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Davide Balula's "A journey through you and the leaves"

GALERIE FRANK ELBAZ, Paris

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Featuring bright colors and interactive technology, Davide Balula's current exhibition seems, at first glance, a significant departure from the artist's earthy process-oriented oeuvre. It's certainly in stark visual contrast to his last show with Frank Elbaz, "The Buried Works" in 2012, which turned the gallery into a vivarium with six blank canvases submerged under several tons of dirt where they were acted upon by natural corrosive and fungal processes. Here, "A journey through you and the leaves..." centers tidily around a series of internet-connected sculptures. Though less sensorial than his previous loamy environment, Balula's current installation is, conceptually speaking, likewise fecund.

"Coloring the WiFi Network" (2015), comprises 17 thin plastic and metal sculptures, each a unique steel squiggle painted a different color. A cluster of these vibrant minimalist works—arrayed around the center of the gallery—are mounted on barely-there white stands so that the whole lot appear to hover in space, just like a Dr. Seuss-ian skyline of wacky rooftop antennas. Elsewhere, tucked into corners, rounding doorways, and mounted on the wall, isolated antennae recall the once ubiquitous (oft jerry-rigged) TV set-top rabbit ears. Despite initially evoking analog transmitters, these works are of and about our digital age. Their linear forms refer to A-to-B routes plotted by car GPS systems and web-mapping services like Google Maps, and each work is hooked up to a Linksys wireless broadband router. All 17 modems, placed directly on the floor in plain sight, broadcast an individual WiFi signal named for the industrial paint color of its corresponding antenna. Illustrations of digital routes that also function as digital routers, these works court physical and virtual connections.

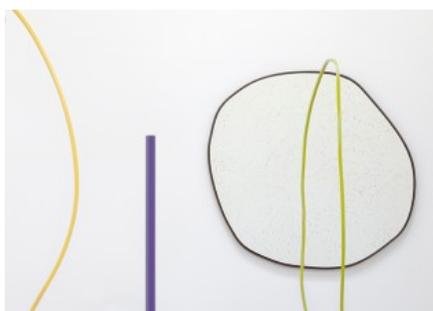
Though the exhibition's accompanying essay, written by former corporate attorney and current anthropology PhD student Lake Polan, explains the premise of "Coloring the WiFi Network," there are no explicit instructions posted in the gallery. Instead, the artist bets that visitors will inevitably take out their cell phones and, while taking a selfie or checking the time, chance upon an intriguing WiFi rainbow. Connecting to any of the paint chip-titled networks—BANANA WHITE, CARIBBEAN GREEN, MUSTARD YELLOW, POWER PINK, WARM RED, etc.—causes a corresponding monochrome to pop up on screen. Recognizing the increasing digital presence of artwork (from amateur photos of exhibitions posted on Flickr, to Artnet's online auctions, to the Google Art Project's vast database of entire museum collections), Balula wrests back some authorial control by coopting the screens that come between the viewer and his sculptures. Preempting the viewer who might be tempted to post photos of the show on Instagram or Tumblr, Balula does his own digitizing. Each on-screen monochrome is temporarily transferred to the viewer's personal electronic device along with complete checklist information.

In addition to offering the viewer the intimate experience of holding artwork in their own hands, "Coloring the WiFi Network" also has macro implications. It's not confined to the context of the exhibition, but, rather, is designed to seep into the real world. Like any hotspot, Balula's networks, once accessed, are stored in the phone's settings. On a return trip to the exhibition, I kept my cell phone out while approaching the gallery and watched as the colorful list of networks reemerged about half a block away. A click reloaded each monochrome, enabling me to revisit these works without setting foot inside the show. Though I was actively seeking out "Coloring the WiFi," its intentional outflow beyond the gallery walls means passersby may come across the work unexpectedly, in keeping with Balula's penchant for chance encounters.

Also on view are two recent examples from Balula's series "Artificially Aged



1 View of Davide Balula, "A journey through you and the leaves," Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris, 2015.



2 View of Davide Balula, "A journey through you and the leaves," Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris, 2015.



