la maison rouge - fondation antoine de galbert

11.06.08

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View of the exhibition

elmar trenkwalder and augustin lesage

inspired artists

June 11 – September 7th

The maison rouge stands out from other contemporary art venues because of its interest in private collections, where the eye of the collector is unique in choosing the works and deciding how they are presented. Works from different eras and movements are displayed in collectors' homes, often with no regard for chronology or classification.

For Antoine de Galbert, founder of the maison rouge, contemporary art stands alongside outsider art and primitive art... which is how the work of the Austrian painter and sculptor Elmar Trenkwalder (b. Weißenbach am Lech 1959) and that of the French mediumistic artist Augustin Lesage (Saint-Pierre-lez-Auchel 1876 - Burbure 1954) came to meet. These are two singular oeuvres, distinct as much for their era as for the form of art with which they are associated (contemporary art for one, outsider art for the other), yet both produced by artists who are "inspired" (invisible spirits for Lesage; an intuitive force for Trenkwalder) and convinced of the magical force of art. Antoine de Galbert was himself inspired to take this encounter from the intimacy of his own collection to the larger scale of the exhibition. The collector's instinct, so it transpired, echoed a genuine affinity when Trenkwalder revealed his long-standing admiration of Lesage's work. A few years before studying at the Vienna School of Fine Art, Trenkwalder had seen a reproduction of Lesage's first painting in a magazine. The image made a lasting impression, although it would be fifteen years before he found out who the artist was. And so Trenkwalder launched himself into the project with enthusiasm, actively assisting the team at the maison rouge with the hanging of Lesage's paintings and deciding where to position them in relation to his sculptures.

Inspired Artists proposes seven large recent sculptures (including three specifically for the exhibition) and drawings by Trenkwalder[1] and, on the walls around them, some thirty paintings and drawings by Lesage, chosen to represent the different stages in his work.

This juxtaposition isn't intended to prove a point. Its purpose is not to make comparisons but to have the works strike up a subjective dialogue; to bring together two exceptionally intense and original worlds, each driven by a creative impulse which one expresses in organic, eroticised sculptures and the other in a profusion of symmetrical and decorative patterns.

The two artists are discussed separately here, beginning with Elmar Trenkwalder whose work forms the thread of the exhibition. Visitors are free to find their own correspondences and echoes between the two.

View of the exhibition

elmar trenkwalder

Elmar Trenkwalder first studied painting with Max Weiler and Arnulf Rainer at the Vienna School of Fine Art. He was already interested in marginal art, in particular works by psychiatric patients which Rainer began to collect as of 1963. In the mid-1980s, Trenkwalder combined traditional media with everyday materials (cardboard, Formica, rubber) to compose "pictural objects" in a transition from the two- to the three-dimensional. A self-taught sculptor, he became fascinated by the softness and plasticity of clay, which would prove decisive in sealing his interest in this discipline. In 1987 he modelled his

[1] Trenkwalder's works do not have a descriptive title but are identified by the letters WVZ (short for *Werkverzeichnis* or "list of works") followed by a number.

first free-standing sculptures in bronze, terracotta and glazed terracotta. The latter would become his favourite medium, alongside painting and drawing.

Hand-modelled works

Trenkwalder began to make increasingly imposing and complex sculptures in glazed ceramic as from 2004, often for major exhibitions and commissions (including the Louvre in 2005 and the Creux de l'Enfer art centre in Thiers in 2006). Working alone in his Innsbruck studio, he models each piece by hand. Such monumental sculptures as the ones shown at the maison rouge are a technical exploit that presuppose great virtuosity and years of practice. They must be made segment by segment to prevent them from collapsing under their own weight when the clay is still wet, and also to fit in the kiln. These segments are then pieced together from the base up. Each piece in the puzzle is modelled from a slab of clay, sometimes adding salient elements, and then fired before being glazed. The glaze gives the sculpture its dominant colour, surface texture (transparent, opaque, drips) and gloss. Each piece is then fired a second time. Like Lesage, who had to unfurl his giant canvases as he painted, Trenkwalder only ever sees his largest works in fragments, discovering the finished whole at the exhibition venue. But this is the only thing their techniques have in common. Trenkwalder's method, based on the sensuality of the clay and the modelling process, is poles apart from Lesage's automatic painting.

