

BALICE HERTLING

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Press release

Camille Blatrix

ON YOUR KNEES

September 26th | October 14th, 2017

Balice Hertling is pleased to present the second solo show of Camille Blatrix at the gallery, and for the first time at our new gallery space, at 239 rue Saint-Martin 75003 Paris.

In his early 2000 text, "Design & Crime," Hal Foster drew an analogy between the contemporary extension of the design sphere and the Art Nouveau movement at the turn of the 20th century. In its ornamental extravagance and decorative details, Art Nouveau sought to ward off industrial standardization by subjectivizing each object to the extreme, stylizing ashtrays, chairs or bracelets like subjects—figures—most often anthropomorphic or zoomorphic. Sometimes ornaments were inspired by forms found in industrial materials, which Art Nouveau craftspeople strove to divert from their function and insert into a part-invented tradition; fantasizing, like the Symbolist painters, an illuminated and lustrous Middle Ages, replete with griffons and chimera, gargoyles and coats of arms—a spurt of resistance to the canon of classicism. The Modernists—who wanted most of all a clear separation between the categories of art and crafts and advocated for the primacy of reason over phantasmagoria, the pure over the superfluous—took issue with the nebulous, anachronistic fantasies of the movement and denounced it as reactionary. By the 1920s, Art Nouveau had become nothing more than a faint memory of bad taste. In the advent of "total design," Foster saw a resurgence of Art Nouveau in the personalization of commodities - the pseudo-individualization through the symbolic capital of brands and the commodification of lifestyles; the proliferation of variations, adaptable to every desire, for the construction of identities.

What makes the sculptures of Camille Blatrix so relevant to today is the melding of references to industrial standardization (smooth, compact forms, ergonomic profiling) and manufactured ornaments—in the literal sense of the term: hand- (*manu-*) made (*-factus*). His sculptures evoke the faint voice of capitalism and its murmur of rallying cries disguised as passwords. At first glance, nourished by the aesthetics of Apple (polished uniformity) and Nike (inlays and soft materials), Blatrix's sculptures appear to be technical objects, are more or less recognizable as such, even though they are pure fantasy. Thus, even taken out of context, they represent the very products they deform, and tend towards the phantasmagoric through a discreet bestiary: a sort of lawn mower recalls a beached whale, tiny wall distributors depict birds with pointed beaks. Sometimes, a face or a small hand protrudes from the piping, or adorns the keys or buttons of a machine. The objects, not satisfied merely to depict, are charged with feeling, reminding us that, far from functionalist, our relationship to them is a much more complex ritual of negotiation, where emotions come into play. Leaving a message on an answering machine, dealing with a cash machine that's out of order: these are interactions with technical objects that catalyze fleeting emotions, which Camille Blatrix attempts to crystalize with the use of the tragi-comic. The artist's interest in romantic comedies is revealing: in this particular film genre, the hero or heroine is often drawn into battle with a predestined tragic fate only to transform it into comedy. The struggle is not so different from what Camille Blatrix intends with his objects: to help them defy a predetermined scenario and escape their destiny of reification into seductive objects of art. The act involves an element of not-knowing, intuition and arbitrariness, irrational decisions that are daily occurrences in the life of the workshop. Working on the form, for Blatrix, means being fueled by anecdotes, emotions, hesitation and contradictions, which serve as antidotes or vaccinations against the control that otherwise condemns these forms to the category of design. At times the artist tends towards fiction (like in his first show at Balice-Hertling, where a young woman in a booth handed out tickets for a hypothetical voyage), overdetermining a narrative structure to legitimize a group of signs and figures. Yet his recent exhibitions (at CCA Wattis in Los Angeles and Andrew Kreps in New York) see him drawn to a more clinical register (from museum to Apple Store): displays in which objects toy with seriality, with a fake standardization that contradicts their deliberate handcraftsmanship and artificial preciousness (synthetic ivory, fake crocodile or snake skin, etc.). The objects play the role of futurist artefacts that a luxury of details renders even more impenetrable.

To unite these extremes might be one of the challenges set by this new exhibition, an exhibition that sums up four years during which the artist's work has become more visible—even, for many already, the mark of an era, or, at least, of a generation.

It would be best, perhaps, to accept the various qualities of his sculptures as equal parts: narrative yet opaque, cold yet charged with emotion, concrete yet symbolic: an individual bestiary displaying its polysemy through an awareness of the very form of its exhibition. In other words, it is best to imagine this group of objects communicating amongst each other rather than each conveying its own story.

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The plugs, straps, buttons and apertures that make up the ornaments of the sculptures also draw attention to their incompleteness, and the connective potential that links, through an invisible string, all the objects into a single, strange domotics system whose function escapes us.

In the exhibition, a row of steles appears to lean toward a hanging figure while wall objects serve as witnesses to this ceremony of machines. It is in fact a ring, a suspended jewel, that seems to hold this silent intrigue captive. One is reminded of the initial quest of the knave-turned-knight Perceval le Gallois by Chrétien de Troyes (it is interesting to note that Camille Blatrix held an exhibition in Wales in 2015 that included, and linked to his own work, his parents' paintings and sculptures.) Perceval's adventures lead him to the castle of the grail, where he observes a silent procession of symbolic objects, bleeding lances and shiny goblets; yet, faithful to his mother's advice to never utter an inopportune word, he dares not ask a question, and so lets slip the opportunity to understand what he has witnessed. His dumb astonishment prevents him from interpreting the ritual. Later, however, his love for Blanche fleur allows him to recognize, upon seeing three drops of blood on the snow, the face of his beloved: "He mused to the point of forgetting himself."

Camille Blatrix's exhibition *On Your Knees* is an inanimate ritual, suspended in time; far from minimalism, it arranges emblems in space, in the shape of a heraldic deck of cards, not to be deciphered, but laid out and reshuffled.

"Get to your places!" shouted the Queen in a voice of thunder, and people began running about in all directions, tumbling up against each other; however, they got settled down in a minute or two, and the game began." (Lewis Carroll)

François Piron

Camille Blatrix (b. 1984, Paris, France) lives and works in Paris. He graduated from Ecole des Beaux-Arts of Paris (ENSBA) in 2011. He has recently had a solo show at CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco in 2016 and he has participated to several group exhibitions like *Faisons de l'inconnu un allié*, Lafayette Anticipation, Paris, in 2016 or *La vie moderne*, Biennale de Lyon, Lyon, France in 2015.