

Plus jamais seul Hervé Di Rosa and the modest arts

Both Antoine de Galbert and Hervé Di Rosa believe in casting wide the net of art, and it is this shared vision that brought them together. In 2007, the artist came to La maison rouge with the idea for an exhibition that would showcase the arts scene in Winnipeg, Canada (My Winnipeg in 2009). We

discovered an uncontainable personality, a man open to all forms of art and most of all an insatiable collector. And so what more natural choice could there be for the fourteenth in our series of exhibitions dedicated to private collections than Hervé Di Rosa, particularly as the last major solo show of his work in Paris dates back to 1988. It was time to right that wrong.

Following on from **Arnulf Rainer** (2005) and **Jean-Jacques Lebel** (2010), this is the third time an artist has been invited to present his own work in the light of works and objects he has collected.

Hervé Di Rosa is an interesting character on more than one count. As an artist, he has reinvented himself better and more consistently than perhaps any other figure of his generation. First a leading protagonist of 1980s Figuration Libre, since then he has tackled every possible style from caricature to abstract painting, realism to comic strips, regardless of what the latest trends might dictate. Few artists have embraced so many techniques, ranging from the fine arts (painting, sculpture, works on paper) to the so-called decorative or folk arts (ceramic, embroidery, lacquer, etc.), attaching equal importance to them all. As a "conveyor" of cultures, Hervé Di Rosa is a veteran campaigner for the recognition of modest art, which he says "has ties with popular

art, primitive art and art brut, but is also more than that". In 2000 he opened the **Musée International des Arts Modestes** (MIAM) in his hometown of Sète. As a collector, he has assembled thousands of books, comic strips, fanzines, figurines, toys, touristware, artworks and curios from around the world, and these inform his own work as an artist.

The exhibition surveys developments, including some less familiar to the public, in Hervé Di Rosa's practice from his early work to the present day. It also highlights the important role that travel and his collections of modest art have played. Lastly, it presents projects undertaken at MIAM.

Once upon a time...

The exhibition begins by referencing the artist's personal sphere, with objects relating to his parents set out on jagged shelving. His father's bird whistles - decoys sculpted from cork and painted by Marius Di Rosa, a keen waterfowl hunter at the Thau Lagoons around Sète - immediately raise the question of where art's boundaries lie. How do they differ from sculpture? Is this folk art? Craft? Traditional art? Art brut? Everyday object? Amateur art? They sit alongside his mother's dishes: the enamelled earthenware serving dishes, vases and tureens that

were the particular favourites of this excellent cook. Closer examination reveals them to be the work of Hervé Di Rosa, made since his move to Lisbon in 2014 and produced by A Viuva Lamego, a traditional *azulejos* factory. These one-off pieces look back at the different stages since the very beginning of the artist's practice with depictions of his **classic characters** (René, Simplon, Les Deux Nigauds, Monsieur Monde, Rockers, Classics) as well as sea creatures, wartime watercolours, Corsican stone heads, Cameroonian robots, Ghanaian chameleons, fresh flowers, life for the poor, Miami landscapes, etc. A thirty-year career, summed up with modesty and humour on vases, dishes and plates...

A collage (Souvenirs du couple, 1990) made from painted found objects and full of allusions to his personal life completes this family portrait.

Facing these shelves, a work from the late 1970s introduces two central themes in Di Rosa's work. Firstly the comic-strip influence, clearly evident in À travers le monde with its cartoon panel arrangement. While Hervé Di Rosa may not have one particular style, he does have a definite narrative universe that draws heavily on comic books and graphic novels. He is, indeed, an avid comic-strip reader and connoisseur, from Tintin to Robert Crumb, from Tif et Tondu to Pif Gadget and

American superhero comics. His art-school days behind him, his ambition was to become a comic-strip author. À travers le monde, whose title translates as Across the world, also foretells the importance of travel in his work. In the early 1990s, Di Rosa began the Autour du Monde series that has taken him to all four corners of the globe to discover how images are produced elsewhere and, alongside local craftsmen and artists, expose his work to cultures and techniques he has yet to explore.

Di Rosa was just 22 years old in 1981 when his work began to attract attention under the name of Figuration Libre, in cahoots with **Rémi Blanchard**, **François Boisrond** and **Robert Combas**. Their figurative painting was an outburst of energy, enthusiasm and colour after the rigour and intellectualism of Supports/Surfaces, BMPT, or minimalist and conceptual art. His creations, which are rooted in the everyday worlds of television, rock music, sci-fi and comic strips, immediately struck a chord with an audience barely older than himself, as well as with art institutions: Di Rosa was 25 when one of his paintings (*Diropolis*, 1985) entered the collections of the Musée national d'art moderne in Paris.

