

PHILIPPE MAYAUX “Dessins aminés”

13.05.2022 – 25.06.2022

The Work Has Turned
by Didier Ottinger

I - The sleep of reason

Chance and randomness have made their nest in Philippe Mayaux’s recent works. His series of paintings grouped under the title “Butterfly Divinities” (2018–2020) stated the terms clearly. All resulted from a technique that made the painter the birther of monsters whose appearance he only partially mastered. At best, he accompanied the shaping of his strange creatures, underlining and clarifying their contours, refining their relief. It is to the “stain” obtained by crushing a core of Judean asphalt on a scanner plate that his “divinities” owed their epiphany. ^{FIG.1}

This voluntary loss of control over the forms he produces was also achieved by Mayaux’s technique of blowing colour through a straw. These random projections gave rise, in 2020–2021, to *Through the breath blooming (A man is watching)*. ^{FIG.2}

These techniques that undermine the omnipotence of the subject, that shake his sovereign control over his art and the world, have inevitably engendered monsters. As early as the thirteenth century, considering those who took pleasure in interpreting the shapes offered to them by clouds or stones, Albertus Magnus observed that “matter forms a horrible monster.”¹ Later, when Leonardo da Vinci invited painters to let the stains that appear on walls serve as stimuli for their imagination, he specified that these forms would favour the appearance of “monstrous things,” of “devils.”² In *The Lives of the Artists*, Giorgio Vasari recounts how Piero di Cosimo “would sometimes stop to contemplate a wall at which sick people had for ages been aiming their spittle, and there he descried battles between horsemen, and the most fantastic cities and the most extensive landscapes ever seen: and he experienced the same with the clouds in the sky.”³ The historian detected in this efflorescence of “natural images” a form of pathology, the visible proof of the illness that affected Cosimo.

1 Quoted in Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, *L’Art de la tache*, Paris: Éditions du Limon, 1990, p. 107.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

3 Quoted in Karen Wright, Martin Gayford (eds.), *The Grove Book of Art Writing*, New York: Grove Press, 2000, p. 446.

In the modern period, the teratogenesis particular to “nature” has been given a manifest meaning. Victor Hugo gave his reworked stains the role of guardians of a world that no longer wished to owe anything to the clear, standardised beauties produced by reason. In order to comment on Hugo’s “automatic” drawings, Léon Daudet pretended to attribute them to a seventeenth-century Flemish painter (Pieter van der Borcht): “[...] how many times have I caught him contemplating the clouds, the smoke, the moiré of a pond, all the shifting whims of nature! Unfortunately, this way of doing things relegated him to the monstrous. The dreadful is his domain.”⁴

When Surrealism, updating Hugo’s romanticism, took its turn to fight against a rationalism that it considered stifling, Max Ernst in turn drew on the chaos of natural forms that fascinated Cosimo.

“On August 10, 1925, an unbearable visual obsession led me to discover the technique that allowed me to put this lesson of Leonardo’s extensively into practice. This was rubbing on uneven surfaces that had irresistibly attracted and held the painter’s attention. My curiosity aroused and amazed, I began using the same technique to question, quite indifferently, all sorts of materials that could be found in my visual field: leaves and their veins, the frayed edges of a sackcloth, the brushstrokes of a modern painting, a thread unwound from a reel, etc. My eyes then saw human heads, and I was able to see them. My eyes then saw human heads, various animals, a battle that ends in a kiss, rocks, the sea and the rain, earthquakes, the sphinx in its stable...”⁵

Once again, Ernst’s abandoning of his art to “nature” gave rise to a horde of monsters.

