

## **Stardust**

The beetle was venerated in ancient Egypt; called Khepri, it means “being”, from *kheper*, meaning ‘to come into existence’ or ‘come into the world’. The beetle lays its eggs in animal droppings which it rolls into a ball and buries in the ground. After passing through the different stages from the egg to the maggot and then to the motionless larva, living in a corpse-like state, a beetle finally emerges from the cocoon. These metamorphoses of the insect which then flies towards the light symbolize a new cycle. In nature, nothing is lost, everything is retrieved and recycled. The Egyptians who wore the Khepri as an amulet were well aware of its role as a fertilizer. Might these beetles not be the metaphor of the artwork?

Running counter to this sanitized day and age, Lionel Sabatté’s studio gathers the dust deposited by time; the atmosphere is full of particles which are sometimes made visible by oblique shafts of light. The artist works in an alchemical way, by turning our waste into mysterious creatures. The question of origin and life-cycle, and the birth of a form in formlessness, lies at the heart of his work.

## **Animal Man**

Wielding a broom and a shovel, Lionel Sabatté collects dust in the Paris metro. From those bagfuls of rubbish, left by flows of human beings in those underground passages, he would create *La Meute/The Pack*. This work was exhibited in the Galérie de l’Evolution, in the Natural History Museum, in 2011, marking the beginning of his recognition. The artist works with series and families: Wolves, Sheep, Billy Goats, Insects. A rod of scrap iron is turned into a skeleton which he covers with dust and hair. Each sculpture corresponds to a month of collecting. “My sculptures are the incarnation of patterns of behaviour; the wolves refer to the pack.” The *Sourire poussière/Dust Smile* series is made up of balls of dust from which the eye of a hybrid being looks out--“it is as if it were looking at us with all its dust”.

## **Billy Goat Man**

Lionel Sabatté is fascinated by the intensity and simplicity of that bygone archaic time incarnated by parietal art—cave paintings. Members of the deer family resulted from this, as did the Billy Goat, whose powerfully muscled upper body contrasts with its fragile legs. Strength and vulnerability exist together in those depictions. During his residency in Beijing, Lionel Sabatté was struck by the consistency of compressed and compacted bricks made of black Pu-Er tea. With those leaves he made these billy goats, herbivorous creatures formed by the matter they feed on.<sup>1</sup> In Sichuan, Yunnan, Tibet and Burma (now Myanmar), Pu-Er tea has been a trading currency since Antiquity, with its virtue of being beneficial for the health making it a

precious gift.

### **Insect Man**

From taxidermists, Lionel Sabatté retrieves butterflies whose wings have been damaged, thus saving them from the dustbin. The series of *Papillons métissés/ Crossbred Butterflies* with their brightly coloured scales belong to the hybrids. Fitted with a tiny translucent human figure, made with finger nail clippings, they incarnate the crossing of two species, insect and human. Another mutant creature, the small white owl, almost mother-of-pearl-like, is made entirely with “foot skin” coming from his beloved. The human waste of society, like the whole living world, trees, insects, and butterflies, has the same value.

### **Animal Tree Man**

Curves and twists in wood inspire these forms. A whole series has come into being from branches of dead trees, like this crocodile covered with reflecting scales made from one euro-cent coins. A symbol of luck in Europe, for the artist these coins give material form to the circulation of a currency which is passed from hand to hand. Silver fish, other mutant creatures, are covered with Chinese coins, uniting the two reflecting elements: water and metal.

### **Plant Man**

“A flower grows in dung”, quoth Master Eckhardt. Month after month Lionel Sabatté collects bits of dead skin and finger nail clippings to transform these residual materials into translucent petals, at the end of a process of sterilization and rebirth. Seen from a distance, a white rose shines with a diaphanous beauty, while closer up the spectator discovers pieces of dead skin. These hybrid creatures are both precious and fragile, thus incarnating a new mutant life.

Magic acts involve hair, finger nail clippings, saliva and blood, because they retain the aura and energy of their owners. These remains of bodies are like a prolongation of the sense of ubiquity of the person who is present, though absent. Lionel Sabatté’s praxis also calls to mind the cult of relics, when body fragments, incarnating saints, are exhibited simultaneously in several different places. Their powers are based on the belief that each parcel has an original sacred content.

Likewise, the physical and psychic bodily character of Lionel Sabatté’s anthropomorphic trees<sup>2</sup> creates “a real presence” in the sense that they refer the viewer to his own most private and disconcerting bodily character. This material experience comes somewhere between the self-image in its entirety and bodily remains: what grows and has to be cut, its scraps and its organic losses which refer to the alteration of our body.

## Mountain Man

In 2016, Lionel Sabatté was awarded a residency at Saint-Ange, on the outskirts of Grenoble, at the foot of the Vercors range. A sweeping view of the mountain unfolded in front of the studio window. While preparing firewood to heat the residence, he had the idea of conserving those remnants of heat, which he called *Fragment du Vercors*. They incarnate the experience of that place in the middle of nature: outside and inside, cold and heat, the tiny and the immense.<sup>3</sup> *Charbons fertiles* and *Fragment de cimes* [*Fertile Charcoal, Fragment of peaks*] are the result of bits of burnt wood which the artist transforms into Japanese landscapes with very small figures, made with nail clippings. This minimalist landscape invites viewers to meditate, and raise cosmic questions.

Olive trees which died during the winter of 1954 (a date corresponding to Abbé Pierre's appeal) and which the artist managed to recycle, are flowering again. We experience nothing less than revulsion when we discover that their petals are made with small bits of skin. Similarly, when we disgustedly throw out our own remains, are we not rejecting human beings, plants and animals, the whole living world which we are nevertheless part of?

