Hubert Duprat, Against the Grain

Let us begin with the most obvious : Hubert Duprat is a kind of naturalist artist, fascinated by the visual potential of elements and phenomena which he encounters principally in scientific literature and then investigates on site. Readily making use of mineral, organic or plant matter, often chosen from rare species, he transforms them into sculptures by minimal, delicate and time consuming interventions. Entomology, mineralogy, petrology as well as history and archaeology : much has been written about these disciplines that inform the artist’s work. From the cylindrical assemblages of small translucent ‘building blocks’ made of calcite to the geometric Pyrite crystals , from the strands of coral linked with breadcrumbs to the amber wafers bonded together , his works operate within an indeterminate sculptural system, between tradition and modernity, in the form of barely assisted natural readymades.

Naturalist & Counterfeiter

Nevertheless, the artist’s inclination for natural things is not entrenched, since alongside and in the same spirit, he experiments with industrial or synthetic materials : a ceiling made of PVC tubes to provoke a dizzying perceptual disorder or a sort of sharp-edged plaster rhombohedron reveals geometric patterns due to the rubbing of small brass cones . Causing wonder, curiosity and desire, his work is thus both elegant and erudite combining heterogeneous aesthetic styles, from baroque (the mineral metaphor, ornament, the organic appendix and vanity) to minimal art (hard edge with geometric tendencies, basic forms, industrial materials), as well as references to movements that have been slightly forgotten by modernity like Art Nouveau with its decorative and architectural developments. To be specific, Duprat doesn’t highlight the raw beauty of material so much as its visually manipulative and illusionistic virtues.

Architect & Engineer

The relation to architecture is essential to apprehend Hubert Duprat’s work. This concern with building is evident when caddisflies larvae construct their cocoons of precious stones , as well as in the calcite tower or in the branches covered in small bone plates which are assembled like tiles or paving . These are all acts of construction which Duprat borrows from engineers and builders. There is an obvious continuation, for Duprat, between the architectural referent and his interest in nature. In fact, in principle, the building materials are natural : stone, used in a rough state or lightly carved, concrete, which is just cement and sand. Architecture is due to human genius, subjecting natural materials to an ambitious and progressive vision for social and cultural development. This results in a silent relation of domination, as recalled in the etymology of the word architecture : ’tekton’ for the action of building, ’arkhe’ as the foundation, but also command. Architecture is literally "what builds power".

Smuggler & Trafficker

In fact, Duprat’s art is not only idealistic and well meaning, but also discreetly critical and subversive. The fascinating ambiguity lies in this invisible and sensitive force : there is conceptual depth that goes beyond the formal delicate surface. The economy of his work has a difficult position towards nature : not only is it revealed and celebrated but also exploited. It is in a mode that denies its own principles that Duprat’s ‘naturalism’ finds strength and rationale. There is a Hegelian perspective in his relation to reality : it is not nature which is beautiful but its submission to art. Not only as motif, but as use value. Not so much as a representation ‘from nature’, as a representation ‘after nature’. Seen in this light, this artist’s activity could be likened to that of a smuggler, a trafficker who supplies natural riches in the field of art, having disguised them to artificially make them more precious. The artist does subject beautiful forms of nature to aesthetic rules, tutoring a certain form of industrious jewel or ornamental decoration. This is a project that finds an echo in the decadent figure of Des Esseintes, in Joris Karl Huysmans’s famous novel Against Nature : “After fake flowers that mimicked real ones, he wanted natural flowers imitating false ones .”

Natural Sadism

At the origin of humanity, one can imagine that relationships between man and nature occurred on the mode of defiance and struggle. Nature was considered hostile, an unknown enemy to protect oneself from, then conquer and dominate to complete exploitation. Machetes, scythes, pruners : a veritable arsenal of close combat weapons has developed in farm sheds. Cultivated lands are the frontlines from which trophies of war are brought back. This original possibly belligerent trait has now dissolved in the idealistic vision of nature as giving and caring. These natural materials, admired and regarded as precious crafts as well as in the naturalia of cabinets of curiosity – do they really provide signs of a peaceful reconciliation between man and the ecosystem ? On closer inspection, these could be considered like samples, taken with a scalpel from the body of the vanquished enemy, as the latest incarnations of a domination achieved by man over nature. Along these lines and without complacency, it could be say that there is a discreetly sadistic side to Hubert Duprat’s sculptural practice, or at least that there is a relation in the mode of fetishized authority. Vital forces appear aesthetically subdued, manipulated, transformed. The rock is shattered before being presented glued back together again , the tree is contained in a cocoon of nails like in an organic corset, the flint is violently cut to reveal figures . It is torn, extracted, aestheticised, then exhibited.

Guilty Pleasures

Going further still, it is probable that this proactive and ethically complex appropriation of such elements in the creative field is not the artist’s personal negotiation with nature but turns out to be a subtle and ineffable critique addressed to the viewer. One can feel a guilty, sensual and intellectual pleasure in the presence of Hubert Duprat sculptures. A guilty delight in abandoning oneself to the seductiveness of the natural ornament in full awareness of its readymade nature. A guilty pleasure in surrendering to the illusionistic effect, after (or despite) the avant-garde. The artist highlights the naivety of the art audience’s viewpoint who wonders at such phenomena which they no longer know how to apprehend in a museum of natural history, and most of all directly in nature. He makes us admire what is most rudimentary as if it is the most amazing wonder : a tribute to the incomparable power of art to transform reality into fantasy. The critical power of art by Hubert Duprat is probably lodged here : in this virtuoso way to mirror, with delight and intelligence, the inadequacy of our gaze, our ignorance as an emotional drive, and the passionate and sensual diversion of our relation to the world.

A text by Guillaume Désanges, translated by Caroline Hancock. Adapted from the original text Hubert Duprat, Against the Grain, published in the catalogue of the exhibition at Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery (March 2011).

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