

Even in stone, there is sand

The town of Thonon-les-Bains has dedicated its third exhibition of the 2016-2017 season to Massinissa Selmani, whose work, shown at the Galerie de l'Etrave, continues to examine the topic of "le dessin dans tous ses états" or "drawing in all its forms". Since the French word "dessin" (drawing) comes from "dessein" (purpose or intention), no matter what materials are used, drawings are at the source of any intention to create a work of art. After being long relegated to the margins, drawing has now established itself for several years as a mode of expression in its own right. Therefore the idea of this exhibition is to showcase the current practice of drawing in the visual arts, above and beyond a narrow definition of the term.

Accepted collectively by the human, the societal and the media, Massinissa Selmani's art questions drawing as a medium for all sorts of materialities and procedures. It appeals to the strange, the bizarre, and the incongruous in order to expose the absurdity of the contemporary world.

Whatever the subject he tackles and the way in which he has decided to treat it, each of his works is in turn an opportunity to defuse its violence, to emphasize its futility, to exalt its fancy.

Adept at the postures familiar to Dadaism and to Surrealism, Massinissa Selmani likes to elude the agreed order, to establish another order, which is indefinable, unpredictable or even worrying, but which is nonetheless surprising. Cutting, collage, assembly, assembly and other ways of composing materials are at the service of a graphic output that goes from the plane to the volume, from the static to the animate, and from transparency to opalescence, in short, which conjugates drawing in the most unusual modes.

Everything is the result of a slowly developed, skilfully adjusted work, which leaves no space at random, as shown by the works gathered at the Galerie de l'Etrave, whatever their form or format.

On contemplating them, the eye finds itself in situations that disorient it so much that it appears as if everything is done to destabilize it, or even to lead it astray, considering its cognitive habits. But reason is not what governs the artist's imagination. On the contrary, all his care aims to bring into the world a whole series of humorous sketches whose incongruity is their prime factor and, hence, which inform a form of resolutely

singular, poetic visual language. Let us see the reference image reproduced on the cover of this issue of *Semaine*. It is taken from a series entitled *Relevés du dehors* (Surveys of the outside) of which the artist speaks, specifying that the function of drawing is first and foremost “documentary”.

Hence this idea of survey, like an archaeologist on the ground, on site. Selmani says he is particularly interested in press photography and uses it as an iconographic source. He quotes then Saul Steinberg, the famous draughtsman and illustrator of *New Yorker*, while admitting his passion for Honoré Daumier and his striking caricatures, or Paul Nougé, a figurehead of Surrealist photography. Let us go back to the reference image and ask ourselves: What do these two individuals do when faced with the blank paper? What is the relationship between them? What story can we associate them with? And what function is fulfilled by this stone, alone, there at the bottom of the image? Faced with Massinissa Selmani's drawings, it is irresistibly this type of question that comes to mind but, precisely, it is to their diversion that the artist applies himself. Not that his images are bereft of meaning,

but, strengthened by the idea of nonsense, they paradoxically create another meaning of a

different order. While one of the characters seems to want to push away something or someone he wants to get rid of, the other crosses the iconic field, dragging behind him, with his right arm high, a thread that disappears on the left flank of the image, without knowing what it is leading to. “The beautiful is always bizarre,” said Charles Baudelaire in his own time. Something of unprecedented beauty is at work in Selmani's art, which has nothing to do with conventional canons but which is derived from surprise, from wonderment, and forces us to rethink the question of the standard. Massinissa Selmani was born in 1980 in Algiers, and came to France in 2005 after studying science. He moved to Tours to study at the *Ecole Régionale des Beaux-Arts* art school, from where he graduated. Sensitive both to history and to his time and to all their vicissitudes, his life and his vision were really changed by his discovery of Daumier's *Passants* (Passers-by), which he saw “at last in real life” at the *Musée des Beaux Arts* in Lyon.

Since he comes from a modest background, one would be inclined to say that, in addition to all these more improbable humorous sketches, he shares with his elder a particular attention to other people and to the human condition. The installation entitled *Diar echems* (Sun-houses), made up of Post-Its, drawings and fictional press

clippings, refers directly to the riots that took place in Algiers in 2009, opposing the forces of order to a whole population that had set up makeshift huts on a football pitch to signify the lack of space from which the people were suffering. “This space, which was supposedly a place of play”, Selmani notes finely, “became a place where stakes were in play”. His work is filled with stakes and challenges of this type, since, in most cases, the artist’s work is not to be taken literally, at face value. Not without a certain humour or a grating of teeth. Signs of this are his small animated videos, his works which multiply transparencies, and even the titles of his works that are always disconcerting on first reading. One has then to just take the time to look carefully, to dissect, to thoroughly search what he shows us, to contemplate what he gives us to read, in order to appreciate the singular extent of its intention and of its powerful struggle with life.

One of the prime qualities of Massinissa Selmani’s drawing is his characteristic precision of line, in a formal tradition which goes back to the most distant times and which includes both Ingres and David Hockney.

However, the bringing into play of its presentation offers a whole range of possibilities that open up to him the most diverse fields of post-modern artistic work. Drawn, duplicated, printed, projected, etc., the drawing is not subjected to harsh tests but is considered as an echo of all contemporary modes of perception. Massinissa Selmani presents drawings in different series of varying numbers – such as the *Relevés du dehors* (Surveys of the outside), the *Maquettes* (Models) or the *Altérables* (Alterables) – but he also presents drawings on a plain sheet of paper. His work does not fail to strongly mark the spirit in all these shifts and variations of materials, procedures and compositions that distinguish his work. Its strength resides mainly in what it produces from an economy of means that allows the artist to hit his target more precisely, eliminating all the worthless superfluities of the anecdote to retain only the archetypal essential that belongs to all forms of language.

Beyond the incongruity, the oddity and the mystery of the visible, Massinissa Selmani’s work has a form of immediate drawing, of which the memory immediately retains the organization, because it has a secret side. It is obvious: “Even in stone, there is sand”.

philippe piguet,

Curator in charge of the exhibitions