Hervé Di Rosa dreamed up a group of characters, each with its own formal and psychological traits and which interact

from one canvas to the next. They are the heroes of *Diromythologie*: the **Renés** with their one eye and gaping mouth, **Raymond**, a red elephant's foot with a predatory grin, **Raphaël** the green dinosaur, **Raoul** the cabaret dancer and **Mique** the illegal worker... rough and ready characters living on **Rue du Malheur** ("bad luck street"); **Ah!Ah!Ah!** the tentacular monster, fishermen at Thau Lagoons, and a succession of vehicles (boats, trains, cars, flying saucers...). *Dirosaland* (1985) is typical of what Di Rosa calls his "Classic" period with its vibrant colours and dynamic composition; a space saturated with action and gesticulating characters; a canvas with all the trappings of a comic-book cover.

Life for the poor

A poignant fresque comprising 30 panels in acrylic on mounted brown paper, stretching 42 metres in length, *La vie des pauvres* considers the economic and moral quagmire of the early 1990s in a scenography that draws the observer in. A million miles from fantasy or science fiction, the spectator is confronted head-on with sordid reality. Produced in 1993 for the **Louis Carré Gallery** stand at FIAC and rarely exhibited since, this noholds-barred work is a stark portrayal of what we prefer not to see. The human, social and sexual misery represented here

reveals the artist's interest in the ordinary man. From bar to factory, society's have-nots and outcasts parade before our eyes, restless and disoriented, the inhabitants and prisoners of Skid Row. The violence of the work recalls **Chester Gould**'s *Dick Tracy* comic strips, while the scrawny human figures suggest **Bernard Buffet**. Unsurprisingly perhaps, this provocative work failed to find a buyer during FIAC...

The modest art shop

La vie des pauvres goes against the grain of the art that brought Di Rosa to public attention in the late 1980s: fun, colourful paintings that take root in the day-to-day. Di Rosa has always looked for ways to make art and life converge. In 1988, a year after setting up a company, Dirosarl, with his brother Richard, he opened La Boutique de l'Art Modeste on Rue du Renard in Paris. Everything inside the shop, from the decoration to the furnishings and fittings, was dreamed up by the two brothers who saw it as a "total artwork". The Boutique was the bricks and mortar representation of a utopia shared by the four founders (the Di Rosa brothers, Dominique Joret and Hervé Perdriolle): to sell series-produced artworks at affordable prices in a place where people could stop by, but also get people who wouldn't normally visit a gallery or

museum interested in art. They created products (more than 300 in all) as diverse as baby's bottles, socks, toys, bags, bath towels, plates and watches, but all useful, everyday items. Some became symbols in their own right, such as the ones featuring the Simplons, the wiry, bug-eyed characters dreamed up by the Di Rosa brothers and whose life, says the artist, "is akin to writing, all elegance and decoration." Di Rosa considers these objects not as merchandising but as full-fledged artworks that have been specially created for different supports. Certain items were joint productions, such as the toys made with Starlux, a famous figurine brand. A second shop, which opened in 1989 on Rue de Poitou, doubled as a gallery showing art forms which more often than not were sidelined from official contemporary art circuits. Thus art singulier could be seen alongside art brut (Van Genk, André Robillard, Thérèse Bonnelalbay), art from other lands, newspaper cartoons (Wolinski, Gébé, Cabu), etc. This collective, democratic adventure came to an end in 1994 but even after the shops had closed, the objects they sold continued to circulate and are still remembered today.

Chronomiam

(a brief inventory of exhibitions at MIAM, 2000 to 2016)

In 1990, Hervé Di Rosa met Bernard Belluc, artist and figurinemaker at the head of an impressive collection of thousands of everyday objects, rummaged here and there, which he archives at his home in **Prades-le-Lez** near Montpellier. The two men set up the "Art Modeste" non-profit organisation, and it wasn't long before the idea for a museum began to take shape. The Musée International des Arts Modestes finally saw daylight in 2000 in Sète. Its permanent collections are Bernard Belluc's themed display cases and Hervé Di Rosa's figurine collections. MIAM has multiple ambitions: to pay homage to the anonymous creators of modest objects, of course, but also to open doors between categories and challenge aesthetic canons; to "demythologise the sentiment of art" (J. Seisser). Di Rosa also seeks to return contemporary art to the public by doing away with any reticence they might have: "There has to be a bit of everything. It's not good to be elitist and see just one aspect of things. It takes Beuys and Walt Disney to be open to the world".

