

GUIDED VISIT

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Ladies and Gentlemen

Most of the works Hubert Duprat is exhibiting at Mona have been either lent by collectors or belong to the artist. 'Exhibition' conveys the idea of an artist making 'pieces'—often in precious materials—intended for the art market and museums. But one domain of Duprat's artistic activity in exhibitions has been to create works in situ—some of which are ephemeral and no longer exist. In the course of our visit to this exhibition I shall comment on what *is* here, but will also permit myself digressions on what *has been* elsewhere. For the purpose of this tour, I shall refer to untitled pieces by describing their materials and composition in my exposition titles.

Trichoptère (Caddis)

Here, first of all is the caddisfly, an insect belonging to the order Trichoptera. What we see in the aquarium is the caddis 'worm', an aquatic larva well known to carnivorous fish and to anglers. Duprat removed the worm from its natural environment and grew it *in vitro* in an aquarium refrigerated to 4°C (the machinery is behind the wall), thus reconstituting the conditions of its original stream. Since the larva is not fixed to its case, Duprat evicted it, supplying it with building materials to which it would not normally have access. Finding itself naked, the larva frenetically constructed a new sheath from the small pieces of precious materials the artist provided; this is an invention Duprat patented in 1983. The process, edited to forty minutes, can be seen in the very beautiful film *L'Éducation du Trichoptère* (The Education of the Trichoptera, 1998).

The artist can manipulate the case's construction by programming, for example, a circle of pearls amid the flakes of gold, or studding the gold with turquoise and other precious stones. This is nature perverted: art by delegation. The art of the caddis worm is a form of DIY, and the results are either regular or irregular, as circumstances dictate. We can understand it as adornment of an animal capable of ostentation or even aesthetic intention—'baroque jewellery' has been mentioned in this respect. In any case, it is the most extraordinary and fascinating work by Hubert Duprat and the one for which he is best known in the artworld.

In tandem with making these works and alongside his other artistic endeavours, Duprat began collecting everything he could find concerning the constructivist art of the Trichoptera. Indeed, he exhibited his documentation in 2012 in the context of a fictitious *Last Library*, the website for which you can see at <http://trichoptere.hubert-duprat.com/en/>.

Cassé-Collé (Broken-Bonded) (not in the exhibition)

Take a large rock, smash it with pickaxe and sledgehammer into a dozen or so pieces, and then meticulously glue the pieces back together. You bring into existence the *Cassé-Collé*, or Broken-

Bonded (1991–94). The first anthropologist to explain the technique of prehistoric flint-knapping during the Palaeolithic more or less followed this process; by seeking out the fragments, he was able to reconstitute the original. This is a further perversion of procedure; a big pebble replaces the beautiful flint, and an imposing sculpture displaces the primitive utensil, in all its modest nobility. As he does with *Trichoptère*, Duprat revisits a mode of manufacture, an art of making. But here the progression is from hi-fi to lo-fi.

Light incisions

Four Cibachrome photographs (Untitled, 1986–89) are juxtaposed to form a symmetrical motif on both vertical and horizontal axes. To obtain the strange bluish-light effect, an incision was made in a piece of cardboard that was then photographed against the light. Since the Renaissance, artisans have crafted very fine slices of marble in order to display the stone's grain, or motif. Cabinetmakers are also acquainted with this procedure, minus, of course, the transmitted light. Duprat also revisits this artisanal knowledge. For *Trichoptère*, he became an entomologist; for *Cassé-Collé* he returned to the memories of the boy archaeologist he once was; for this work he is geologist, or lover of stones.

He is also an optician, inasmuch as he has created other photographs playing with light and optical procedures. I think particularly of the very beautiful series created by transforming his studio into a *camera obscura*—*L'Atelier ou la montée des images* (The Studio or the Ascent of Images, 1983–85)—a series that also connects thematically with the 'the world upside-down', a theme familiar in France from the Épinal print.

A material carved and opened up reveals a motif that would otherwise have remained concealed. This same exploratory thinking gave rise to three parallel blocks of concrete on which the motif of the artist's studio, with its door, floor and skirting board, can be discerned (Untitled, 1989). The work is reminiscent of a sliced fruitcake. Thought connects the three elements and projects the motif into the depths of the concrete. This is an invitation to 'reverie of intimacy', as philosopher Gaston Bachelard discusses.