From near/from far

Seen from a distance, Trenkwalder's sculptures resemble huge architectonic constructions, perhaps a fountain, a mausoleum, a tomb, a cathedral, a chapel or a pyramid. We can make out columns, doors, ledges and windows... Their surface is richly ornamented and, as with Lesage's paintings, we are tempted to take a closer view, thereby revealing a second dimension to the work. But whereas closer observation of Lesage's paintings brings out the incredible intricacy and painstaking detail, here the effect is one of surprise as bodies, faces and most of all sex organs appear before our eyes. Indeed, many of Trenkwalder's works are sexually referential and, once revealed; these anatomical details alter our perception of the whole: these are works of flesh in which each element can be interpreted as an intimate body part.

Abstraction of the motif

The potential obscenity of such a show of anatomical details is countered by the hieratic nature of the monuments that enclose them, but most of all by the artist's approach. Viewed at close quarters, reduced or enlarged in scale, repeated sometimes to saturation point, what was a realistic depiction takes on an abstract and decorative dimension. Each sculpture is treated in a single, often unnatural colour, causing the organic and non-organic to merge in the viewer's eye. Similarly, the use of symmetry (one of the structural principles shared by the two artists' work) helps to disincarnate these forms.

Metamorphosis of forms

Art is supremely suited to metamorphosis and, in the artist's own words, "has the capacity to join things which have nothing to do together." Trenkwalder's sculptures appear to be inspired by dreamlike visions or fantasies, where dream and reality begin to merge. The forms they contain are endlessly transformed: human figures become architectural elements, trees become limbs, a single figure has male and female sex organs, sex organs become hands, faces, ornamentation, and vice versa. Sculpted or drawn, metamorphosis is central to these phantasmagorical structures as the artist reflects on how the inert and the animate can connect. As Pierre Dourthe writes in the exhibition catalogue, they become "the place where the monumental inert and the eroticised animate exist side by side."

References

Trenkwalder's work seems to draw on elements from the most diverse eras, cultures and genres. More or less identifiable organic elements are found alongside others suggesting gothic architecture, baroque sculpture, art nouveau, Hindu temples, folk art, outsider art or motifs borrowed from different religions and beliefs. "I feel as though I am 'sucking up' the images and emotions of the world. I transform these images and these emotions as would a dream." Many critics have also noted the importance, in Trenkwalder's work, of specifically Austrian influences from Alfred Kubin to the Viennese Jugendstil, visionary architecture and Sigmund Freud.

Visions

For Trenkwalder as for Lesage, the creative process is an incredibly intense, almost trance-like moment of self-absorption. Trenkwalder looks for ways to provoke these visions, these moments of image production, which he also experiences unprompted during his occasional epileptic seizures. "[The seizures] always begin with hallucinations, by a very dense, almost dream-like imaginative activity... I try to find my way back to these images."

Eroticism

Titian, Fragonard, Rodin and Courbet... numerous artists have produced works with an erotic dimension, as Trenkwalder is quick to remind us, although erotic images are infinitely more present in his work than in that of the aforementioned painters. Not that he uses erotic inspirations to provoke. Trenkwalder simply gives form to his own mental images. Beyond the intimacy of his imagination, behind this diversity of postures and possible combinations of male and female lies a strange mysticism, a sort of archaic religion whose ritual totems are these sculptures. Certain elements of Hinduism spring to mind, such as the *lingam*, a phallic stone representing Shiva, or the erotic sculptures adorning the Khajuraho temples. While these

are not directly referenced in Trenkwalder's work, they share a similar concept of eroticism as a vital energy and principle of fusion.

