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Run to See Jacques Martinez

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Faced with contemporary art, there are on the one hand the grumblers, convinced that art is dead, or uninteresting, or, worse, carnivalesque and in the process of disappearing in an ultimate and derisory parade.

On the other hand are the enraptured, in ecstasy over everything and everyone, confusing art with show, works with performances, enchanted with productions whose characteristic, as Barthes already noted in a premonitory passage in *Plaisir du text* (1973), is to "exhaust their necessity as soon as they are seen," for they no longer offer "any contemplative or enjoyable longevity."

And facing both, dismissing them back to back as the twin figures of an identical nihilism, are the artists, the real ones. It's not certain one should continue to call them contemporary, so indifferent are they, really, to time, ageless and traversing all the ages, pirating them, piercing them, taking them as a whole and then slicing them into dramatized units and, finally, undoing them: Frize's or Twombly's abstractions, the Chapman brothers' crucifixions, Rudolf Stingel's self-portraits, Frank Stella's birds in relief, Subodh Gupta's metal vanities — or, today, at the Yves and Victor Gastou Gallery in Paris, the Frenchman, Jacques Martinez.

Who is Jacques Martinez?

A Niçois, first of all, as much as a Frenchman, since his adventure as a painter began in the shadow of César and Arman, his elders, in the vicinity of what was called the Ecole de Nice.

A European more than a Niçois, for he paints — and thinks — in an imaginary space ruled by the rigour of Zurbaran no less than the illusions of Mantegna or the heroism of Matisse continuing, in the last days of his life, in Nice, the interminable history of painting.

He is a modern, especially, and definitively so (I once edited a book he wrote called *Moderne Forever*), one whom no tantrum of the avant-gardes, no pathos of the end, no disillusion nor return to supposed “true values” ever kept from thinking that painting has a history, and that, for example, after Cézanne’s bowls, jugs, and other pitchers, it is difficult to paint still lifes the way one did before.

For his current exhibition is an exhibition of still lifes. It is an ensemble — drawings, photos, but especially sculptures — of gigantic squashes, of moulded bronze colocynths that one would describe as drawn from the “antivegital vegetation” (in other words, reinvented, revived, produced and, in short, thought of vegetation) that Malraux depicts in his description of Picasso’s atelier.

And there is in this manner of re-appropriating an old gesture, of making it live and giving it new life with his fingers, in this way of playing with a genre without necessarily validating all the codes (I am convinced that, like Baudelaire in a famous letter, Martinez doesn’t believe for a second that “the soul of the gods lives in plants,” or that his “hallowed vegetables” are “more valuable” than his “soul”) and then, when the fruits of this game have taken on a form that is just about sure and are available, so to speak, to the eye and the hand, of casting them in bronze (that is to say, in a matter that, since the age that bears its name, supposes and implies a belief in the lasting nature of things), there is at the source of this endeavour a wager that, in these times of regression, derision, and, often, of imbecilic booing, lacks neither appeal nor virtue.

One cannot count on Jacques Martinez to sing the bad pean to the «death» or «decrepitude» of art, this « thing of the past”, like the Sunday Hegelians — he doesn’t believe in it anymore than he does, say, in the death of human beings’ desire for transcendence.

One can joke, without him, about the vain paradoxes of “ephemeral art,” this silly oxymoron — whose “happenings” and other “installations” can, in any case, take on meaning only in a view of a definitively desolate world.

The Martinez of these “Bodegons” (the word for his colocynths, in Spanish) thinks that the relation of an artist to Time is always a hand-to-hand combat, sometimes a victory, often a defeat — but that worse than defeat is, obviously, the defeatism of those who would resign themselves to the aesthetic tourism of the post-moderns.

He thinks, as Bataille did of Manet, that the only great art is “incongruous” or, better still, “disrespectful” — concretely, disobeying the order of the world and of nature, inventive, unfaithful, insolent. And this is the entire meaning of these ironic homages, such as sculptures of bottle corks, or of bunches of screwdrivers (César, Arman, and others), of elongated forms or those in the shape of a mushroom (Chardin) or of a squash which has become a gourd (with a wink, again, at Matisse).

And if there is a conviction that has never left him, in the thirty years that I have observed and commented on his work, it is that art exists, not to repeat the world, but to recreate it—the soul of the gods, decidedly, inhabits, not the plants, but the artist.