

Terminarès

Text by François-René Martin

Professor of Art History at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris

The nostalgia of a planet that would still retain something of its wildness, or even of a planet that would simply remain a habitable environment, for humans, animal or plant species, is at the heart of David Décamp's work. Portions of trees are wrapped in lead sheathing, as if charred after a fire, or protected from some climatic change that would doom them. The same trees can take on the appearance of a spine, forming the residue of a creature that would only remain in a skeletal state. And animal bones, shown as relics that are both tiny and splendid, also inhabit this world that is inseparable from the human self-destruction of the planet. The title of the exhibition says it all: Terminarès. In contemporary parlance, this means to finish, to conclude, and even, in the commercial world, a sale at knock-down prices, a sort of festive sell-off of items of varying quality before the stock runs out or the store closes. The word also has a slang connotation, which overrides the learned origin of the term, a Latin declension of the verb terminare. "We're closing," says David Décamp. "Pack your suitcase": the melting sink has just destroyed our effects, ruining our hopes of leaving an uninhabitable world. There is no way out.

What is for sale then? Some remnants of nature. What will definitely close? The planet, as we knew it about half a century ago, before

scientists coined the term Anthropocene, when the effects of industrialisation on the ecosystem were not yet as noticeable as they are today, in the age of global warming. David Décamp did not wait for these speeches or for this very late awareness to become concerned. His childhood spent in the middle of the Jura forests, to which he returned again and again, his knowledge of trees, of which he made his first profession, his fascination for bark and leaves, his attention to animals: art has only translated into forms, objects and installations what was for him a landscape that was as present and constitutive as it was threatened. This is what makes his works and all the lived things that surround them not part of the belated good ecological conscience of our societies, which are both worried about climate change and still greedy for goods and energy. Nor do they belong to the very interested interest that many artists have had in all these issues for some years now, where international biennials intersect with the "COP" negotiations on climate. "It's as if I wanted to pierce the heads of those who are going to look at my work: with a jackhammer. "There is the idea of a way of the cross, without it being the subject. Two remarks, among many, in the conversation I've been having with David Décamp for several months and even now, to be sure, years, and which I've happened to note. His works do have something sacred about them, an atmosphere of reliquaries, of suffering and catacombs, as well as of piety. But the martyrology is that of the trees he sheathes or whose bark he preserves, of the plane tree leaves he represents with an expensive meticulousness, of the bronze bird corpses he collects, of the deer he lays out in lead coffins, of the frogs whose thigh bones he collects as fine as twigs, of the fish whose carcasses he reconstitutes, thus transformed into elegant and disturbing mobiles reminiscent of the natural history museums. As for piety, it is that of the artist who collects all these debris of the living, as opposed to the ascetic absent from the real and contingent world who would have integrated the catastrophe so as not to see it anymore. It is against this figure, identified by Michaël Foessel, of the spectator who is both aware of the ecocide and passive, as unmilitant as he is informed,

that the art of David Décamp distracts us, the better to send us back to our real world, that is to say our practices, our habits, our way of life. His works come to knock against our heads, sometimes entering them, piercing our own bones.

For his work also contains a lesson on the economy of doing that underlies the possession of objects, things, works that we possess or that only pass through our lives, quickly consumed or discarded. Spending a day making a dead leaf, with all its veins, its freckles, not just to imitate its appearance, but to imitate the time at work in the seasons; spending a day carving a piece of bone, as the haberdashers did in the past. To use the pieces or buttons once carved by others to make a vanity. It is a whole economy of manual labour, far from today's machining, where the hand and time are constantly diminishing, that is at the heart of David Décamp's work. In addition to the natural resources that need to be preserved, there is another resource, that of the hand, which needs to be exploited, without any real measure, without any precise idea of time. In *The Central Region* (1969), Michael Snow attempted to make an absolute record of what he called 'an extremely rare commodity: wilderness'. David Decamp's works show us other commodities, made up of goods that are as minute as they are sparkling, marvellous remains, referring to the same rarefied wilderness, never lost, however, because found in all these debris, these threatened naturalia and the gestures that restore them to the world.