

The Spirit of the Eye

A personal analysis of our visual worlds

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Rachel Labastie, the art of the matter

□ F.Donini Ferretti □ Contemporary Art □ 2 mai 2019 □ 3 Minutes
Sans feu ni lieu, at Eleven Steens, 25 April 2019 – 29 June 2019

I visited by chance rather than by design the show of Rachel Labastie, at Eleven Steens, and have no regrets: this young artist with a nomadic background of *yéniche* origin is moving, convincing, and remarkably articulate.

A youth of many hardships, brightened by the presence and wisdom of a beloved grand-mother, has instilled in this solar personality a purposefulness, an honesty, and an understanding of the contradictions and vicissitudes inherent to human life that are little short of admirable amidst the mixture of cynicism and ideological stubbornness, whether real or feigned, which characterize much of a generation.





Rachel Labastie works with matter: clay, ceramics, terracotta...and of course fire, the *god* of transformation, of transmutation: she is rooted in the real world. But she also expresses very subtle and powerful ideas, rather than concepts. For nomads, the hearth is where stories are told, families kept together, and tradition transmitted: fire welds the past with the present, and the members of the group one to the other. But fire is also the medium of transformation of the raw into the cooked, to quote Lévi-Strauss, the water into steam, the clay into a brick or a vase.

The work of Rachel Labastie is entirely built around paradoxes of the matter, which force us to meditate about the possibility of a synthesis, a middle way, an equilibrium between the high and the low, the good and the evil, freedom and power which is ultimately the *torn* nature of the human condition.

We see a tree branch made of clay, which would normally bend but does not; we see hands holding each other while powerful forces, materialized by lashing straps, tear them apart, and these hands and arms are made of glass or ceramics which express fragility; we see slaves shackles made out of ceramics – and *which* slavery are we witnessing here ? – as if they could be broken at will, but are not; we see blackened terracotta skulls and bones in the hearth as if death manifested itself at the very heart of the ritual of life; we see a wooden church which is without windows or doors, but manifests the undying aspiration of humans to find a meaning to their lives, even though perhaps this meaning is impenetrable, or the institution which is in charge of showing a path is closed on itself. We see axes planted into the wall, their handles bent by the effort, and these axes are made of ceramics...





The plasticity of uncooked clay, which forms a manner of carpet on which the artist walks during her performance, while singing the gipsys' hymn *djelem djelem* with an impressively powerful voice, is all together a reminder of time passing – a *vanitas* if you will – as we never tread the same soil, a metonymy of humans *made of clay* according to the myth of Genesis, and an exhortation to act our lives, since such is the clay that what we are to model. Rachel Labastie has mastered many of the techniques which involve cooking and modelling clay, or firing ceramics; never does she seem to indulge into any *ornament*. The power of her intuitions is never diminished, enhanced or concealed by any *embellishment*, or by the artifice of any *trope*; no colour is added to the original colour of matter itself. One could call it an *honesty* of art, if by honesty we intend precisely that the idea or the emotion is a genuine concern and emotion of the artist herself, and that she conveys it without the weaponry of any seduction. Her rethorics mostly consists in the contrast or complementarity between the intrinsic qualities of the materials used and the meaning they are meant to express.

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