FIG.3 AND 4

II - Separation

The powerful dynamism of a “return upstream”⁶ is the foundation of Mayaux’s artistic project. Even if it takes carnivalesque or comical forms, his obsession with origins cements the facets of his art. The stories and myths developed by the presocratic philosophers to account for the birth of the world have been a constant inspiration to him, notably in creating the polyptych of the *Quatre Z’éléments* and a considerable number of other works. Following Empedocles, he saw the world as a game, a struggle, the harmony of heaven and earth, of water and fire. When he abandoned myth in favour of science, forgetting Empedocles for Stephen Jay Gould, Mayaux began to dream of the “primordial soup,” of those hybrid creatures fixed for eternity in the Burgess Shale, in those fossils that document the first explosion of life. In the beginning was openness to the possible, the universal graft, the marriage of opposites. FIG.5, 6 AND 7

For use in his art, Mayaux retains the chimerical principle of this primal soup. Translated into the form of collage, this fever of assembly, this “chimerism” is one of the most resilient principles of his practice. For Mayaux, the indistinction and permanent assimilation of opposing principles this implies also takes the form of “cannibalism.” His insatiable appeal to culinary metaphors, his apology for consumption – from the most delicate dishes to the “parts” of his *belle* - impose themselves as a vision of the world; culinary art as the method for a unifying project. FIG.8

Appropriating the other, eating what is different: all are ways back to the original androgyny. FIG.9 AND 10

III - Crisis of culture

The illustrated account of Marcel Duchamp’s death, *Vivre et laisser mourir* or *La Fin tragique de Marcel Duchamp*, painted by Gilles Aillaud, Eduardo Arroyo and Antonio Recalcati in 1965, caused a memorable outcry. That a band of ruffians should dare to attack the man whose name was synonymous with the avant-garde was inadmissible. Blinded by the factual imagery offered by the polyptych, few took the time to read the text penned by Aillaud to explain its meaning. As much, if not more, than the artist and his posterity, what the name of Duchamp signified to Aillaud was an attitude towards the

4 Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, *L’Art de la tache*, op. cit. 113.

5 Max Ernst, “Au-delà de la peinture,” *Cahiers d’Art*, nos. 6-7, 1936, p. 28.

6 I take this term from René Char’s collection of the same name, *Retour amont*, published in 1966.

world. For him, Duchamp embodied the highest degree of hubris of the human feeling of power and domination. In Aillaud's words, Duchamp is the one who formulates, at its highest degree of intensity, a thought "which has underlain, ever since its origin, the conquering enterprise of Western science, the will of man to 'make himself master and possessor of nature.'"⁷ Later, Aillaud extrapolated the reproaches he had addressed to Duchamp's followers: "The threat that looms behind this generalised Formalism is an immense dream of integration, of participation in the life of modern bourgeois technical society. *We are witnessing the subjugation of vital energies by culture*, whose entire ambition is to be in tune with the intoxicating novelties of science and industry."⁸ FIG.11

When Philippe Mayaux stepped onto the art scene in the early 1980s, the gigantic statue of Duchamp still blocked the horizon. Mayaux negotiated so skilfully, blurred the lines so well, that he was awarded the Marcel Duchamp prize.

In the rooms of the Centre Pompidou, he paid Marcel a perverse tribute. The Promethean artist who, in Gilles Aillaud's eyes, embodied the values of a reasoning era, drunk with "progress" and enamoured of *machinismo*, did not "fit" with Mayaux's "regressive" materialism. On the surface, he multiplied complacent quotations: he filled display cases with ready-made casts, reconstituted the "bachelor" band, designed optical machines. Viewed a little more closely, there was something a little fishy about his homage. His "ready-mades" were indeed "junk», literally the assembly of scraps, the collage of waste.

Like Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, the thirteen little pictures presented by Mayaux superimpose the name of a tree – *Birch*, *Yew*, etc. – over the image of the bark they take as their model.

In 1934, Duchamp collected in his *Green Box* the "Notes" he had written two decades earlier for his *Large Glass*. The publication of the "Notes" confirmed that for Duchamp text and image were inseparable. He added that words allowed him to project his works into "more verbal" – that is, more ideal, more conceptual – territory.