Trenkwalder works with a medium that is generally ignored by contemporary art, being more readily associated with the applied arts and decorative objects, using a traditional artistic technique and a profusion of explicitly sexual motifs in works that can be labelled neither sculpture nor architecture, all of which makes his work unique in the panorama of contemporary art. The same singularity distinguishes Lesage, whose work does not fall neatly into one of the artist categories of his time.

The works of Trenkwalder and Lesage are separated in time and by geography but, beyond these distinctions, as visitors move through the exhibition they discover how the similarities drawn out by this juxtaposition – both grow verticality and in sections, both are symmetrical and ornamental, both incorporate the animate in the inert – reinforce the affinities between the two.

View of the exhibition

augustin lesage

Outsider art and mediumistic art

The work of Augustin Lesage can be categorised as art brut, a term coined by the painter Jean Dubuffet in 1945 to describe a form of spontaneous art created outside "official" cultural boundaries, and which Roger Cardinal

named outsider art in 1972. Much outsider art is produced by the insane, often in psychiatric hospitals. Gravitating around this core are the work of self-taught artists, often eccentrics or people on the fringes of society, art produced in prisons, and finally the "mediumistic art" of Augustin Lesage (whose representatives also include Fleury-Joseph Crépin, Laure Pigeon and Marguerite Burnat-Provins).

"You will be an artist one day"

Like his father and grandfather before him, Augustin Lesage worked as a miner in Ferfay in northern France. He began painting at the age of 35, at the behest of "powerful Spirits." In January 1912, as he dug for coal 500 metres underground, he distinctly heard a voice say, "You will be an artist one day." An inconceivable thought for an uneducated miner (he went into the mines at 14 with just his school-leaving certificate) whose life would be governed by his class. And so Lesage told no one about these voices, fearing that if he did they would think him mad. When a few months later his friend Ambroise Lecomte, also a miner, introduced him to the spiritist doctrine, Lesage found an explanation for his voices.

Spiritism, the doctrine of the Spirits which developed in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, is founded on the belief that the living and the dead can communicate through a medium who levitates tables, passes on messages, writes and sometimes, like Lesage, draws at the spirits' command. The working classes were fertile ground for this doctrine to spread, in particular in mining and newly-industrialised regions. Northern France was a case in point, where the growth of the mining industry prompted thousands of rural families to leave the countryside and live the life of a proletarian. These were people who had been brutally cut off from their land and traditions, and whom Spiritism seduced as a means of renewing contact with their dead but also, as Michel Thévoz[2] eloquently explains, as a "symbolic compensation."

Medium and artist

Lesage's capacities as a medium, that is his ability to relay the invisible spirit's message, were quickly acknowledged. He organised weekly séances with friends, and it was here that he received written messages confirming the revelation made to him in the mines. The spirits urged Lesage to pick up some coloured pencils and draw. In interviews with Dr Osty, director of the International Metaphysical Institute, in 1927, Lesage recalled how "[...] we put a sheet of paper and some coloured pencils on the table, we had turned the lamp low and were in semi-darkness [...]." Lesage produced his first drawings in 1912, six of which are included in the exhibition. These are totally abstract, automatic works that take up almost the entire sheet, as though abhorring

[1]Michel Thévoz, "Augustin Lesage et le spiritisme" in *Augustin Lesage,* catalogue for the retrospective exhibition, Arras

empty space. The curvilinear lines suggest ample movements, probably made by the entire arm rather than just the hand and in quick succession. Some of these drawings are signed Marie, Lesage's younger sister who died at the age of three and was the first Spirit to inhabit him. From the very beginning, Lesage insisted he was simply "the hand that obeys." After Marie, he would be guided by the spirit of Leonardo da Vinci (around 1925), a certain Marius of Tyana, a great Hindu painter, an Egyptian artist, and others. Each time he would follow their command without question: "Never have I known, before starting a painting, what it would be. Never have I had a vision of the finished painting at any moment during its execution. My guides told me, 'don't try and understand what you are doing.' I give myself up to their impulse."

After these first drawings, the Spirits bid Lesage to take up painting. They guided him as he bought the necessary supplies and in his first attempts, "dabbed on with a large brush." These works are shown in the exhibition alongside the drawings. Lesage then moved from paper to canvas. His first work on canvas is a monumental painting measuring nine square metres. Begun in 1912, it took him over a year to complete.