***Coupé-Cloué* (Cut-Nailed)** (not in the exhibition)

Tree trunks studded with nails—hobnailed trees: the fat heads of brass tacks entirely cover the trunks, forming a new and durable metallic bark-like armour. The caddis has its sheath of gold and precious stones, and the trees, too, are entitled to a brilliant carapace. It is a matter of adornment—to each its own envelope, its own skin, its own suit of lights. Hobnailing to protect, protecting with ostentation, this is another form of know-how.

***A la fois, la racine et le fruit* (Both root and fruit)**

The branches of two trunks mingle. The 'cladding' procedure is similar to *Coupé-Cloué*. The materials are both trivial—the little nails—and ennobling—the burnished bone flakes. The result is an oxymoron, again hi-fi and lo-fi meet, again a hybridisation of know-how. But *A la fois*,

la racine et le fruit (1997–98) and *Coupé-Cloué* afford a counterpoint to the reveries of intimacy. Their cladding/clothing/appearance is primary. They express the vertigo of artifice and the ascension of the simulacrum, but also the power of transformation. The eye begins with a trunk and moves among the branches (root or branch?), only to return to the thread constituted by a single trunk. The power of metamorphosis: illusion and prestidigitation.

Thread and metal pin

Models of string figures—such as ‘cat’s cradle’—were a standard component of creativity for socio-cultural clubs in the 1960s. The objects created occasionally turn up in flea markets, or reappear in the form of anonymous abstract works combining DIY methodology with modernist appeal. The memory of Naum Gabo, whose threads create volumetric space, could hardly be more remote, and we are also some distance from Op Art. The worst of it is to transpose a pastime reserved for rainy days into an ‘installation’ the size of a wall. This mural network (1995–98/2013) is surely the most ironic work in relation to art and its history that Duprat has ever created.

***Les Bêtes* (Beasts)**

Duprat’s hybridisation of materials reaches a new degree of perversion in these figures for shadow theatre. Made of flint, a more inappropriate material could hardly be imagined. The prehistoric art of flint-knapping is combined with a spectacle that was fashionable in the nineteenth century, producing an anachronism of expertise.

Les Bêtes (1992–99), like many other works by Duprat, has two dates. This is because it took several years and the assistance of a specialist, who lived near Lascaux, to complete the project. The ancient Mayans of Central America, who produced ‘Eccentrics’ in flint, obsidian and jasper, were meeting a completely different challenge, creating knapped figurines of very rugged outline.

Some of the figures vaguely resemble pistols, such as those that Claes Oldenburg collected in his *Ray Gun Wing* (Museum of Modern Art, New York). As a final irony, *Les Bêtes* series eventually became a state commission and finished up behind the walls of a police station! Duprat has been known to use a real pistol—several in fact—as he had to fire a great many shots to constellate an entire wall with lead shot (Untitled, 1992). This again is a surface with encrustations—a mural decoration, with implicit violence that echoes that contained within *Cassé-Collé*.

Costa Brava coral

Polished coral, reconstituted into branches, fascinated the collectors of the late Renaissance. It appears like the descending Holy Ghost above the head of the Madonna della Vittoria in Andrea Mantegna’s painting (1495–96, Musée du Louvre, Paris). Perhaps the most striking example is that which blazes on and emblazons the head of Wenzil Jamnitzer’s *Daphne* (1550, Musée National de la Renaissance, Ecouen).

However, in Duprat's case, the branches of coral are connected not with an ornate metallic ring but with bread. The coral is sophisticated, the glue domestic: another collision of high and low. The work is shaped just like a brain, with all its circumvolutions, or, if you prefer, like a burning bush. It is a collector's object—for a connoisseur of curiosities—fragile and precious despite its baker's glue.

A similarly depraved use of glue was employed in the large ceiling of juxtaposed mica flakes (Untitled, 2008), made for the arts centre in Vassivière, France. In that case, the grouting between the mica flakes was plasticine. Meanwhile, the motif of the tree occurs in *La Montagne* (The Mountain, 1993–94); wood and pink Iranian marble encrusted a concrete slab that could be seen upside-down from a mezzanine. In a number of Duprat's works we find reverie on generation as well as an exploration of the tenuous borders between mineral, vegetable and animal kingdoms.

Shagreen

Shagreen is a form of fish skin containing silica, a material that is midway between tanned hide and mineral. In this work, Untitled, 2011–12, it gives the impression of connecting the polystyrene blocks, like the metal pins linking blocks of stone.