As a true heir of symbolism, Duchamp imagined an art trained along the azimuth, which aspired to reach the world of ideas. Nothing of the sort with Mayaux! By bringing the name of a tree closer to its image, he locked in the meaning of his paintings, condemning us to the impasse of their tautology. But it was the central work that gave the exhibition its title which most accurately reflected Mayaux's relationship to Duchamp's work. "À mort l'infini!": Death to Infinity! From his *Large Glass* to the ultimate *Given...*, Duchamp was constantly positioning himself as a continuator of the perspectivists, as the heir to an optical and mathematical system centred on – infinity. In his recent study of the different systems of representation of the world, *Les Formes du Visible*, Philippe Descola sees the invention of perspective as the moment of a "separation». "Perspective allows for unprecedented experimentation with the phenomenal world, which has suddenly become modern nature as a reality instituted by a human agent and henceforth traversed by the distinction between a subject and an object."⁹ As will be clear, the originality and strength of Mayaux's work lie in his insistence on rediscovering the laws of continuity. His assault on the infinite is a sign of his rejection of a heritage on which is based a modernity reduced to its passion for science and technology. The title Mayaux has given to his exhibition sounds like a war cry. Against his "conceptual" masters, he brandishes the banner of punk piracy, that of a *no future* elevated to the rank of a dialectical weapon, opposed to the inveterate idealism of Duchamp's work.

Mayaux claims infamy for his work. FIG.12

The degradation he applies to his art can be carnivalesque, can put a grotesque image on a scientific thesis – witness *Le Chaînon manquant* (1994) and *Neurone japonais* (2001). It can evoke the inversion of head and belly, transforming love into an ode to cannibalism. It can take the form of an identification with the naughtiness to which the age condemned his art. Like Philippe Perrot, who adopted dog repellent as sole background for his paintings, Mayaux reports that for many years, in order to assume the heresy inherent in his practice as a painter, he used toxic pigments. FIG.13

7 *Vivre et laisser mourir*, quoted in Didier Ottinger (ed.), *Gilles Aillaud. La jungle des villes*, exh. cat., Monaco, Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles, 14 July-9 September 2001, and Musées de Châteauroux, 22 September-30 December 2001, Arles, Actes Sud, 2001, p. 33.

8 Quoted in Francis Parent and Raymond Perrot, *Le Salon de la Jeune Peinture. Une histoire 1950-1983*, Paris: Patou, 2016, p. 60.

9 Philippe Descola, *Les Formes du visible*, Paris: Seuil, 2021, p. 459.

IV - Cro-magnon here we come! FIG.14

If Mayaux's choice of figurative painting at the beginning of the 1980s might have seemed "retrograde" in the eyes of his art school teachers in Nice, his recent interest in "native" forms and his taste for randomness and chance make him suspect of a regression that is even more serious, even more fraught with consequences.

On several occasions, he has already flirted with the "spirit of the cave." He has been fascinated by "grotesques," by the archaeological vertigo of an associative delirium. It was by a most "objective" coincidence that the discovery of antique grotesques was the result of archaeological research carried out in Nero's Domus Aurea, buried several metres underground. What was thought to be a cave gave its name to this Roman décor. Surrendering his images to the caprices of a fickle ink, Mayaux ventures into older caves. The regression linked to this exploration was denounced in its time by a Marxism that summed up the faith of an era in the progress promised by science and technology. Referring to the stage of a culture under the sway of nature, Friedrich Engels evoked a "relic [...] of what we would today call stupidity. At the base of these various false representations of nature, of the constitution of man himself, are spirits, magical powers, etc."¹⁰ Mayaux has always espoused this "stupidity." Faced with the *futuristic* insouciance of modern heroes, Sigmund Freud had portrayed a more complex humanity. "But have we a right to assume the survival of something that was originally there, alongside of what was later derived from it? [...] and yet we find the simple forms still in existence to-day. The race of the great saurians is extinct and has made way for the mammals; but a true representative of it, the crocodile, still lives among us."¹¹ Mayaux is one of these "great saurians". The irony with which he treats science, the laws of evolution, the rules of a perspective that signals a mastery of the world is part of a project that could not be more coherent, a project that, beyond the anecdote of a fantastic iconography, clarifies his links with Surrealism.