The diversity of the exhibitions staged over MIAM's sixteen years are recorded and celebrated here, using some of the objects and works shown. They have embraced all manner

of subjects and regions to train the spotlight on contemporary creation in remote parts of the globe (*Mexico ! Mexico !*, 2000-2001; *My Winnipeg*, 2009; *Global Caraïbes*, 2010; *Manila Vice*, 2013; *Providence*, 2015), different forms of collecting (*FanClub*, 2013-2014), art brut (*Carlo Zinelli*, 2004; *Véhicules*, 2015), art singulier (*Les Biascamano*, 2002), techniques (*Pop Up à Sète*, 2003; *Sur le fil*, 2009), themes (*Bang ! Bang !*, 2006; *Coquillages et crustacés*, 2008), even tributes to the heroes of television culture (*Gromiam*, 2012; *SHADOKS ! Ga Bu Zo Miam*, 2016).

Mapping modest art

Hervé Di Rosa has seized on the map's didactic, standardised form as a way to reflect on what the notion of modest art entails. By attempting to represent modest art's various practices as territories, he raises the question of boundaries and the difficulties inherent to such delimitation, while offering his perspective as a traveller and discoverer of techniques. Metaphors for the complex nature of modest art (eloquently rendered in the central map, with its many sections), these maps are a means of defining vague ensembles and categorising them according to their distance from the centre; we're reminded of **André Breton**'s *Surrealist Map of the World* (1929) which reconfigured the globe according to the

group's own centres of interest, with a disproportionately large Pacific Ocean and its archipelagos at the centre.

Vehicles

Hervé Di Rosa explains his love of vehicles by his love of movement. As a boy, he would watch ships entering and leaving the harbour in Sète, and dream of one day setting sail himself. Children love nothing more than to act out imaginary journeys for their toy cars, motorbikes, trains, planes and boats, and invent the stories that go with them.

Despite a marked distaste for real cars, the artist is a huge fan of model vehicles, in particular those driven by his childhood heroes. In the 1960s, toy manufacturers realised there was money to be made from TV series and films, and began making scaled-down versions of these four-wheeled stars. In 1965, Corgi Toys launched a scale model of James Bond's Aston Martin D85, complete with gadgets, that went on to become the year's biggest-selling toy. Countless other manufacturers followed suit.

Comic strips are another source of inspiration. Inside the display cases are planes flown by Tintin, the cars **Blake and Mortimer** use for their investigations, **Spirou**'s high-powered

roadsters and **Michel Vaillant**'s racing machines. On the wall are **Joe Bar Team**'s motorbikes and Di Rosa's own scale models of taxis from different periods and from all around the world, combining his love of toys with his love of travel.

Carrying on the grand tradition of famous comic-book couples (Asterix and Obelix, Spirou and Fantasio, Thomson and Thompson...), in the late 1980s Hervé Di Rosa imagined a globetrotting duo by the name of Les Deux Nigauds, whom he portrays in paintings as well as in sculptures representing their various means of locomotion such as boats, cars, planes and hot-air balloons. Next to them is an example of a "pedicab", the bric-a-brac bicycle rickshaws that are a common sight on the streets of Manila, in the Philippines, but could easily have driven straight out of a Gaston Lagaffe comic strip.

This section concludes with a series of works from the early 1990s, assembled from riveted and varnished metal and other materials, and which continue the vehicles theme with submarines, trains, diggers, etc.

Shadow theatre

A group of fourteen brightly-painted steel sculptures lend their elegant silhouettes to the patio of La maison rouge. These

colourful characters, part of the *Théâtre d'ombres* series, go by the names of **Brigand**, **Timorée**, **Rayonnante**, **Ecologiste**, **Bourgeoise**, etc. First imagined in the 1990s for a puppet show, they made the transition to monumental sculptures some ten years later.

Travel

While living in Miami (2002-2006), Di Rosa set himself the task of producing one drawing a day, which he mounted in second-hand frames and hung on his studio wall. They grew into a "constellation", Miami Piece 2, that references certain of his works, techniques he has used (Little Haiti's sequins, Cameroon bronzes), tributes to artists (Matisse), reinvented covers from art reviews, collages, watercolours, notes... in a word, all his techniques and practices: a fragmented portrait of the artist.

