

BIOGRAPHY OF ARNAUD COHEN

Arnaud Cohen is a Franco-Portuguese artist born in 1968. Presented by Valérie Duponchelle as one of the ten personalities reinventing culture (Le Figaro, Feb 2015), he addresses through his ultra contemporary work the subject of individual responsibility in building collective destinies. He draws and refers as much to the situationists and Édouard Glissant as to allegories and mythology. His appropriationist practice takes him towards social and aesthetic forms as diverse as a foundation, a dance floor or a reality TV show. Arnaud Cohen lives and works between France and Spain and has been a member of the British Royal Society of Sculptors since 2019.

RECURRING THEMES IN HIS WORK

Over the last ten years, in the spirit of Beuys, Broodthaers and Boltanski's legacy, Arnaud Cohen's work has been structured into five recurring practices :

COLOSSES

A transgender and trans-historical hybridization of human representations of power.

WINTER OVER DEMOCRACIES

The West faces an uncertain future, both politically and ecologically (sculptures, tapestries, installations, videos).

DANCE OVER ME - 21st century world tour

This installation and performance project offers different audiences around the world the opportunity to dance on the symbolic graves of accomplices of former local tyrannies (sculptures, installations, performances, videos).

ART SPEAKS FOR ITSELF

ASFI is a fictional foundation aiming to highlight the main causes of the standardization of contemporary art on a global scale (performances).

SISYPHUS IS A WOMAN

The place of women and gender issues in our globalized societies (performances, photos, videos, installations, sculptures).

ARNAUD COHEN // EFFACEMENTS (ERASURES)

Everything must go (Tout doit disparaître) is the favourite slogan of businesses during the sales period: this enjoinder to a profusion of purchases aims to liquidate stocks before the next batch of goods, our consumer societies being condemned to produce new ones indefinitely and to discard them as quickly as possible in order to function and survive, using planned obsolescence as a lubricant in the workings of the system. Daughters of predatory and deadly capitalism, raised on the insane myth of progress and steeped in technicism, these societies believe themselves exempt from the duty of submitting to the material limits imposed by terrestrial finitudes and imagine a future in perpetual expansion.

Nothing is more intolerable to them than the idea of stagnation, and nothing is more alien than the idea of their own disappearance.

Everything must go is also the prophecy of the neon sign that welcomes the visitor upon entering Arnaud Cohen's exhibition at the Le Mur art centre in Moret-sur-Loing. But the phrase here refers to the inevitable annihilation of all things, a fortiori of all human society. After all, it's only a question of time. With *Effacements* (Erasures), the artist walks us through works full of lucid melancholy and learned irony, among the traces of the pathetic glories of a world on the brink of collapse.

Opposite the piece of furniture serving as a library, on the piano music-stand in the reception area, a burned score preserves the shreds of a melody which must have represented for its composer an entire harmonic universe, now resonating like the inaudible reminiscence of a tender and intimate music of the spheres. And with its glassy eye, a stuffed badger, threadbare and pitiful, evokes the final attempt to preserve at all costs the memory of a natural paradise lost forever.

On their path to industrialization, perhaps assuming in advance that it would destroy at high speed what nature and humans had patiently built before, modern Western societies invented the museum, the ultimate defence against generalized amnesia, of which they are nevertheless the most diligent instigators. The inversion of values is evident: ancient civilizations adored a mythical past, a non-existent golden age promoted to the rank of an inaccessible but always updated model, while modernity invented the future, just as idealized and improbable, thus launching itself in a headlong flight with no escape. This is what *Devero Sociétatis* (*hungry ghosts*) reminds us of: in the first room of the exhibition, the skeleton of a chimera is used as a display case for artefacts of all ages. Crawling on a plastic cast of a Roman foot, equipped with arms and fragments of various useless bodies, including the head of a reborn princess and Napoleon's death mask, this grotesque standard-bearer, bearing historical relics suspended on the fragile thread of memory, hoists to its summit two opposing faces. One is a funerary mask from an ancient Egyptian sarcophagus from the Ptolemaic era, the other a Japanese theatre figure from the Edo era: two ancient cultures which never crossed paths and which, equally devoured by time, here mutually contemplate their sad or grimacing ghosts, become mute and disembodied trophies in the hands of a machinist civilization – ours – doomed to the same fate.