After its foundation in 1924, Surrealism turned to a chimerical Orient, that of a Chinese art chosen for its "use value." In 1939, André Masson described the virtues he attributed to Oriental art: "Various calamities seem to strike the art of this time. On reflection, they can be summed up in a single malaise that one might be tempted to call 'lost unity'. [...] In contrast to Greek civilisation, which exuded an aesthetic and philosophical will, the structure of contemporary civilisation is based on science, which is dispersion itself."¹² Traditional Chinese painting offered Masson a reservoir of techniques open to randomness, the paths of a submission to chance capable of challenging the omnipotence of the Cartesian subject: "Spitting ink like the monks of the Chán sect, throwing his cap impregnated with colour at the face of his painting." He was passionate about "painting without bones" – that of the "spreading stain, once practiced by the masters Sesshu and Tao K'i."¹³ FIG.15

Updating the Japanese sumi-e technique, allowing unthought-of forms to come to him, Mayaux revives the most immemorial cave art. "At Altamira, rocky protuberances offer the relief of a bison; in the Covalanas cave, a rocky spur represents the back of a bovid; at Niaux, the circular holes produced by water drops were used to represent the eyes and wounds of a bison,"¹⁴ comments Jean-Claude Lebensztejn. Clarifying the meaning of this birth of art, the historian concludes with an analysis applicable to Mayaux: "The first work of art, if this expression means anything, was therefore not a work of art. It came from outside: from nature itself."¹⁵ FIG.16

10 Lebensztejn, *op. cit.* p. 106.

11 Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, tr. James Strachey, Norton, 2010, p. 16.

12 Françoise Will-Levaillant, *André Masson. Le Rebelle du surréalisme*, Paris: Hermann, 1976, p. 13.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 173.

14 Lebensztejn, *op. cit.* p. 109.

15 *Ibid.*



FIG.1
Philippe Mayaux
Butterfly Divinity (Dagona), 2018-2020
Mixed media on canvas, 27 × 35 cm
Courtesy galerie Loevenbruck, Paris



FIG.2
Philippe Mayaux
Through the breath blooming (A man is watching), 2020-2021
Acrylic on canvas, 41 × 33 cm
Courtesy galerie Loevenbruck, Paris



FIG.3
Max Ernst
«The Repast of Death» / «Le Repas du mort», Natural History / Histoire naturelle, ca. 1925, Paris, Galerie Jeanne Bucher, 1926. Edition: 300. Plate XXVIII, from the portfolio of 34 phototypes after frottage 32.5 × 49.6 cm



FIG.4
Victor Hugo
«Figures that the peasants make when they see the sarregousets,» Les Travailleurs de la mer, 1864-66
Pen, brush, brown ink and wash, reserves, 27.7 × 19.5 cm
Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Manuscrits, NAF 247451, fol. 59v°

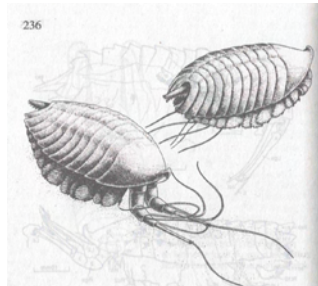


FIG.5
Drawings by Marianne Collins for Stephen Jay Gould's *Wonderful Life* (1989), from the French edition (*La Vie est belle*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1991



FIG.6
Philippe Mayaux
Chimère, Queueueue, 2006
Unique cibachrome print, 75 × 100 cm
Courtesy galerie Loevenbruck, Paris



