

Lionel Sabatté, A Cosmogony of the Non-human

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In describing animal figures and mysterious beings, and by giving life to flowering plants and organic landscapes, Lionel Sabatté's compositions are ambiguous inasmuch as they constantly refer to a figurative representation of the living world, while a more prosaic observation suggests that what is only ever involved is emaciated carcasses, and protuberant forms or allusions wielding an extreme tension together with things wasting away. Life thus—inevitably—goes hand-in-hand with death, although the association seems to function less in an allusive and distant way than in the mode of concomitance.

So what, among other things, merits particular attention in Lionel Sabatté's oeuvre is probably the eloquence with which it manages to combine opposing orders. A whole semantics of ambivalence actually comes into this work, to the point where it forms its most essential grid. In an obvious way, first and foremost, when, using materials reputed to be inert and crude—in particular dust, finger nails, dead skin, metal and concrete—fantastic creatures come to life, dead branches bud once more, and rocky masses sketch enigmatic smiles, in such a way that an idea of the living world comes to terms with the inanimate, while a spark of vigour fuels deceased bodies. Then, in a latent way, when a form of fascination stems from the depiction of Lilliputian characters, spell-binding unicorns, sovereign swans and wolves on the lookout, even when their consistency polarizes incomprehensible fears, which the marvellous character contrasts with an indiscernible anxiety. From then on, among the issues raised by such work, we find that of the closeness between an order of things—a conception of nature—and a certain idea of the non-human. What is certainly involved by these wild and sinuous postures, like these billy-goats ready to charge their assailant, or these prone reptiles, their mouths agape, if it is not a way of calling into question a perception of the world that has made man the lord of creation? Do these remnants of matter from which at times hostile creatures result, at once organic and industrial, vestiges of past fortunes, assert the need to return to fundamental times, times without human beings?

An initial reading of this work might involve putting forward the hypothesis of a form of unity in the manner of incorporating forms of antagonism. So, through the works, we would witness the development of a unified and coherent system based on which a reading of the world, with its

phenomena and diverse manifestations, is rendered possible. In tandem, the visual preoccupations highlighted by the artist, attesting to an interest in worlds which escape human reality, but also containing a mythical or even magical dimension, seem to constitute a cosmogony which introduces mysterious forces, more capable of regulating man's and nature's future, by contributing a global base to universal dynamics.

The paintings, for example, suggest bodies that are prey to evolving forces, as if exacerbated by elementary life instincts, a desire for growth played out on a cellular scale and reflecting invisible but basic processes. Sometimes, the arabesques allow us to identify wings similar to those of dragonflies, even if they more frequently call to mind the tentacles of jellyfish, presumed poisonous. Similarly, knots appear conjuring up eyes set wide apart while a central part suggests the blooming of a flower with translucent petals. Heightened by streaks and runs spreading in every direction, these paintings nevertheless articulate backgrounds scattered with unevennesses in the foreground, which are like withered and shattered masses, explosions reflecting an excess which might, for a while, embrace a time of ephemerality, a time informed by an inner visual wish and included in the "twofold movement, contradictory but indissociable, of the upsurge and destruction of the form."¹ So these visual blooms are related to microscopic enlargements re-enacting microbiological views, while the evocation of a microbial aspect summarizes natural fears with regard to ills which we cannot see. Corpuscles join together, contaminate one another, referring to a visual rhetoric to do with withering and coming apart, which is to say the highlighting of primitive organisms and chemical substances bearing a form of nuisance. The intangible anxiety which here results from a dissociation of perception with rationality seems to ring out with a notion of chaos; a notion which we know, since Antiquity, can be associated with a conception of order, renewal and creativity.

As a result, the constant allusion to do with life and its basic dynamics simultaneously makes way, in these paintings, for a consciousness about the degeneration forming a global inertia, which is capable of assimilating contradictions rather than referring them back-to-back. Recalling that an "organism lives only through the ceaseless labour during which the molecules of cells deteriorate",² we can note that that which has to do with vitalist effervescence is, in the end of the day, reabsorbed in a simultaneous weakening, as soon as the proliferating processes witness, at the same time, the need to re-establish the balance of the organism they form, just like their surrounding system, on the scale of the species.

