

Concerning life in death,

It is in Réunion that Lionel Sabatté lived from the age of ten to twenty. Even though we should sometimes stand aside from the biographical dimension of a creator, in this case, it is not a drawback if we delve into his biography to shed some light on his work. Réunion, therefore, where a volcano, the Piton des Neiges, was born five million years ago. Added to this are the Tamil rituals that he saw as a child, in which individuals cross a fire. Slowly, the feet pass through the heat. Certainly, these images and the eruptions of the volcano had an influence on the expression of the artist. Bright red, deep yellow, deep black. The colours spring up, come out of the canvas as lava comes out of the earth. The earth and its gaseous state are thus one of Lionel Sabatté's explorations.

Telluric, volcanic and bloody: this is how his paintings express themselves. Canvases that were first painted in acrylic. And it is no coincidence that at the outset he turned to this chemistry because it is a derivative of oil, a material that contains organisms that died millions of years ago. Through this medium, the artist silently forges a tribute to ancestral life forms. Then the scale changed, and the states of life summoned forth evolved. The underwater world stimulated and nourished his work for a while. At the time, it was at the Aquarium of Paris that he exhibited his creatures of another time. The exhibition was entitled *La fabrique des profondeurs*, 'The Factory of the Depths'. Abyssal depths that set the tone for a series dedicated to the appearance of life and creatures made from dust. A dust recovered at the Châtelet metro station, the fruit of people brushing past each other. The remains of life left by the passage of strangers, of human beings. Indeed, all of Lionel Sabatté's creations speak of the appearance of life and the exploration of its different states.

The artist then developed a series of paintings, initiated in 2011, which mutated, like an organism. First there were lakes of paint, retouched with a small brush. Lakes in which living and unknown creatures appeared. Like a classical painter, using his brush he sought at the time to form realistic figures, often in the guise of birds. In this respect we might speak of anthropomorphic abstraction. Life appears, is born before our eyes, through a series of brushstrokes. But while a painter of still lifes relies on reality to compose, he sought life in the patches of paint. Patches that awaken our

propensity to find the human in the moving world around us. In the same way as we delve into our imagination to see known objects in the sky and its clouds.

This aspiration to make the unknown known is part of his work. Today, he only paints in oil, no doubt to create effects of matter. His painting has indeed evolved constantly. This has allowed him to play with tones and light. A light that pierces the canvas. These large formats shape a painting marked by the urgency, blossoming and brilliance of life. Heat emanates from his work, hot and bubbling. Under his brush and by his approach to painting, the cold paint is revived and warms up. It is interesting to note that his series in oil has gradually erased recognisable forms to give way to a pure abstraction. Fewer and fewer people and birds guide his painting. It is sculpture that has, so to speak, recovered and captured his birds. They limp, they stagger, they dangle from their fragile heads. These birds in volume are the result of a series of oxidised metal plates. They are made of wax, and then pass into the hands of a caster. He recovers them with screws that he takes care not to extract. Why does he leave them so marked with nails? So that they become martyrs, which in its way evokes African sculpture. Accidents thus become voluntary actions. These birds, light as the wind, respond to his bird drawings of the islands. Drawings that let the eye, thanks to the effects of scale, here see an island from above, there a bird seen close-to. Some birds are dead, as if they had died or been frozen in the bronze. Through this exploration of oxidation, Lionel Sabatté strives to bind death and rebirth, which meet like two inseparable friends.

Other sculptures appear in the artist's oeuvre. In particular, a large series of dead trees with human skins. Three groups of trees are displayed here. The first is composed of real trunks, whole and measuring four metres in length. These trees are from the Sainte Victoire mountain and had burned and are made to throw out buds of human skin by the artist, like a pledge of life. A life found using bits of skin from feet gleaned from chiropodists. Urban feet, Parisian feet. Always these traces, these remains of life that have the power to resuscitate dead objects... The epidermis of anonymous individuals undergoing treatment become petals of flowers through his gesture. The other group of trees is composed of olive trees that died in the winter of 1954. The coldest winter of the century marked by the famous appeal from Abbé Pierre. These trees speak of a historic leap forward in solidarity. Of a

community that tries to struggle as one against the harshness of the climate. The olive tree, moreover, is an image of peace and this envelops his work with a symbolic connotation.

The last group of trees displayed is composed of pollarded ash trees, those pruned trees used as firewood. These trees with tortured trunks revive the anthropomorphic dimension of the artist's work. This is the first time that this series of trees has been brought together as though in an original forest. They face a dozen metal plates that closely echo his paintings. These plates make use of the process of oxidation, this phenomenon that makes us age and that is also used to produce energy. This implementation of a chemical reaction by ambivalent nature perfectly characterises Lionel Sabatté's approach. He always brings into play a consubstantiality between life and death. In these plates that resemble landscapes seen from the sky, the world trembles, dies and lives again. Opposite, we see a series of his drawings of faces and bodies made of dust deposited on the paper. Drawings that despite the fineness of the line are almost sculptural. Women, old men, young bodies and those worn out by life appear side by side. These are the faces of our humanity in the process of living.

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