"My style is to have all styles and therefore to have no style," he affirms. The works around the patio are evidence of this vast palette of techniques, and his many approaches to the image. Each place gives rise to a different graphic regimen.

In La Réunion he becomes an observer of Nature, documenting things seen and heard in *Tendres tropiques*, a series of lithographs which use multiple techniques to create

different textures and effects. In Tel Aviv (the sixteenth leg of Autour du Monde), he produced large-format watercolours showing the view from his window, the beach, the Massada desert, etc., with barely a trace of human presence. In Miami (the twelfth leg), he painted landscapes dotted with billboards and advertising signs whose bold colours cannot take away from the empty monotony of each scene. The seventeenth leg of this round-the-world journey brought him back to Paris, and the Barbès district: fragments of the urban landscape are rendered in solid blocks of colour to produce a graphic, almost abstract effect.

Tapestries

Tapestries from Di Rosa's collection are hung around the café area. The idea of a tapestry is to cover a printed canvas stitch by stitch with coloured threads to create an image, generally of the type found on posters and mass-produced paintings and likely to appeal to a wide audience: animals, female nudes, children's characters, landscapes, still lifes, bunches of flowers, sunsets, famous paintings, etc. The format leaves little scope for creativity and, as with a colouring book, requires no particular skill. This explains the popularity of this pastime, which can be practiced from being a small child to an advanced

age. These poignant objects, typical rummage-sale fodder, were shown at an exhibition at MIAM (*Sur le fil* in 2009).

Cabinet of curiosities

The museum's forebear, first introduced in Europe during the Renaissance to display collections of precious items, curiosities of the natural world, scientific instruments and other objects, the cabinet of curiosities is a recurrent theme in Hervé Di Rosa's work. Natural specimens mingle with everyday objects in the Cabinet de curiosités (1997) with its mother-of-pearl inlay. Elsewhere, in Tienda del señor Maguey (2000), the artist appears to reflect on his own collectionism: Mr Maguey, a hybrid creature whose leafy head grows from a man's body, could be the artist himself, surrounded by his multifarious collection of terracotta figures, metal hearts, automatic pistols, papier mâché piñatas, sculpted wood animals, saints, genies and robots. On the contrasting coloured shelves opposite the painting, Di Rosa has set out his own cabinet of curiosities, comprising some of the many "modest" objects he has collected and brought back from his travels around the world. Some are unique, others mass-produced; all are intended to brighten the every day. They mix in with works by other artists (a gun by André Robillard, a mermaid by Oscar Soteno, a mask by **Kenny Scharf...**) and Di Rosa's own creations to the point where it becomes almost impossible to distinguish "artwork" from "object".

Around the world

This next room centres on the artist's many travels, and shows some of the objects collected along the way together with works he has produced using techniques learned from local craftspeople. Hervé Di Rosa conceives of his travels as "a project of aesthetic discovery, a project to embrace the world, with a high poetic content". Each trip is an opportunity to assimilate and develop a variety of skills which form the basis of the constant evolution of Di Rosa's practice; these travels also turn up chance encounters and collaborations which add to the magic of his art. Each leg of the journey (currently at its nineteenth stopover, in Lisbon) provides Di Rosa with a new formal and aesthetic language. The works shown here correspond to several destinations and are not shown in chronological order. This "dirosesque round-the-world trip" (Pierre Restany) made its first stop in **Sofia**, Bulgaria, where Di Rosa learned the ancient art of Byzantine icon painting. On his return, he showed this series, Dirosaïcônes, at FIAC to great acclaim. Di Rosa's whimsical characters met oriental imagery in

Tunisia (15th leg) in 2006, at a glass painting studio in Tunis. In Ghana (2nd leg) he worked with the Almighty God Art Works in Kumasi on paintings inspired by African shop signs promoting businesses such as hair salons, garages and shoe repairs. Three of Di Rosa's paintings are shown here under authentic signs which the artist-collector brought back from West Africa. In Ethiopia, in Addis Ababa in 1996 (4th leg), he produced Sur le monde, a striking work on zebu skin on a eucalyptus stretcher. After several trips to **Mexico**, which he describes as the "capital of modest arts", Di Rosa moved there permanently for the tenth leg (1999 to 2002), adding numerous Mexican ex-votos to his collection. His collaboration with rotulistas (sign-writers) inspired the two large acrylics on tarpaulin. He spent 2013 in Seville (18th leg), during which time he produced a series of less distinctly structured works from pieces of dried acrylic paint cut into shapes. Also in Seville, he made several small statues, the Virgens del arte contemporáneo, inspired by religious imagery and celebrations: faith, spirituality and popular beliefs always stir the artist's heart. His Little Haiti series, part of the twelfth leg, springs from a collaboration with the Haitian community in Miami, Florida, who taught him their art of making voodoo flags from sequins. The different pieces made in **Durban** (8th leg) borrow techniques from Zulu artists,