Now conserved at the Musée de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, this is a totally intriguing and, in Dubuffet's words, "strangely disorienting" work that is considered to be Lesage's masterpiece. It resembles no other work of its time, falling outside the known register of art. It is literally an anomalous work with its colossal size, wealth of pattern and colour, and painstaking execution. Created by a man who had spent twenty years at the bottom of a mine, a man with no education, no cultural or artistic background, no noticeable talent, it laid down *ex nihilo* the unique characteristics of his work to come. It contains no references, being composed of a succession of curvilinear patterns or symmetrical geometric forms. At a time when, after a long intellectual and artistic maturation process, artists such as Kandinsky, Malevitch and Mondrian envisioned a form of painting whose subject matter would disappear in the abstraction of reality, Lesage cut to the chase: his painting was, from the very beginning, totally abstract, executed from top to bottom in a succession of horizontal sections, each with the same density of minutely-drawn motifs.

Lesage's technique

Lesage would go several years without painting after completing this work, first to exercise his talents as a mediumistic healer in Béthune (1913) and later because he was called up to fight in the First World War. On returning from the war in 1916, he threw himself back into painting, devoting every spare minute away from the mine to his art. The sitting room of his modest miner's cottage became his studio and would remain so until he died. The table was spread with tubes and pans of paint, brushes (one for each colour) and various objects which he used as templates to trace shapes onto the canvas: buttons and glasses for circles of various sizes, dishes for oval forms, a set-square, protractor, ruler and tape measure. Lesage would fix the canvas to the wall

and begin painting without any preliminary drawing, guided only by a vertical line drawn in pencil down the centre of the canvas and a few perpendicular lines. He worked directly, painting the main decorative motifs which he would then surround with smaller secondary elements, always using blocks of colour with no shading or perspective. Lesage filled the canvas section by section, line by line, following a symmetrical structure. Each movement was clear and precise. He painted without hesitation, often at what he himself described as "a steady, uncontained rhythm… like a machine." He would unfurl the canvas as the painting progressed, like a kakemono. This method of painting remained unchanged throughout his artistic career, which officially began in 1921 when Lesage was introduced to Jean Meyer, director of *Spirite* review and founder of the International Metaphysical Institute. It is thanks to Meyer's patronage that Lesage was able to retire early from the mines in 1923 and devote himself entirely to painting.

Although the characteristics of Lesage's work, to a certain extent imposed by his method of painting, remained relatively constant throughout his career, we can identify different "styles", all of which are represented in the exhibition.

Lesage's "styles"

Lesage employed two distinct styles in the 1920s. The first relates to paintings such as *Composition Symbolique* (1924) at the entrance to the exhibition. They are dominated by architectural elements, with rose windows, domes, columns, gates, niches and altars arranged symmetrically around a central axis. The linear structure and colours can produce a striking optical effect in which masks or figures appear. The second style, which appeared around 1927, is very different from Lesage's previous and subsequent work. It is more organic, distinguished by curves and buds, earth colours (browns, ochre and mauves) and heavy, visible, almost Impressionist brushstrokes in complete contrast with the smoothness of his early work. Most importantly, it introduces figurative elements with simple, childlike drawings of birds and hieratic faces, drawn front-on and without a model. Their naïve representation suggests the religious images found in many homes (such as the Christ in Lesage's own home), although they can also be interpreted as self-portraits. The symmetry of these works is less rigid than before, sometimes to the point of almost disappearing. This style, which lasted only a few years, could be Lesage's attempt to paint "like an artist" with expressive brushstrokes, formal composition and the portrayal of volume. One feels, however, that Lesage was less comfortable in this vein than in the decorative hallucinations at which he excelled.

