refers back to Horace Walpole's novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, considered to be the first English Gothic

novel, a genre very much in vogue in the late eighteenth century, with its pronounced tendency towards sentimentality and the macabre.

Behind the gates, different eras jostle together regardless of chronology – polystyrene busts, reminiscent of Roman emperors, pose against a silvery sequined wall, opposite a photograph of the staircase from Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Dragonwyck*, now part of the decor.

Comment j'ai inventé Versailles (2002) is projected onto the wall. Here, Delprat continues to "invent" things from simple materials: a pleated paper wig, a cardboard crinoline, a beauty spot, and a little Lully and here she is as a burlesque Louis XIV. And yet the subject of the video is the French sovereign's death.

In the next section, the theme of death is reexamined in ***Le chant du guerrier couvert de cendres*** (2006), this time in a more sombre mood. The artist, a keen reader with a strong sense of curiosity, was inspired by Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*, and Book 11 of *The Odyssey*. The voices of Gilles Deleuze and Samuel Beckett, among others, can be heard.

Voices are important to Hélène Delprat. Those she has heard at home, on the radio, find their way into her ***Dessins radiophoniques*** (2011). Fragments of speech are noted down on a sheet of paper and used to accompany or caption pictures: these "domestic drawings" record moments whose meaning is instantly lost. More fragments combine, seemingly haphazardly, in her collages (***Les travaux et les jours***, 2016-2017). They are shown alongside specimens from her collection of small photographs, the format

used to conserve the source images she harvests from books, the press, libraries (the Fonds Jules Maciet at the Bibliothèque des Arts Décoratifs) and, above all, the internet – from museum databases (Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Louvre, Victoria and Albert), library databases (New York Public Library, Bibliothèque Nationale, etc.) - or wherever her eclectic, erratic searches may take her. These pictures reveal her taste for all things horrible, marvellous or extravagant.

The gallery is dominated by *Portrait pourri remix* (2014); what appears to be a humorous self- (anti-?) portrait of the artist, complete with lipstick, false eyelashes and sequins, and holding a cactus. Along with a photograph of the actor Christopher Lee, on top of a bizarre abstract painting, this portrait introduces the theme of taste. For Hélène Delprat, when it comes to art there is no such thing as good or bad taste. She fully embraces – and frequently quotes – the refrain of the three witches in *Macbeth*: “Fair is foul and foul is fair”, as demonstrated by this “corridor of taste”. For some, bad taste resides in lack of harmony, exaggeration, or “things that just aren’t done” – such as hanging a picture crooked, and on tartan wallpaper to boot, covering doors in fake fur, making a huge copy of an equestrian portrait found on a decorative plate, or collecting and painting “little doggies”. But the permed poodle she portrays is not just any old dog, as the title of the picture shows: this is Pamphagus, one of Actaeon’s dogs, now able to speak, having devoured its master’s tongue. The donkey, another animal frequently found in Delprat’s work, bears a worse reputation: stupid, stubborn, ignorant and lecherous. A grinning, two-headed specimen features in *Bad taste, Donkey Burger* (2007). Further along, it appears personified by the artist, braying and bedecked

with paper ears, in the video *Hi-Han Song remix* (2013). Chairs drawn on rhodoid end this chaotic display, and reveal the artist's taste for the decorative arts: "I like the things that clothe our everyday life and that I find in books – fireplaces, gates, tapestries and wallpapers, design".

This section also includes several pictures from her 1990s series *Où est la peinture?*, which dates back to when she began to question her painting practice (*Encore raté*, etc). A particular example is *Trissotin* (meaning "three times an idiot"), the pretentious pedant in Molière's *Les Femmes Savantes*.

As part of her video-making, Delprat has produced numerous sculpture-like accessories such as the tin-foil armour sticking out of the wall for *Le chant du guerrier couvert de cendres*. More recently she has embarked on a series of self-standing sculptures: in *L'œuvre sculpté de Bouvard et Pécuchet* (2017) she imagines the works Flaubert's (anti-) heroes might have created for their encyclopaedic museum. The rudimentary clay figures atop polystyrene columns have the same naivety, fragility and humour as the sculptures of Fischli & Weiss, a duo of Swiss artists whose work Hélène Delprat particularly enjoys.

On another wall, a series of photographs revisits *Les femmes savantes* (2010) and the theme of false erudition. Here, the artist's hands frame a series of book covers or title pages, held against a scanner. The titles of the books clearly demonstrate the themes that inform Delprat's work: *La Belle et la Bête*, a book on grotesques in Italian art by Philippe Morel (a friend and historian of Renaissance art who also held a residency at the Villa Medici), Pline the Elder,

etc. The title ("the learned ladies"), however, suggests another level: Delprat is well aware of the temptation to brag about how much one knows, and this work is not intended to show off the artist's knowledge, but rather mocks her for doing so.

In *Mes invités* (2015), the artist's references are of the visual kind. Resuming her 1990s practice of including inscriptions in her paintings, the artist spells out the names of her private pantheon of people who have influenced her, or whom she admires: old masters (Piero di Cosimo, Poussin, Fra Angelico) rub shoulders with contemporary artists (Barnett Newman, Sigmar Polke, Fischli & Weiss, Gilbert and George) and eccentrics (Liberace, Chanel, Horace de Vere Cole): highbrows and lowbrows whose names seem to shine in the dark.

"I love titles, film titles, book titles – and, if they're mine, I love changing them". Hélène Delprat collects titles, with a particular preference for ones that are interminable, funny, extravagant or plain pompous. They have a life of their own, appearing and disappearing, telling a different story from the painting itself, opening up new perspectives. As "the Museum of Titles' chief curator", she uses them to bring actors, artists and historical figures (Goering) to the stage. Actor Jean-Louis Trintignant introduces an entirely new dimension to this collection of titles in his recording of them, made at the artist's invitation.

The exhibition ends as it begins, with a photograph of Hélène Delprat in the garden of her family home, that is, in the real world – a world she has helped us to forget, just for a while.