who weave coloured telephone cables into baskets and also produce intricate beadwork. The third leg of this "world tour", in 1995, took Di Rosa to Benin, where he discovered the traditional applique techniques which are used to make cloths symbolising the kings of Abomey. La femme et le serpent and Le Lion are part of a commission for 47 appliques representing countries which have French as an official language. Their lines and colours also reveal the influence of Matisse's cut-outs, which Di Rosa has always admired. In the centre of the room, four large robots in wood, bronze and bead were created in collaboration with the Bamum people, who live in the high plateaux of western Cameroon. The artist has also travelled in Asia, stopping several times in Vietnam. During this seventh leg, he worked with a master lacquerer on several lacquer panels with mother-of-pearl and eggshell inlay. One of these works, a double-sided screen, stands at the entrance to the room. For the sixth leg, Di Rosa came back to France and learned the Corsican "a fresca" painting technique. Paghjella, le polyphone (1998) stands against a Corsican landscape, a peculiar individual who can sing a polyphony all by himself.

Classic

The paintings in this room all belong to the *Classics* period of *Diromythologie*, and illustrate the strong narrative element of Di Rosa's early works. His **Internationaux Vilains**, a brand of comic-book superhero, rub shoulders with various Renés, caught up in complex situations, both pugilistic and cosmic. *Time Spiral* is an opportunity to explore different temporalities in a journey from prehistory to a future far, far away.

In *Dirosapocalypse*, a monumental work (4 x 8 metres) completed in two weeks, the 24-year-old artist condemns the characters he created just a few years previously to an apocalyptic fate at the many hands of the madly grinning antihero Ah!Ah!Ah!, an all-powerful figure in the centre of the painting. This incandescent world torn apart hints at medieval altarpieces and their depictions of hell.

The 3,600 figurines and action figures make up the largest part of Hervé Di Rosa's collection. Some, still in their original packaging, are assembled here into giant robots. Gleaned on his travels around the world, on market stalls or in airports, collector's items or crude copies, produced by the thousand or individually hand-painted, characters from TV series or traditional folklore, saints or merchandising products, lifelike or pure fantasy, grotesque or idealised, they each have

their place in the artist's collection: "I've always considered figurines as sculptures. It's this representation of the body, which is the very basis for sculpture, that interests me. My love of toys follows on from that. My aim is to assemble an encyclopaedic inventory of human and sometimes also animal forms". A teeming mass spills across the platform that separates two other works: on one side, *Dirosapocalypse*, a piece of "youthful bravado", and on the other a recent digital work overrun with Xs and Renés. Di Rosa's characters move constantly between real and pictorial space.

Underwater

In 1986, Hervé Di Rosa returned to his hometown of Sète and set up his studio on the shores of **Thau Lagoons**, in **Balaruc-le-Vieux**. He slipped back into Mediterranean life, rediscovering such pleasures as fishing and diving, and set about producing a new series of works. These paintings depict fragments of underwater landscapes, inhabited by fish and divers exploring wrecks in a world of starfish, shells and bubbles. Like his *Classic* paintings, they demonstrate a remarkable attention to detail and an intensity bordering on saturation. These underwater scenes are displayed, appropriately, below ground

level, in a watery darkness alongside a real-life aquarium whose colourful fish and decorations echo the paintings all around.

Library

Paper is Hervé Di Rosa's favourite support. Drawing, a daily activity, uses paper as its main medium, as do comic books, magazines and books. Because Hervé Di Rosa is an avid reader and bibliophile. The wallpaper is a reproduction of just some of the shelves in his Paris home library; on the opposite wall hang some of the many prints Di Rosa has made; the case presents some of the publications he has designed (*Dirosa Magazine*, *Cahiers de l'art modeste*, artists' books, etc.) together with books and catalogues from his own shows; underneath, a selection from Di Rosa's collections reveals his many sources of inspiration, from natural history manuals to **Jules Verne**, from photo albums, which he files and consults like notebooks, to kids' magazines (*Pépito Magazine* and comic books), adult journals, fanzines, informal artist publications, etc.