3 Davide Balula, *Artificially Aged Painting (Wet, Dry, Wet, Dry, Wet, Dry)*, 2014-2015.



4 (Left) Davide Balula, *Artificially Aged Painting (Wet, Dry, Wet, Dry, Wet, Dry)*, 2014-2015. (Right) Davide Balula, *Coloring the WiFi Network (with Nude)*, 2015.

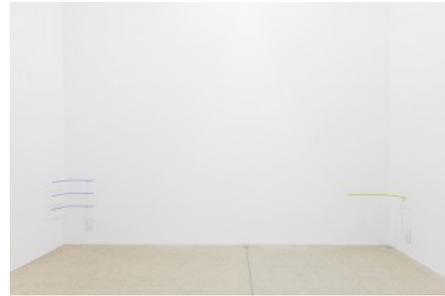
Paintings" (2010–ongoing), which present another way in which the artist enlists technology as his unwitting collaborator. To create the pair of large-scale paintings (both titled *Artificially Aged Painting (Wet, Dry, Wet, Dry, Wet, Dry)*, [2014–15]) the artist placed primed, unstretched canvases inside a high-tech control chamber, where they were subjected to extreme climatic conditions. Shown amidst the thicket of WiFi antennae, Balula's cracked and flaky paintings, which demonstrate a physical toll wrought by invisible forces both natural and artificial, suddenly make viewers acutely aware of the electromagnetic radiation passing through their own body.

A final component of the exhibition, *Between now [...] and now* (2015), exists entirely outside the gallery. Part performance, part document, and part conceptual stopwatch, this SMS-based piece comprises periodic text messages sent by the artist to a list of cell phone numbers collected at the show's opening. Another example of the artist harnessing technology and introducing his work into the viewer's private sphere, these texts act as odd and intimate time markers. One morning I received the note: "The thickness of your soles between now." Nearly 12 hours later, the follow up, "and now," closed the bracket. I'm told a final text will signal the end of the exhibition. Until then I remain connected, my phone providing a temporary avenue for Balula's temporal musings.

Mara Hoberman is a writer and curator based in Paris



5 View of Davide Balula, "A journey through you and the leaves," Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris, 2015.



6 (Left) Davide Balula, *Coloring the WiFi Network (with Lilac)*, 2015. (Right) Davide Balula, *Coloring the WiFi Network (with Yellow Lime)*, 2015.



7 Davide Balula, *Between now [...] and now (SMS)*, 2015.



8 View of Davide Balula, "A journey through you and the leaves," Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris, 2015.

1 View of Davide Balula, "A journey through you and the leaves," Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris, 2015. All images courtesy of Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris. Photo by Jean-Pacôme Dedieu.

- 2 View of Davide Balula, "A journey through you and the leaves," Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris, 2015. Photo by Zarko Vijatovic.
- 3 Davide Balula, *Artificially Aged Painting (Wet, Dry, Wet, Dry, Wet, Dry)*, 2014-2015. Factory primed linen, wooden frame. 178 cm diameter. Photo by Zarko Vijatovic.
- 4 (Left) Davide Balula, *Artificially Aged Painting (Wet, Dry, Wet, Dry, Wet, Dry)*, 2014-2015. Factory primed linen, wooden frame, 178 cm diameter, unique. (Right) Davide Balula, *Coloring the WiFi Network (with Nude)*, 2015. Metal antenna sculpture, plastic, modified router, variable dimensions. Photo by Zarko Vijatovic.
- 5 View of Davide Balula, "A journey through you and the leaves," Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris, 2015. Photo by Jean-Pacôme Dedieu.
- 6 (Left) Davide Balula, *Coloring the WiFi Network (with Lilac)*, 2015. Metal antenna sculpture, plastic, modified router, variable dimensions. (Right) Davide Balula, *Coloring the WiFi Network (with Yellow Lime)*, 2015. Metal antenna sculpture, plastic, modified router, variable dimensions. Photo by Zarko Vijatovic.
- 7 Davide Balula, *Between now [...] and now (SMS)*, 2015. Automated text messages, personal phone numbers.
- 8 View of Davide Balula, "A journey through you and the leaves," Galerie Frank Elbaz, Paris, 2015. Photo by Jean-Pacôme Dedieu.

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