A number of Duprat's works comprise smooth surfaces, with one material encrusted on another. The *Marquetries* series (1986–94), which was the first to make use of the motif of the artist's studio, revisited the art of veneering, but with unexpected combinations of materials—mother-of-pearl, ebony, ivory or baleen encrusting vulgar plywood. What could be more remote from the valuable woods that the cabinetmaker works?

As we have seen, the studio motif has also been engraved into concrete. But the engraved concrete was in turn encrusted on a plaster surface in the 'rolled up' wall of Rennes (1989) and in the renewal of a Renaissance motif (Strasbourg, 1995). To this must be added several walls with circumvolutions of brass wire encrusted onto a surface of plaster in the work *Entrelacs* (Tracery, 1992–94). These are all magnificent works, in which artisan knowledge was reinvented to replace the automatic gesture previously transcribed by informal painting or lyrical abstraction.

Brass and plaster

The truncated cones of brass enclosed in a plaster polyhedron (Montpellier, 2009) extend to the surface of the plaster. Now, just try polishing two materials of different densities. It is all but impossible to reach a smooth finish. There must, therefore, be a trick . . .

Duprat is constantly working to reinvent techniques, attentive to the way in which a given metal, for example, can be worked, moulded, or filed. This technique may be several months, or

indeed several years, in the development. Its counterpoise is the raw medium made by the mason's or plasterer's hand.

***Comme un gant* (Like a glove)**

Comme un gant (2005)—that is, like a glove turned inside out—is a metaphor in French for a person thoroughly duped. The external surface that becomes internal is a notion underlying a number of Duprat's pieces. The caddis constructs its cocoon, or house—an external protection—from within the cylinder. The slices of concrete cake mentioned earlier are engraved on their outside with a motif that appears to continue through the interior of the slices. The motif of the studio, as an engraved drawing, recurs in the sectioned boxes made of wood or concrete, which in turn form part of a roof (Pichon-Longueville, 1987) or an exhibition space (Bordeaux, 1988 and 1989; Nice, 1989). *L'Atelier ou la montée des images* (The Studio or the Ascent of Images) turns the exterior, the street, inside out by making it the interior of the studio: sheath-house and box-studio. Inclusion and reversibility of interior and exterior become a matter of topology.

The magic of *Comme un gant* comes partly from the improbable conjunction of tubes of polyester mastic and hematite pebbles, and partly from the fact that the pebbles mysteriously carpet the interior of the tubes. Even the least curious visitor remains uncertain about these objects.

Duprat's art gives full rein to the question: 'How is it done?' This is a question the boorish pedantry of critics generally puts aside as naive, insufficiently conceptual, and excessively plebeian. But here art is also the invention (reinvention) of know-how: thought transpires behind the craftsman's hand.

Crystal cylinders

The vertical cylinder (Untitled, 2008) is made of Iceland spar; the horizontal cylinder (Untitled 2007–12) of iron pyrite, or fool's gold. The crystals are mounted with glue and form a sort of wall, with scintillating facets. The pyrite reflects the light; the spar adds an element of transparency.

There was also a 'stained-glass' project for windows of a chapel in the park at Kerguéhennec, in Brittany, made from quartz crystals. This, in turn, evokes the Baltic amber in *Nord* (North, 1987–98), some of which contains fossils. The amber assembled in this hollow form is polished on the outside like the coral cited above. This fascination with minerals—their collection, working, and inclusion in composite objects—is a tradition that goes back to the late Renaissance and to Mannerism, a time of extreme refinement of taste, before art and craft had irremediably parted company.

Components of any material accumulated and assembled can come to constitute a new material, and there is no need to enlist the aid of rare substances. The artist's eye picks out unsuspected potential. In the Vassivière arts centre, in Aldo Rossi's bell tower, an extraordinary ceiling was made simply by juxtaposing common, or garden, PVC tubes (Untitled, 2008).

Ulexite and Plexiglas

Every material has optical and/or imaginary potential. Semi-transparent ulexite gives the impression the dice faces within are very close to the surface (Untitled, 2008). Ulexite is a natural optical fibre; it has the power of projection. But a material as apparently commonplace as Plexiglas can also give rise to an optical effect (Untitled, 2011). This is Op Art with plasticine.

