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SUMMER 2017

OPENINGS

JEAN-MARIE APPRIOU

MARA HOBERMAN



View of "Jean-Marie Appriou: *Sonde d'arc-en-taupe*" (Mole's Rainbow Ring), 2014, Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Photo: Aurélien Mole.

JEAN-MARIE APPRIOU'S anarchic, witchy work is simultaneously heroic and humble. His deeply strange forms—some mythical, some near kitsch—are created through processes involving the intuitive handling of traditional materials including bronze, ceramic, glass, and, next up, marble. He is by no means the first contemporary artist to reclaim such substances, yet Appriou's approach is unique: Rather than collaborating with skilled craftsmen, celebrated foundries, or high-tech laboratories, the French-born artist adopts an emphatically DIY method. More interested in alchemy than in artisanship, he manipulates these materials on his own, allowing his hands-on, trial-and-error experiments to foster intimate (if accident-prone) relationships with them.

For one of his earliest exhibitions—an installation in the window of Air de Paris gallery in 2012—Appriou, fresh out of art school in Rennes, France, chose to work in a medium that was new to him: ceramics. But instead of shaping this (notably unforgiving) substance by, say, renting space in a studio or outsourcing the production to experts, the artist built a kiln himself, using it to fire an assortment of vases, goblets, and pitchers meant to evoke such mythological beings as zombies and vampires. The resulting pieces of wheel-thrown pottery, which the artist notes are roughly the same scale as a human head, were displayed on and around a *lit clos*, or box-bed, a traditional carved-wood furnishing from Brittany that looks like a large cupboard but functions instead as a private sleeping area. This *mise-en-scène* added to the nightmarish quality of the would-be utilitarian vessels, whose dripping gray glazes suggest various scatological fluids. Emphasizing the relationship between the final, vaguely figurative artworks and their telluric material, Appriou sprinkled his prefired pottery with ash glaze and adorned the baked clay with animal pelts.

Two years later, the artist made another custom furnace—this time to fire more than five tons of cast-iron sculptures and bas-reliefs, which he spread over five thousand square feet in the sprawling basement of Paris's Palais de Tokyo. The show's title, "*Sonde d'arc-en-taupe*" a wordplay translating roughly to "Mole's Rainbow Ring," describes an imaginary circle linking the sky and the earth through the contiguous mirror-image arcs of a rainbow and a mole tunnel. The pieces themselves included a medley of Gothic-style landscapes and figures describing the various geneses of Appriou's artworks: Giant, tear-spilling eyes evoked the liquid iron the artist poured into sand molds (not to mention his own blood, sweat, and tears), cattail-lined marshes referenced the origin of clay, and large-scale hands building coil pots underscored a hands-on methodology.

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View of "Jean-Marie Appriou: Ginger Succubes," 2012, Air de Paris, Paris.

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APPRIOU'S APPROACH to smelting and casting metal is unconventional, if rather millennial. Instead of completing a traditional apprenticeship, as many artists might, he turned to YouTube tutorials posted by amateur enthusiasts—"biker hobbyists who like to make belt buckles on Sundays," as he describes them. Such online training has led to plenty of failed attempts, but for Appriou, this is hardly a problem. In fact, he has found that missteps give him a greater understanding of how materials react to different conditions, ultimately leading to more meaningful results. One happy accident occurred when he decided to add bits of broken lead pipe to a cast-glass bas-relief during its gradual cooling process, resulting in *Hysteria*, 2015, a glass bust whose open mouth drools a sickening rivulet of shimmering metal; the unanticipated effect suggests a disturbingly visceral narrative. By titling the work after a pejorative antiquated medical diagnosis, Appriou performs a self-reflexive nod, wryly acknowledging the hysterical quality of his own experimental practice.

If alchemical transubstantiation is at the core of Appriou's work, his art is transformative in other ways, too. *Sébastien (Périscopes) I*, 2013, for instance, attempts to turn sculpture inside out. Depicting the Christian martyr Saint Sebastian, the work comprises a roughly life-size glazed ceramic torso resting atop a large, twisted aluminum tripod. Strategically placed mirrors inside the hollow body create a periscope, so that when the viewer peers in through the hole representing the place where one of the saint's lopped-off arms would have been, he or she sees a metal heart shape. The heart is actually a reflection of part of the aluminum base, but, thanks to Appriou's well-crafted illusion, its appearance has changed, as if by a eucharistic trip, into something else.

Last year, at La Loge in Brussels, Appriou exhibited a pair of bronze cypress trees, *Untitled (Cypress 1)* and *Untitled (Cypress 2)*, both 2016 (made via a lost-wax casting technique he learned on YouTube), which confound traditional associations of bronze sculpture as solid, monumental, and heroic. Despite being more than seven feet tall, the trees appear fragile and ephemeral. With an almost lacy thin crust that has already begun to oxidize, the hollow forms suggest a pair of vacated, decomposing cocoons—carapaces of loss, emptiness, and temporality that also index the work's own production. (Such delicate and poetic handling of bronze, whereby the finished sculptures describe their own fabrication—in terms of destruction, no less—provides insight into how Appriou will confront his next material: stone. He is learning to carve marble for an installation at the royal gardens in Versailles this October.)

Recently, Appriou has surrendered his hard-won and intimate means in order to produce work on a greater scale. "Raspberry Rising," 2016, an exhibition at Clearing in Brussels, featured the artist's first collaboration with a foundry. The resulting large metal reliefs are imposing, roughly eight by eight feet across, and present imagery inspired by tarot-card images, including celestial objects (the sun, Mercury, and a downward-pointed airplane), a giant human heart, and a horse. Do these new works, fabricated by skilled craftspeople, have less improvisational, mad-scientist charm? Perhaps. But in letting go of some physical involvement with his materials, the artist has freed himself from self-referential origin stories, opening his art to a wider range of interpretive possibilities. As if to drive this point home, in the exhibition's press release Appriou asks curator Gallien Déjean to elucidate the show as if it were a tarot-card spread; Déjean replies with an enigmatic interpretation, noting the influence of the sun and the presence of Jungian archetypes. Of course, exegesis is itself another kind of alchemy—a quixotic, personal transmutation of empirical fact.

Mara Hoberman is a critic based in Paris.

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