From the mid-1920s, Lesage began to show his work at Salons where it received a favourable reception. As a "missionary for the spiritist cause" who,

in his own words, "had come to demonstrate spiritist art before science and show that art is not of this world," Lesage now needed to show his work beyond a circle of initiates. As from 1926 he took part in the Salon des Beaux-Arts, the Salon d'Automne and the Salon des Artistes Français (becoming a member in 1934). The Surrealists were fascinated by mediumistic art and the suspending of mental control that it implied. Breton reproduced one of Lesage's paintings in an essay entitled *Message Automatique* that was published in *Minotaure* (n°3-4, 1933). The press published articles in praise of his work, and Lesage was invited to take part in numerous exhibitions which, from 1936, would take him to Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, England, Scotland, Switzerland and Belgium. The miner from Ferfay had broken free of his class.

For many critics, what Lesage gained in public recognition he lost in inspiration. Imagery became increasingly present in his paintings after 1930, which were filled with religious and mythological figures. Christian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Buddhist and Oriental motifs formed the pantheon of a universal religion, a central premise of the spiritist doctrine. Dr Osty concluded that "Lesage's simple soul has been impregnated by the reading of spiritist books, leading him to develop a mysticism open to all forms of belief." This religious syncretism can be seen in the juxtaposition of a Virgin and Child with bearded Sumerian gods or Egyptian statues. Lesage incorporated these figures into his characteristic decorative language in what might seem a slightly clumsy way, as though he had cut them out of almanacs and magazines then glued them onto the canvas.

For Dubuffet, who wrote about Lesage in the third issue of *L'Art Brut* (1965), this was the sign that "Lesage allowed himself to be dazzled by the culture of the people who viewed his art with interest, and who wanted it to be the confirmation of their beliefs." Spiritualists were indeed "eager for the millennial and mythical," particularly the frozen figures of Ancient Egypt which, after 1935, became the main source of inspiration for Lesage who was convinced he was the reincarnation of a pharaonic artist.

Inspired ornamentation

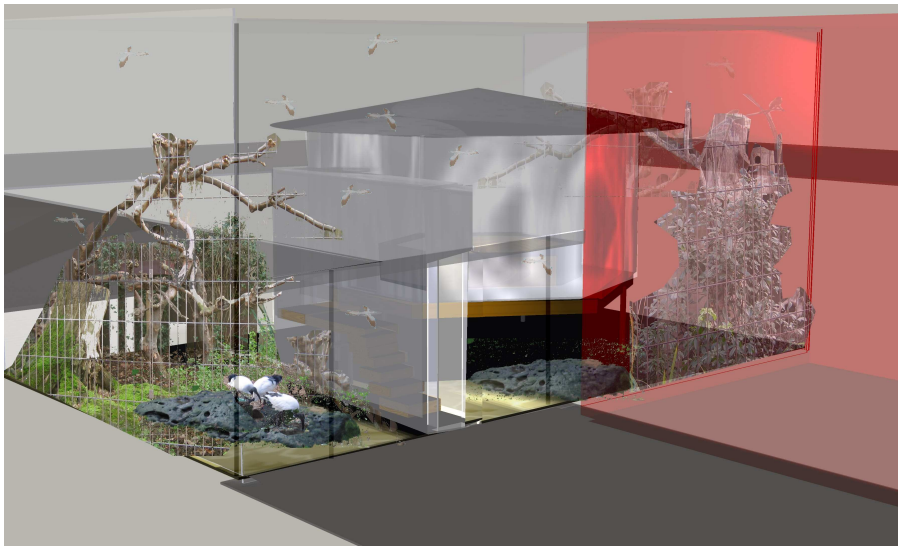
Alongside his paintings with figurative motifs, Lesage continued to produce decorative compositions. These new works were brighter, more luminous than before. While his technique remained essentially the same, the actual painting appears coarser (no doubt due to his slowly failing eyesight). Rose windows and mandorlas are recurrent forms, highlighted with dabs of paint. These tiny drops of colour on the surface of the canvas heighten the precious, jewelled aspect of the whole. Variations in texture can be seen, their value depending also on the totality of the cycle of which they are a part, and which merit re-evaluation. For Lesage, these were not simply decorative works but a

"symbolic visualisation of the impalpable etherical[3]" whose meaning will one day be revealed.

