

## **Xavier Veilhan - art exhibition - Brief Article**

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Xavier Veilhan is an inventor of inventions, an artist-engineer who seeks the split second just after creation, the fragile moment of hesitation when anything is possible. He seeks the instance of the prototype. Take his recent solo show at Le Magasin, which featured *La Ford T*, 1997-99, a sculptural partial reconstruction of the Ford Model T. Moving back and forth on a metal rail that calls to mind assembly lines, *La Ford T* consists only of the car's frame, steering mechanism, wheels, and motor; it is a blueprint, an outline--a calculated mix of industrial prototype and Minimalist sculpture.

On view as well was *Le Tour* (The potter's wheel), 1996, a scooter that can operate a pottery wheel, as well as *La Tour Eiffel*, a digital image of two men dressed in nineteenth-century garb, maps in hand, facing an Eiffel Tower that has either broken in two or has yet to be constructed. The bicycles in *Les Velos* (The bicycles), 2000, also seem to be in the early stages of some strange experiment: The first is whole, the second has no brakes, and the third is nothing but a frame mounted on tires, with no pedals. An absurd bricolage, a game of deconstruction: As artist and engineer, Veilhan salvages cultural products, such as the mountain bike (which is vogueish in France), dismantles them, and returns them to their imaginary beginnings.

Veilhan's oeuvre is as strong as that of almost any young French artist working today. In is quite legible, even if this fact is at times masked by the diversity of his protean, multicolored, often spectacular work, which integrates painting, machine, sculpture, and installation. Working with curators Yves Aupetitallot and Lionel Bovier, the artist decided against mounting a retrospective in Grenoble. In one sense, that's a shame: One might lament the absence of works like *Le Feu* (The fire), 1996, a long fireplace around which visitors can sit and a shining example of the "relational aesthetic" developed by curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud, or the enormous red rhinoceros made of polyester resin that Veilhan showed last year in the window of Yves Saint Laurent in New York. But the elimination of these pieces also enables the gaze to be renewed: Veilhan's mixing of early and later works, some made quite recently, traces his main themes, allowing the complexity of his formal constructions to emerge.

As if to underline the disorientation proper to Veilhan's work, its vague aura of unreality, the Magasin exhibition opens with a strange environment, *La Foret* (The forest), 1998-99, which

one passes through as if it were a thicket of trees. Made entirely of a synthetic substance that looks like brown felt, it constitutes a space where one can pause, lie down, stretch out, and invite one's eyes to venture into a new realm. Like *La Grotte* (The cave), 1998, a dark space (made of the same feltlike substance) that allows visitors to pass from one room to another, these installations seem to be metaphors for vision; they articulate the viewer's implication in the works and make Veilhan an architect of the gaze, an engineer of the eye. With *Les Grues* (The cranes), 1993, the visual mechanics grow even larger: Opening a door to the exhibition room causes three cranes to turn in circles while a steel ball slides on a metal rail along the sides of the room. "To look at a painting, to enter into a work," Veilhan explains to a visitor, "is to start a process. Vision isn't a passive act." At other times, vision is blurred, maintained in slight confusion: In front of large digital works such as *Le Dirigeable* (The dirigible), 1999, which offers scenes worthy of historical painting, or *La Plage* (The beach), 2000, a panorama made of little cards showing human figures on a beach, the eye is unsure whether it is seeing canvas, digital print, or photography. Like many artists of his generation, Veilhan plays with new technologies, confronting them with traditional forms from the history of art.

Another painter-like invention, a strange figurative work on canvas called *Gael et Michael*, 1999-2000, is in fact a collective work produced with three nonpainter friends (a stylist, an interior decorator, and a graphic designer). In order to reinvent painting, a hot topic in France these days, Veilhan felt he had to renew its mode of production; this led to his forming a studio à la Leonardo da Vinci. Once again, the figure of the engineer: Whether with improbable motor engines, viewing machines, collective canvases, or participatory installations, Xavier Veilhan is asserting himself as a formidable inventor of forms and behaviors. A civil engineer. An artist.

Translated from French by Jeanine Herman.

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