Duprat has mastered the art of constructing optical effects with the most banal objects and materials. The summation of this genre was perhaps the large wall built last summer in the middle of a huge room in the archaeological museum of Lattes, near Montpellier, in the south of France, not far from Duprat's home. Flowerpots of different sizes—small ones inside bigger ones, like Russian dolls—were laid down, inserted, and juxtaposed in this wall, showing on one side their concentric circles and on the other their bottoms. The whole thing 'revolved' like a collection of Marcel Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs*, but this was the common version. The result was magnificent.

Magnetite

Geological time is not human time; the scales and forces in action are incommensurable. There is excess, disproportion. Small pieces of reconstituted magnetite—sold in pairs as 'magic trick' gadgets—are piled up in their thousands to form a mass of many tons (Untitled, 2008). One can easily imagine the magnetic potential of such a heap causing confusion, making one take any direction at all for north.

Pat of modelling clay

A shapeless mass that resembles an enormous pat of white butter is made of Giotto Pat'Plume modelling clay. This is sculpture before sculpture, a mass of matter waiting to be worked. A latent sculpture is sealed into its material and untouched by the hand of the artist. From a distance, the mass seems vaporous, an impression completely at odds with the volume it occupies.

Paraffin and quartz crystals

Again we have a shapeless mass (Untitled, 2000), but here quartz crystals emerge from an unwieldy lump of paraffin, their bases still held captive in the body of the paraffin. This is not the surface effect mimicking an internal disposition, as in the *Marquetries*, the concrete 'slices of cake', and the polyhedron constellated with pieces of brass; the effect here resembles an inside-out geode, the crystals of which are centrifugal rather than centripetal. Consequently, the work mimics an agglomerate, as does *Le Pire* (The Worst, 1996–98), the sculpture in which pebbles

polished by millenarian ice flows are set in a large concrete dome. Duprat is aware of the deposits of fossilised caddis tubes found in Auvergne, those Oligocene deposits several dozen metres thick and known as indusial limestone. He is also aware of ‘puddingstone’, a detrital sedimentary rock made of a natural agglomeration of pebbles in a bed of stony cement.

Polished axe

Without losing all sense of direction, we return to prehistory. Here is a very recent work (Untitled, 2013). A Neolithic axe is stuck into a lump of clay covered with a layer of plastic that maintains the clay’s humidity. It becomes a miniature menhir (standing stone) on its pedestal, like a portmanteau word, combining the ancestral artist and the modern sculptor—the most ancient united with the most recent.

Polyurethane and flint

A polyurethane panel, usually used by florists as floral foam, stands on end to resemble a display cabinet and is studded with flints. This plays very similar chords to those of the polished axe: the same stylisation of presentation and the same anachronistic amalgam. The triviality of the medium contrasts with the respect customarily shown to ancient materials.

To understand this taste for anachronism, I shall end with *Le Salon bleu* (The blue Salon, 1984–85), a set of five Cibachrome photos enlarging and fixing the double-vision of lenticular postcards. A sense of wonder is evoked before this entirely imaginary interstellar blue. (The recent film *Gravity* reminds us that the space is black.) We recall articles by Robert Smithson, inventor of Land Art, in which he co-located prehistoric and sci-fi references. Duprat’s art similarly goes from the remotest geological time to technological futurism.

In its many different ways, Duprat’s work speaks of geology, geological thickness, and geological time—not historic time, which is so very short, but a much longer time on the planetary scale. Yet, it is never less than relevant to the present. Under the guise of speaking of natural things, so his art might seem reducible to a discourse of scientific entertainment, it invites us to become aware of the fact that man’s imprint on the Earth is indelible, and therefore projects us into a new age: the Anthropocene.

Archaeologist, entomologist, ethologist, geologist, inquisitive collector fascinated by the natural sciences and all kinds of optical and other strange objects, Duprat has no need to mimic the presentational arrangements of ‘Cabinets of Curiosities’; his art is not a commentary on the art institution! Much better for us, he understands the deeper meaning of *Wunderkammer*, or *meraviglia*. Each of his discoveries and his creations—though not all survive and every one the product of long preparation—adds a further marvel to the vast virtual totality of pluri-centenary collections of curio-creativity. Beyond appearances—for those who have eyes to see—his work carries within it existential questions upon our human condition and the beginnings of this third millennium.

The visit ends here. Thank you for your attention.