This idea of balance, of harmony perhaps, is based on the cycles of the living world, and is, on the face of it, confirmed by the artist's constant need to carry out recommencements by injecting life into forms of inert matter. An idea of going backwards, perhaps back to zero, in fact goes hand in hand with the different works, as is indicated, moreover, by an overall aesthetic which has something rudimentary, almost old-fashioned, about it. The wolves made of dust quote bygone times when man still did not have a hold on things; some creatures started to crawl, as if hailing from prehistoric times; the seething effluvia of the paintings call to mind the primitive soup theory, the broth from which life germinated; the anthropomorphic shapes, for their part, emaciated and incomplete, their gaze vacant, do not close their eyes on the world, but turn towards the interior of a soul at least as vast as the Cosmos; in mentioning an original feverishness, their lumpy stature, which results from calcinations, incorporates them within an imagination of survival, as if they had withstood a most fearsome cataclysm, making them beings which, by having defied death, conduct themselves beyond all humanity.

A balance would be achieved, as a proper return to the order of things, even if it behoves us to add a nuance by considering a notion of *permanence* operating through successive and continual transformations rather than through the idealized maintenance of an unchanging and fixed posterity. The balance of the living world is actually conceived in a temporal and cyclical manner; it therefore rejects any idea of eternity—another notion asserting perpetuity by being opposed to the ephemeral—but in a different way: “the eternal is separate from the temporal, while the constant is displayed *through* things that change. The *constant* is what does not *vary*, within variation; the *eternal* is what, as being, does not *become*.”³ Otherwise put, in Lionel Sabatté's work, what is involved is not so much a subscription to a primordial return by referring to ancient times, as envisaging the maintenance of a much larger dynamic for which the unvarying factor is just a stage of the variation, and vice versa. The seasonal cycle, conjured up here and there by the artist, is, in this sense, exemplary, because it depicts processes of succession—hence of differentiation—while at the same time keeping an overall grid recurrent, year after year.⁴ So the apathetic old tree stumps, petrified during the winter of 1954, which are given the power of flowering in the form of olive trees regenerated by dead skins, magnify the buds of spring while evoking both tenacity and immortality. As a result, it is better to see here a gesture consisting in triggering a circumstantial *moment*, an “occasion” inscribed in a succession favouring a reality with no describable beginning or anticipated end, rather than an act of

resurrection involving a nostalgic rehabilitation of pastoral times. Restoring life, here, is not a way of thwarting cosmic plans, nor is it a way of countering the determinism of death by aspiring to eternal youth; giving back life is more the act whereby one intermediary stage among others is slipped into the continual flow of sequences between lives and deaths, pushing back as far as possible ideas of commencement and finiteness, in favour of a capture “by the middle”.

It is in this respect, likewise, that an idea prevails about circulation in certain works, like the billy goats made of black tea hailing from the province of Yunnan in China, which become the reflection of trading deals between Asia and the West. Similarly, emaciated beings using one euro-cent coins made of copper-plated steel, the ones that we end up putting into piles, and about which one can only presume that they have had countless prior lives, call for an economy stemming from ceaseless flows of exchanges. If this idea of monetary circulation undoubtedly makes the cyclical principles of life reverberate, the fact of incarnating them by means of animal figures makes it possible to attribute a personality, if not intentions, to unfathomable phenomena. What is nevertheless surprising is the need to visually translate them by means of what is reputedly wild and hostile, immediately getting rid of the domestic animal, “familiar and familial”,⁶ as if to endow oneself with an idea of the subordination of nature by man, or, at the very least, to signify a gap with civilization.