Despite achieving certain recognition in his lifetime, Lesage's work was never seen on a large scale. He always refused to sell his paintings, preferring to give them to people who could promote the spiritist cause. When he did agree to sell one, he charged the same as he would for manual work, adding the cost of the materials to the cost of his labour, based on a miner's hourly rate. Lesage was acknowledged by artists and connoisseurs and yet despite this, and his own desire to be socially accepted, his attitude suggests his sympathies always lay with the miners more than with artists.

An eminent specialist in outsider art, Michel Thévoz has spoken of Lesage's "spiritist alibi" and how "subconsciously, Lesage had the idea of presenting his artistic vocation under the cloak of spiritism, thus circumventing socio-cultural obstacles." Lesage was a pioneer of abstraction and a forerunner of Surrealist automatism. Whatever forces set him on the road to art; his work opens a window onto the underlying mechanisms of critical creation and obliges us to extend our vision of art beyond its accredited forms.

[3] Roger Cardinal, "L'art et la transe" in *Art spirite, médiumnique, visionnaire : messages d'outre-monde*, catalogue for the exhibition at La Halle Saint-Pierre, Paris, 1999.



Project for *Birdhouse café*

andrea blum

birdhouse café

June 11th – October 5th

Three times a year, the patio inside the maison rouge becomes the setting for a commissioned work. The commission for this summer's exhibition comes with a specific criterion: the installation must be a working extension of the foundation's café. The maison rouge has chosen the American artist Andrea Blum who, since the early 1980s, directs her work towards functional pieces of various types and scale. These works are as much sculpture as they are architecture, design or urban furniture. Andrea Blum's works are not limited

to the objects or furniture that compose them: she orchestrates public and private spaces (such as offices, libraries, projection rooms, interiors and parks) to encompass the activities that take place there and the reactions they provoke. The visitor must leave aside their role as passive spectator to become a user, an unknown performer in a work whose meaning unfolds in time and through how it is used.

Birdhouse Café, Andrea Blum's work for the maison rouge, forms a complex recursive arrangement that reveals itself gradually and in two stages. First the outside view, through the glass-walled corridors around the patio, of a building (the red house) and inside this building a glass cage (the patio) containing birds in an artificial landscape, and inside this patio a birdhouse. The second view is from inside the birdhouse, which visitors can enter via the café. Indeed, contrary to what the title of the work may suggest, this "birdhouse" is not for birds but for people: “Birdhouse Café is a functional dining pavilion”

[1] The birds that we think are free inside the patio are in reality prisoners of a twofold observation, from the outside and from within. Andrea Blum uses animals (birds, lizards, and fish) as a medium like any other in what are resolutely anthropocentric projects. *Birdhouse Café* uses native Parisian birds which she has chosen for their formal qualities (size, colour, movements, and song). A fifth-generation New-Yorker, Andrea Blum considers nature to be an abstract entity for the urban-dwellers we are; something we watch through a car window as we drive by, a commodity that enters our life in purely decorative forms (pot plants, birds in cages, driftwood). Even then, nature retains its potential as an "optimistic presence."

Perched on stools like birds around a feeder, the café's customers experience an unclassifiable space that leaves them feeling disoriented and out of synch. In Andrea Blum's own words, I would like my work to function as an agent to position and de-position her works function as "an agent to position" whose configuration is designed to prompt the visitor-user into a certain form of "psycho-social" behaviour, but also as a "de-position agent" in that the reaction they provoke is always inconsistent with the context: "a social breakdown of content and context."

How should we behave in a place that is an artwork, a café and an aviary? Which of these functions takes precedence and how? Each visitor, through his or her behaviour, will decide.

Andrea Blum lives and works in New York. She is represented by Galerie IN SITU Fabienne Leclerc, Paris.

www.andreablum.com

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[1] Jouke Kleerebezem, *Andrea Blum : Domestic Arrangement/ Public Affairs*, The Hague : Stroom hcbk, 1997, p.22