

Michel François

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Press Release

Xavier Hufkens is delighted to present Michel François' fifth exhibition with the gallery. François will be the last artist to exhibit in the gallery's location on 6 rue St-Georges, before the building undergoes a major refurbishment this year. Well-known for his interventionist approach to exhibition making, François' works can be read as a poignant meditation on the architectural destruction that will precede the rebuilding.

In the first room, the artist presents work from a new series of wall-mounted sculptures. From afar, it appears as though a sea of loops and curves has been sketched directly on the wall; as spontaneous as a doodle. Closer inspection reveals it to be a three-dimensional work in metal. The curvilinear 'drawing' is created from a single 95-metre-long ribbon of rolled steel. Yet, for all its linear grace, the metal possesses a powerful tensile strength and will instantly recoil unless firmly secured. François loops the ribbon across the frame, securing it at strategic points with strong magnets. As is typical of his work, the sculpture is the unpredictable result of a predetermined process. With great economy of means, he literally takes a 'line for a walk', without knowing in advance how the finished object will ultimately look. In this sense, the artist surrenders to the process and his material to create a piece that is as much about control (physically mastering the volatile, unpredictable steel), as it is about letting go (the material has a life of its own). The geometry of the frame precisely accords with the symmetry of the architecture, while the chaotic and almost irrepressible energy of the lyrical, free-flowing lines puncture the formal order. The wall is pierced with steel tubes, over which the sculpture is draped as if it had grown over organically. The steel-lined holes open up the room to the outside, a transparency that interrupts the protective gap between private and public.

Like the steel ribbon drawings, the perfectly aligned silver glass tubes as presented in the garden room also play on the notions of chance and risk. An evolution of earlier sculptures, an action is repeated: the artist walked across the line of neon lights, crushing them underfoot. The work is premised on the artist's physical intervention: a fractured line traced down the middle, like a pathway. Poetically, the mirrored tubes reflect the surroundings in various atmospheric conditions, capturing ever-shifting yet broken images of the white walls, glass windows, blue sky and bright green foliage of the garden. The neon lights or the mirrored tubes exemplify a theme that runs throughout Michel François' oeuvre, namely his desire to divert clearly identifiable forms from our everyday lives—typically objects that are discarded and regarded as worthless—and to reframe them as artworks that point to alternative and potential realities. In this case, the push and pull between creativity and destruction, perfection and imperfection and, in a possible allusion to wider environmental concerns, the broken images of the natural world reflected in obsolete man-made goods. The result of trampling on the tubes can never be known in advance.

In the adjoining double-height room, François exhibits a metal lattice that is suspended from the ceiling in a horizontal position, so that it floats in mid-air.

Xavier Hufkens

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The work is made from three aluminium offcuts: the seemingly redundant grids that are left behind after a more valuable commodity—rectangular plates—have been punched from metal sheets. These offcuts have been bent, twisted and augmented with layers of glistening aluminium leaf. Images of intersecting horizontal and vertical lines—grids, nets, lattices, masonry walls, cages—reappear throughout François' oeuvre. These works allude, in an oblique way, to current political realities surrounding borders that, for all their semblance of solidity and rigidity, are permeable structures through which both goods and people filter in both directions. For many, a border becomes a place to be reached at all costs, an object of desire in its own right, something infinitely precious—with the silver leaf in François' work pointing to this inflated value.

Including those not discussed here, the works in this exhibition engage, both metaphorically and materially, with the conditions of their setting. François has said that he thinks of his works as remnants, and that they have a limitless capacity for self-recycling. In the present exhibition, they dialogue with a space on the cusp of renovation, actuating a process of chaos, clearing and renewal.

Michel François (b. 1956, Saint-Trond, Belgium) lives and works in Brussels. He represented Belgium at the Venice Biennale with Ann Veronica Janssens in 1999 and his work was included in Documenta 9 (1992). BOZAR, Brussels, plans a large solo exhibition in 2022. Other museum exhibitions include *Nineteen thousand posters*, 1994–2016, Mac's Grand Hornu (2011) and *Frac île-de-France* (2016); *Pièce à conviction*, Middelheim Museum, Antwerp (2016); *Pieces of Evidence*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham (2013); *Plans d'évasion*, SMAK, Ghent and Iac Vileurbanne (2009–10); *Salon Intermédiaire*, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2002); *La Plante en nous*, Haus der Kunst, Munich (2000); Kunsthalle Bern (2000).

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Michel François' studio, Brussels, 2019
Courtesy the Artist and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels



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