## Micro- and Macrocasm

Let us quote Leonardo da Vinci: "If you look at walls soiled with many stains or made with multicoloured stones, with the idea of imagining some scene in them, you will find there the analogy of landscapes with a décor of mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains and hills of every sort." This imaginary procedure also applies to Lionel Sabatté who pours oil paint onto a canvas laid directly on the floor. Puddles of paints explode and expand, comparable to organic microsystems. A flow of oil paint is transformed into diffuse trails, and disparate splashes create little islands of colours. A tension is played out between essence of turpentine, a lean material, which works on the surface, while the oil paint, a fatty material, produces masses. His area of experimentation gives rise to chance, then he intervenes and lends a coherence to this world which, with his brush, he animates with flashes of light, and eyes. This at once uncontrolled and controlled process may ruin the canvas, or, conversely, bring it out. In each instance, he flirts with catastrophe. A shapeless stain is transformed into a figure giving the spectator his active role in the reading of the picture. Some images created by an accidental resemblance or by pure projections on the part of the spectator, are so many signs of a world which questions our own way of looking at things.

The potential of the paint evokes plains with furrows and hollows akin to dream stones, a natural geometry of ramifications. Arborescences and cracks cross the space of the canvas making a structure of the living world visible. What space-time is he grasping? A world of contractions, pulsations, acceleration and dilatation which forms new constellations, referring as much

to the world as to our organism.

### **Living Islands**

In the drawings with a metal powder base, oxidization transforms the stain of paint into a matter close to rust. The rock formations and at the same time the blue and green metallic shininess of these fortuitous images suggest to Lionel Sabatté images of birds, alive or dead, such as those known on Reunion Island, where he grew up. His painting brings together a set of tensions. A monad—paint stain—shatters the continuum and the surface. Many stories of intersection and co-existence between all species then rise up.

Lionel Sabatté's world is incorporated in the category called the "Informe" or "Amorphous" by Georges Bataille.<sup>4</sup> It thus wavers between the top and the bottom, the figure on a human scale and the infinitely small world of remnants. Through very precise and meticulous long-term work, Lionel Sabatté transforms the "gobs" and waste of the daily round into Chimaerae. Certain creatures seem as if washed up on the edge of a beach after an oil slick. Others, whitish, ochre, brown or ashen in colour, emaciated bestiaries, merge with the earth, thereby expressing a camouflage strategy. In our so-called anthropocene geological era, when our planet is becoming less and less inhabitable, our survival is becoming a central issue. Lionel Sabatté's work is a vanitas, nothing less than a "still life" which is part and parcel of the life-death cycle, ephemeral time and cosmic time. But his creatures still talk of survival.

### **Ghost Man**

The recent exhibition *Human Condition*,<sup>5</sup> which was held in a disused hospital in Los Angeles, announces a new chapter in Lionel Sabatté's work: human figures emerge, whom he calls his tribe. The head with its empty gaze is worked in quite a realistic way. The iron rods are akin to a three-dimensional drawing which defines both the void and the volume of the body, made up of a shrewd mixture of plant fibres, bits of cement, turmeric and pigment. For the artist: "Spicing cement is to make it more living, we are in an animist world." The body, on the other hand, is supported on bits of scrap iron whose movement is like a drawing calling to mind an interior view with its networks and its veins. A fragile equilibrium between lines and mass is enacted here. The whitish, ashen colour of the cement, as well as the skeleton, are in fact akin to ghosts.

### **Naked Life**

Lionel Sabatté collects the layer of dust and shapes it like clay. These particles of existence are a metaphor for loam, our humus in the sense of the Greeks' "naked life", which we must urgently become aware of. His paintings are akin to the single-celled organism whose networks conjure up both the

extracellular and the intratissular world, a geography of traces. Different scales overlap between the aerial perspective and the geological strata, cosmic breaks which talk of the micro- and macrocosm. They are Landscape Bodies inasmuch as they incarnate that interface between species and their environment.

One of Lionel Sabatté's earliest sculptures is made of a small ball of hair. It refers to those most private objects of our body. For the child, his remains are part of him. If he becomes separated from them, it is as if he were losing a part of his body, his treasure. Likewise, Lionel Sabatté harvests and transforms this quantity of dust, residue of circulation, and uses it to make fantastic creatures, hybridizations resulting from human passages. These living particles contain the genetic map of every passer-by. Lionel Sabatté's oeuvre is at once a reflection about our collective loam and a perspectival treatment of the transhumant. Today's tendency promotes a sanitized, digital and 3D art flirting with the luxury industry: conversely, Lionel Sabatté is still working with his own hands, shedding light on the humus which binds together all the beings living together on the planet.

« *We are all stardust, because all the nuclei of the atoms forming us were created at the centre of dead stars several billion years ago.* » Hubert Reeves.

**Jeannette Zwingenberger, 2018**

- 1-Exhibition, *Échafaudage d'un printemps*, Yishu 8, Beijing, China / Curated by Huang Du, 2015
- 2-Anthropomorphism, here, should be understood in its biological substance and not in the fixed image of its figure. See Jeanette Zwingenberger, exhibition catalogue: *L'Homme-paysage. Visions artistiques du paysage anthropomorphe entre le XVIe et le XXIe siècle* 15.10. 2006-14.1. 2007 at the Palais de Beaux-Arts de Lille, Paris, Somogy 2006.
- 3-Exhibition, Lionel Sabatté, *Tectonique des mutations*, Musée des Beaux arts, Grenoble, 2016, Curated by Inge Linder-Gaillard
- 4-Magazine *Documents* (1929-31)
- 5-The Hospital, Los Angeles, USA 1.10– 30.11.2016, Curated by John Wolf