FIG.7
Philippe Mayaux
Chimère, Zootoutou (Gentil), 2006
Unique cibachrome print, 75 × 100 cm
Courtesy galerie Loevenbruck, Paris



FIG.8
Philippe Mayaux
Savoureux de toi, 2006
Painted synthetic plaster, porcelain, resin, stainless steel, 35 × 40 × 35 cm
Private collection



FIG.9
Philippe Mayaux
Cheddar mortadella cosmos, 2005
Tempera on canvas, 24 × 41 cm
Private collection

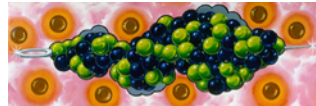


FIG.10
Philippe Mayaux
La Cosmogonie des abîmes, 1995-1996
Acrylic on canvas, 50 × 150 × 3 cm
Paris, Centre national des arts plastiques



FIG.13
Philippe Perrot
La Sœur inversée, 2007
Oil and antiseptics on canvas, 80 × 100 cm
Private collection.



FIG.11
Gilles Aillaud, Eduardo Arroyo and Antonio Recalcati
Vivre et laisser mourir ou La Fin tragique de Marcel Duchamp (detail), 1965
Oil on canvas. Polyptych: 162 × 992 cm, consisting of 8 pieces: 162 × 114 cm and 163 × 130 cm each
Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

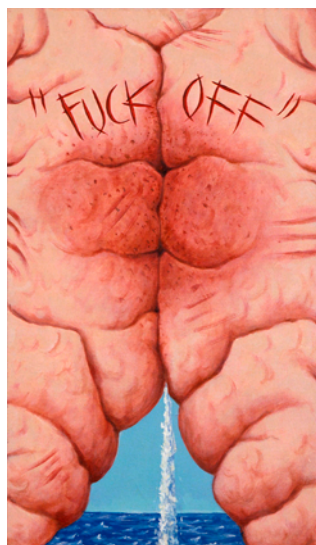


FIG.12
Philippe Mayaux
Fuck off, 2000
Acrylic on canvas, 46 × 27 cm
Private collection



FIG.13
Philippe Perrot
La Sœur inversée, 2007
Oil and antiseptics on canvas, 80 × 100 cm
Private collection.

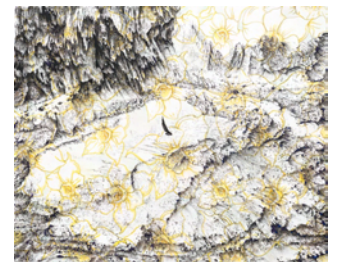


FIG.14
Philippe Mayaux
Le Dénî, 2022
Carbon black and pastel on paper, 122 × 148 cm
Courtesy galerie Loevenbruck, Paris.



FIG.15
André Masson
The Blood of Birds, 1956
Tempera, sand and feathers on canvas, 75 × 75 cm
Paris, Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne



FIG.16
Final mask, 13,000 BCE
Cave painting, Altamira cave Santillana del Mar, Altamira National Museum and Research Centre, Cantabria, Spain

Didier Ottinger, "The Work Has Turned," 2022, illustrations

Photographic credits:
FIG.1, 2, 8, 9, 14. © ADAGP, Paris. Photo Fabrice Gousset, courtesy Loevenbruck, Paris. **FIG.3.** © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. **FIG.4.** © Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fonds Victor Hugo. **FIG.5, 13.** © Tous droits réservés. **FIG.6, 7, 12.** © ADAGP, Paris. Photo Marc Domage, courtesy Loevenbruck, Paris. **FIG.10.** © ADAGP, Paris. Photo I. Kalkkinen. **FIG.11.** © ADAGP, Paris. Photographic Archives Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. **FIG.15.** © ADAGP, Paris. Photo Centre Pompidou, Mnam-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / image Centre Pompidou, Mnam-CCI. **FIG.16.** © Photo Pedro Saura.