With Lionel Sabatté, however, the composition of a kind of dichotomy between nature and culture is contradicted. The circular dynamics, and more generally the artist’s *modus operandi*, are in fact part of the development of a metaphysics of *creation* which is separate from anthropomorphic preoccupations, in particular with regard to the *sacred* in the Catholic religion, by the concealment of the themes of Genesis, Eternity, and the Last Judgment, for example. As a fundamental gesture and as an act prior to everything, the creation is thus rejected; at most, it competes with a visual creation which, it just so happens, consists in inoculating life—at the very least in depicting it in a peripheral way, akin to a number of ancestral narratives, in particular that of the Golem, where we note the incompleteness, the tensions between creations and procreation, between nature and artifice, between the creator and the Creator. This idea of artifice is especially emphasized in the structures supporting each one of the sculptures, in particular by leaving raw materials apparent—as with these spindly and slightly rusty metal frames, and these blistered lumps of greyish dust, and these flows of shapeless concrete—in such a way that the evocation of the living and the natural is somewhat paradoxical. To a much

greater extent, not only does each one of the sculptures seem to be governed by a form of incompleteness, an idea of non-fulfilment which carries within it countless embryonic futures, but we are also witnessing an evaded depiction of life, as soon as the configurations and postures in most cases convey the immanence of a tipping point: this nestling opens its wings and sings at the top of its voice with its eyes half closed, this snake twists and turns in a compulsive way; one is getting ready to take flight, the other bites its tail. As for the paintings, life is suggested based on capacities calling for a coming agitation from which results an impression of latency, an indiscernibility between the moving and the fixed.

So there is no dichotomy between nature and culture, but the composition of a lay cosmogony which, by dissolving the issue of the Origins and the End, remains quite similar to those developed by primitive societies having no idol other than nature and its cycles. If the bestiality here highlighted seems, first of all, to pinpoint a non-human world, a visual intervention of the mainspring of that of Lionel Sabatté, imitating life but always by complying with civilization, incorporating artifices and monetary tributes, rules out the possibility of a world exclusively ruled by natural laws, which is to say a world without man. Conversely, the narrative of man without a world, transcendent and separated from everything, postulating his mastery over all things,⁷ in particular in the context of technophobic arguments stating his shedding of responsibility and his indifference, invariably leads to the threat of a ubiquitous end. The fact is, by way of example, that if we consider the ecological issue which, in a certain way, remains between the lines in the artist's programme, it has to be said that the anxieties stem from *the impossibility for man to consist with other beings*.⁸ Anxieties which echo these restless creatures and these not very affable materials, not because by possessing place, progeniture and food, it would be necessary to remain on the defensive, but because it is necessary to separate man from his projection of the world by reinstating him among non-humans.⁹ So, by having neither language nor technology, and making vitalist somersaults and visceral agitations, ready to leap and always with the promise of an imminent upheaval, the non-human figure is no longer perceived as the abandonment of man by nature but as a ghostly double whose injunctions reflect the need to consider a return to undefined but primordial Origins, in order to retract an envisageable End.

From now on, these silhouettes with their elegant, slender stature, like survivors of a world which does not yet exist, say nothing else, because "they have seen in life something too big for anyone, too big for [them], which has

placed on [them] the discreet mark of death”.¹⁰ So it is through them that there resides a form of indiscernibility between the human and the non-human, as if they were sharing the same shadow, which accommodates life and its possible future developments.

- 1-Catherine Malabou, “Le Vœu de plasticité”, in *Plasticité*, Paris, Éd. Léo Scheer, 1999, p. 8.
- 2- Edgar Morin, *Introduction à la pensée complexe*, Paris, Le Seuil, p. 85.
- 3-François Jullien, *Du “temps”*, Paris, Grasset, 2001, p. 24,
- 4- *Ibid.*, “si les saisons en variant, s'enchaînent, elles s'enchaînent car elles **variant**”, p. 38.
- 5-*Ibid.*
- 6-*Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, with Claire Parnet, Paris, Vidéo Éditions Montparnasse, 1996, production: P. -A. Boutang.
- 7- Pierre Montebello, *Métaphysiques cosmomorphes*, Les Presses du réel, coll. Drama, p. 17.
- 8- *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 9- *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 10-Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?*, Éditions de Minuit, 1991, p. 163.