

Press release

June 24th
August 12th, 2023Opening
Saturday, June 24th
from 11am to 8pm

Hiss

Sébastien Gouju

In 1908, the Viennese architect Adolf Loos wrote his well-known essay *Ornament and Crime*, in which he criticized the excessive use of ornamentation in architecture and art, stating that ornament was a sign of cultural and moral decadence. According to Loos, patterns, arabesques, reliefs, gilding, decorative moldings and scrollwork were the hallmarks of a primitive and barbaric society and no longer had any meaning or place in modern-day reality. He argued that simplicity and functionality were far more important characteristics than the aesthetics of ornamentation. In terms of design, the principle of “form following function”, where the purpose of something is clearly and simply expressed, became a fundamental aesthetic tenet in the world of the Western artistic avant-garde at the beginning of the 20th century. Far more than a simple question of taste, Loos clearly formulated and justified this radical simplification, perpetuating the “classical versus baroque” debate that saw its beginnings during the 17th century. The two viewpoints clashed essentially over questions of form, but the discussion could equally be extended to the spheres of morality or politics. On the one hand, were those arguing for a refined, elementary and “sincere” form of minimalism, and on the other, those who advocated a liberated and exuberant style of expression. Of course, between these two poles, there are a myriad of nuances of aesthetic enjoyment...

This dualistic interpretation of the history of forms is still relevant today in the 21st century. There are a number of artists however, who tread the line between these two “camps...” So, where does Sébastien Gouju’s work fit into this polarized vision? Certainly, his taste for organic subjects, popular culture and the refinement of details, as well as his interest in Huysmans and symbolism (the series of bells *À Rebours*, 2022, is a magnificent example) might encourage us to classify him as an “ornamental criminal.” *Le Serpent qui Danse* (2021) has all the makings of a baroque work, if only in the idea of using the clinical space of a gallery to present a sort of suspended fragment of jungle; what could be more anarchic than a snake suspended between two walls, that transforms itself into a liana, from which flowers, filaments and leaves hang in natural disorder? The work was created in the leather workshop La Fabrique, in Grauhlet in the Tarn region. It is entirely made up of stitched leather, a material that Sébastien Gouju has become fond of using since his residency in a Hermès leather goods workshop in 2018. Patently unsuited to sculpture, when working with leather, structural solutions need to be constantly found. Unlike a piece of wood, its form rarely follows its function... It requires the technical mastery so often found in Sébastien Gouju’s work, whether it be with glass, embroidery or enameled stoneware... The use of such materials points to the artist’s penchant for the world of know-how, of assemblies, firing and the reactions of materials that have to be anticipated, in short, all the skills related to hand-crafting. This pleasure in craftsmanship however, is almost systematically accompanied by a critical distancing. The objects he creates, which feature animal, vegetable or mineral forms, are not content with simply being, they also denounce their own state of being almost as immediately. Where ornament flirts with the pleasure of illusion, in Sébastien Gouju’s work we also find the paradoxical pleasure of disillusionment. And with this sleight of hand, the work suddenly flips into the realm of a mind game.

Contre-jour (2018) features a group of large trees made from black lambskin

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and metal, that at first suggests a fragment of bucolic landscape, captured as its name suggests, against the light. But as one circles the work, the illusion either dissipates or somehow takes on more intensity. They are as black as an oil slick or thunder clouds... They are definitively black, even when flooded with light. As is often the case with Sébastien Gouju's oeuvre, this work requires two readings. The immediately seductive effect is always undermined by a touch of dissonance.

In this binary vision of the history of art, Sébastien Gouju is something like a quantum particle: he exists in two places at the same time. The obvious pleasure he takes in crafting objects, the sensuality and richness of the colors and materials he uses, the meticulous aesthetics he borrows from traditional craftsmanship, are always counterbalanced by an almost Duchampian intellectual detachment. Perfectly accomplished, the object at the same time seems to be held at a distance, suspended between two states that make the viewer oscillate between the delicious pleasure of the gaze and the critical distance of the mind. In the "dual between ornament and austerity," Sébastien Gouju finds himself in the position of arbiter, which allows him to never just give in to a nostalgia for decorative art, frozen in time, because he always steers it back towards the critical discourse of the present day. A pirouette whose oxymoronic nature he revealed in an interview with Sébastien Faucon, in which he described his work as the site of a "natural décor." The first of many paradoxes one must overcome to enter his world of childlike rebellion...

Gaël Charbau

Gaël Charbau is an independent artistic director and curator, who founded the freely available, independent art journal *Particules* in 2003, which he directed until 2010. In 2014, alongside Laurent Dumas and Angélique Aubert, he created the "Bourse Révélation Emerige" a grant which is dedicated to the promotion of young French artists. In 2020, following his artistic direction of the 18th edition of Nuit Blanche in Paris in 2018, he was appointed artistic director of the Olympic and Paralympic village for Paris 2024. In 2023, he took over the artistic direction of Un Été au Havre. Since 2011, Gaël Charbau has organized over 60 exhibitions in France, Europe and Asia.