Back in the early 1980s, Hervé Di Rosa began to play around with the idea of a cartoon starring the characters in his *Diromythologie*. Not an "artist's production" but a real, madefor-TV, prime-time cartoon. The project took shape in the late

1990s when **Canal Plus**, a French TV network, gave him a team of writers and animators to help bring his characters to life. The **René family**, along with the other good folks of **Bonheur-les-Bains**, defend their peaceful town against constant attacks from the **Internationaux Vilains**. Twenty-six 24-minute episodes were broadcast beginning in 1999. Full episodes were shown each Thursday plus an abridged version on other days.

At the end of this journey through Dirosaland, the title of the exhibition - *Plus jamais seul* – *Never again alone* – becomes abundantly clear: Hervé Di Rosa has not one but **many worlds**, steeped in **thousands of references**, filled with objects and characters, a succession of encounters.

This profusion of works and objects gives some idea of who this artist is: an open-minded, generous, optimistic individual whose boundless energy and vitality rub off onto all those who meet him.

la maison rouge

president: Antoine de Galbert director: Paula Aisemberg

head of collection: Arthur Toqué

head of exhibitions: Noëlig Le Roux, assisted by Adèle Hermier

technical director: Laurent Guy, assisted by Pierre Kurz, Steve Almarines

scenography: Laurent Guy and Jean Seisser

installation: Tiphaine Civade, Frédéric Daugu, Jérôme Gallos, Charles

Héranval, Emmanuelle Lagarde, Nicolas Magdelaine, Selim Mohammedi, Noé

Nadaud, Arnaud Piroud, Franck Têtu, Bertrand Tixier

cultural programming and publications: Stéphanie Molinard, assisted by

Angela Blanc and Margot Nguyen

head of communication: Aurélie Garzuel

assistant: Stéphanie Dias

reception: Guillaume Ettlinger and Alicia Treminio

press relations

Claudine Colin communication, Pénélope Ponchelet, Marine Le Bris

les amis de la maison rouge

president: Véronique Pieyre de Mandiargue, assisted by Aude Quinchon

opening days and times

- wednesday to sunday 11am to 7pm
- thursday to 9pm
- free guided tour saturday and sunday at 4pm
- la maison rouge is accessible to visitors with limited mobility

admission

- full price: €10
- concessions: €7 for ages 13-18, students, registered artists, over-65s
- free for under-13s, job-seekers, disabled visitors and a companion, members of ICOM, members of les amis de la maison rouge
- tickets on sale at FNAC tel. 0892 684 694 (€0.34/min) www.fnac.com
- full-price pass: €28

- reduced-price pass: €19

free and unlimited access to exhibitions, free or reduced-rate access to events

Rose Bakery Culture

by be-attitude

texts for le petit journal

Stephanie Molinard, Angela Blanc, Margot Nguyen (many thanks to Jean

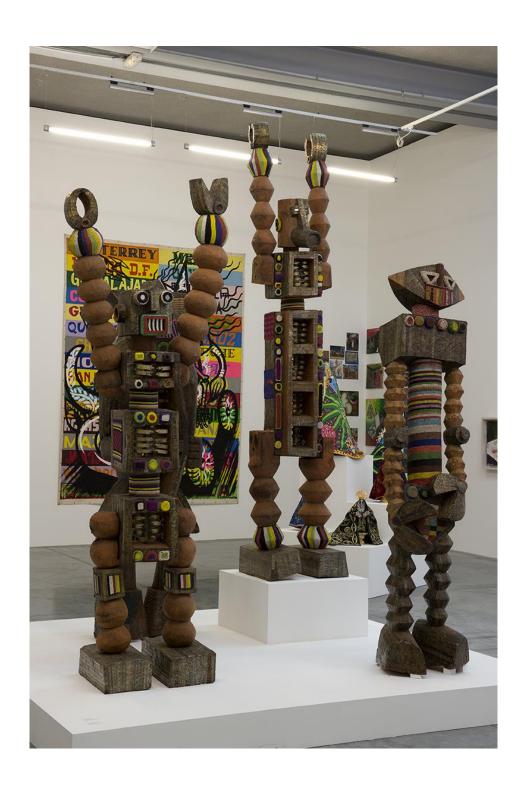
Seisser!)

la maison rouge is a member of Tram

© photos: Marc Domage

graphic design: Jocelyne Fracheboud

printed by L Graphic



exhibition from october 22, 2016 to january 22, 2017 la maison rouge

fondation antoine de galbert 10 boulevard de la bastille 75012 paris france tel. +33 (0)1 40 01 08 81 info@lamaisonrouge.org lamaisonrouge.org