

January 12th
February 9th 2019Opening
Saturday 12 January 2019
From 11 am to 9 pm

Hippolyte Hentgen

Sunday in Kyoto

press release

Contrary to the impression a quick glance might impart concerning the oeuvres of Hippolyte Hentgen—let's say their virtuosity—what is truly striking when we examine them carefully is their ambition: that of creating a singular visual utopia based on a desire to share lovingly collected images. Their graphic resources are drawn from what is known as popular culture (cartoons, humorous drawings, abstract motifs from fabric or wallpaper, documents explaining science to the masses and picture postcards) and are imbued with performative virtues that Hippolyte Hentgen exploit with brio. Yet their work seems to be of a different nature from the techniques of collage, photomontage and misappropriation that have been abundantly practiced for over a century. What we are witnessing from Hippolyte Hentgen seems more of a creolization of the images, just as we might say of a language.

To be more precise: while there can be no creolization without a starting language, which upon contact with another or several other languages is metamorphosed, none of the constituting elements are more important than the others. Edouard Glissant, the great theorist of Creolity, corroborates this idea: "creolization implies that the cultural elements brought together must be of 'equivalent value' if this creolization is to really occur." In the case of Hippolyte Hentgen, the starting language is drawing, visually nourished by other drawings, other images and other references, each charged with its own plastic quality but also with an element of meaning it does not lose on contact with the others. Glissant speaks of creolization applied to art stating, "It is a blending [...] that produces something unexpected." He also speaks of "the poetry of the relationship." This is much less a question of appropriation (comparable with theft) or recycling (utilitarian recuperation) than one of generous exchange, each element impregnating the other without apparent logic apart from that of visual interweaving or a mysterious resonance, that should be seen as a metaphor for the perfect equality between the imaginary summoned by the images and the memories they carry. In other words it is more a question of cross-pollination than post-modern mixing or montage. Yet the transformation of the raw materials (cartoons, abstract motifs, etc.) through drawing also contributes to its critical function. Because that's what it's all about: drawing. And to be more exact, it's about the alchemy of drawing, like that of the written word. Yes, like that of Rimbaud: "I liked silly paintings, hoardings over doors, decors, images of acrobats, signs, popular illustrations..." Do Hippolyte Hentgen's sources sometimes seem dated? Lets say they have a trans-historic element. The fertilization of the past in the present. The shift of the known and the recognizable towards the unimagined, the unknown and the strange. Their drawing certainly encompasses this potentiality.

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Gallery, an epicenter, around which more indefinable territories spin. It is ingrained within the images. Roland Barthes, delighted with his own observation, noted that their meaning largely escapes the Western eye, yet he too fell under their spell like most travellers, amazed by so much detail, reinventing so much more than what he had seen or read rather than bearing witness to an informed cultural reality. Hippolyte Hentgen, tapping into Japanese imagery, dream of deviant blends, undiscovered polyphony and daring associations avoiding unequivocal signifiers or reductive interpretations. Their collection is also open to more recent popular figures, inviting the spectator to drift mentally. One might reasonably ask if this field had not already been explored at the end of the 19th century when the Impressionists discovered Japanese stamps, prints, fabrics, fans, screens and gardens? Accusing Hippolyte Hentgen of this would be a misunderstanding of their approach, which tends towards drawing, founded in a quest for inventive simplicity within the space of the canvas, like that of the others, the Impressionists, wrongly considered exotic. This is drawing for its own sake. At the risk of repeating myself, drawing is Hippolyte Hentgen's "starting language," much more than the Japanese imagery, which might seem dominant. It is of no surprise then that—unlike Barthes who nourishes the fantasy of an "artificial void"—it is the imaginary world of the images with its particular expressiveness that persists. It poetically enriches an already profuse artistic vocabulary. It creolizes it. This time it's Japan, yet it's not so much Japan that is explored but the complexity, the graphic complexity included, of the world. The odyssey has only just begun.

Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux
Translation : Chris Atkinson

Born in Paris in 1950, Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux is an artist, essayist and performance historian. "No matter how hard I try, I haven't yet really managed to define myself or I've come up with something rather banal like the sort of thing you find on glossy book jackets: date of birth, two or three or even ten exhibitions, a few publications and some other more or less flattering bits and pieces. When I read this kind of thing, I get the impression I'm reading about another me, who in the end I don't even recognize. So what should we write? That my real education in art, more than studying fine art in Paris, the museums or theoretical studies, was my discovery in the mid-sixties of English pop, the Beach Boys, girl groups, Jacques Dutronc and Nino Ferrer? I've already repeated the same thing hundreds of times in long-awaited commentaries acknowledging 'sub-culture' as the source of my art (something I only half believe myself)."