In the alcove on the back wall, piled up easels are part of the furniture of the exhibition space: Arnaud Cohen has gleaned the canvases they support here and there, covering them with a veil of transparent paint which reveals a hollowed-out inscription. *Everything was going so well – the old Masters* put the mottos of major commercial brands into the past tense – *We were in good hands, intelligent safety was everywhere...* – which underlines its vain and deceitful nature. The blurring of old anonymous paintings, survivors of the

abandonment of the gaze thanks to the intervention of the artist, gives the hazy motif a mysterious dignity and at the same time nourishes the nostalgia of an obsolete artistic practice, swept away by the incessant flow of electronic images.

In the middle room, like a sword of Damocles, an imposing timber cross with arms covered in neon lights hangs above the heads of visitors, like the majestic crucifixes in the transept of Italian Romanesque cathedrals. The light here is not divine but electric, and *Dantechrist* is more a relic from a near and desperate future, slipping into the obscurantism of a reheated faith to escape the bloodless and brutal reality.¹

At this point in the journey, the artist has placed a *Corny poem mirror* to allow the visitor to take a photo of themselves in the company of a smoky verse resonating like a profound thought: *We are unfortunate vampires exposed to the illumination of love*. Submerged all day long by empty and manipulative sentences, succumbing to the indomitable narcissistic desire for self-immortalization in the brief and fallacious eternity of social networks, the majority of humans, now irremediably chained to their digital screens, as zombies are to the smell of blood, involuntarily accelerates the disappearance of their reflective faculties and their carnal reality by actively participating in the avalanche of superfluous images and mind-numbing information.

The composite sculptures from the *Echology* series form a small, unusual cabinet of curiosities. They are made from obsolete busts and faces, partially disfigured by colourful growths formed by plastic toys that commercial companies distribute widely with false generosity, with the self-interested aim of strengthening their grip by flattering the playful instinct of consumers from childhood. Climbing plants come to embrace and cover with new life these imaginary and grotesque beings, survivors of a past recomposed by an inconvenient present sailing towards an unfathomable future.

Reuse is constitutive of Arnaud Cohen's artistic approach. It allows him not only to preserve, through almost insignificant artefacts, the memory of an emotional bond lost forever, but also to fight, if only with the symbolic means of art, against an aberration of widespread waste and mountains of rubbish that block our intellectual and natural

¹ The work refers to the idea that the writer Maurice G. Dantec had of the future: a surge in religion accompanying a technological collapse. Coming from a communist family, Dantec later sympathized with the far-right ideas of the Identitarian bloc and expressed royalist and anti-Islamist views, drifting towards a mystical Catholicism in the last years of his life.

horizons. The old tapestries from the *Winter over Europe* series are also found in auction rooms: they are adorned with various insertions which, without obscuring the original subject, ironically or parodically enrich it in the light of current concerns.

In the *Ouverture* video, produced in collaboration with the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature – Fondation François Sommer, Arnaud Cohen focuses on two radically antagonistic biblical myths, that of the Garden of Eden and that of nature at the service of man. Their age-old irrational cohabitation, made possible by the spiritual coercion exercised by monotheistic religions, explodes in modern consumerist and capitalist societies: hubris takes over the desire for symbiosis and technical mastery ideologically establishes the systematic submission of natural resources to economic madness. In just a few minutes, the delicious fiction, filmed in the Ardennes landscape with a pinch of latent humour, summarizes the adventure of Homo Sapiens - an animal species which claims to be the summit of creation in the image of the divine - from its origins until the day it targets itself.

More human than human is a print referring to the slogan of the Tyrell Corporation, the company that creates humanoids in *Blade Runner* by Ridley Scott. The motto, printed without ink, at the limits of the visible, appears in the form of a captcha supposed to escape robotic recovery, an attempt now obsolete in the era of the detection capabilities of the new generation programs called AI (artificial intelligence). As if to underline the inevitable intellectual and sensitive decline of the human race, this misleading and humiliating designation for thought veils the despair of a dying world which places its destiny in the hands of soulless machines.

In a more intimate register, like a personal and marginal note, the visitor will discover a drawing by Victor Brauner. Dedicated to a friend whose name has been scratched out, it recalls the tiny duration of a human existence in the face of the black and silent immensity of oblivion.

Finally, behind a wall at the exit of this dense and consequent itinerary, the inscription *Pay now, buy later* is a final disenchanting nose-thumbing to a world stuck in a totalizing and suicidal predatory logic whose power to seduction is nevertheless unsurpassable.

Enrico Lunghi, exhibition curator.

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