

Guillaume Leblon

Vital materialism and the unsteady march of progress

by Rahma Khazam

French artist Guillaume Leblon's stricken environments and disaffected cityscapes distil a strong sense of foreboding and unease. Made from found objects, plaster or everyday materials, they speak of urban alienation and natural or man-made catastrophes, among other global ills. Take the white plaster landscape *Giving Substance to Shadow* (2013), which formed the centrepiece of the artist's solo exhibition at Villeurbanne's Institut d'art contemporain earlier this year. Signifiers of disaster were scattered around the windowless white-walled space: a black and white image of menacing waves and a small ladder affixed midway up one of the walls evoked an abandoned swimming-pool, while bulbous, white, lemon-shaped objects hanging on the opposite wall lent a sense of deformation, perhaps resulting from overlong immersion in water.

Meanwhile, the moss-green growths in the far corner of the space could be perceived either as growing out of the dazzling white surface or as the substrate that the plaster serves to cover. The moss also suggested – along with the stones emerging from a corner of the ceiling (*European Corner*, 2014) and the sand and plaster tortoise poised a little way up one of the walls – that nature may be reasserting its rights over this henceforth uninhabitable terrain. Mute and unyielding, the artist's work weaves an unresolvable narrative that bears out Manuel Oliveira's remarks in his text for Leblon's monograph *Parallel Walk* (2009). The Spanish critic points out that Leblon's work can appear vague or even incomprehensible because it has deliberately been left unfinished or incomplete: contemplating it does not bring clarity, but reveals the hesitations, contradictions and decisions involved in the making of a work of art, breeding in the viewer uncertainty and gnawing doubt.

No less alienating – and equally riddled with uncertainty – is the seascape conjured up by the sculpture *Backstroke and Other Bird* (2013), in which a sand-covered figure with arms outstretched and an open book

on her head evokes both a sleeping sunbather and a swimmer who has, for no apparent reason, come to a halt mid-stroke. Resting horizontally in a frame created from single metal lines, upon which a bird is perched, she embodies the artist's half-formed idea or thought.

The outlandish textures of the sculpture *Sea Brass (fish)* (2012) likewise give the impression of an incomplete work: here, Leblon poured molten brass onto a beach towel spread out in the sand, creating a scarred, pitted crust that could be an obscure allusion to wave motion – or to the toxicity of marine environments.

Other works in the show hint at the dehumanizing nature of cities. The never-ending highways generated by urban sprawl are magically intimidated by the folds of the upside-down carpet draped on the floor of the room showcasing Leblon's 16 mm film *Villa Cavrois* (2000). Here, the camera's meandering tour of modernist architect Robert Mallet-Stevens's dilapidated villa of the same name in Croix in northern France, seems to echo the crisscrossing routes traced by the folds of the carpet and, perhaps, the visitor's own circuitous itinerary through the different spaces of Leblon's exhibition. Meanwhile, the installation *Faces contre terre* (Face to the Ground, 2010) faintly recalls the aftermath of a hurricane: irregular fragments of discarded furniture cover the entire floor of the room in which they are installed, forcing visitors to walk over them. Carl Andre's floor sculptures come to mind: although Leblon eschews Andre's commitment to regularity of form, he adopts a similarly non-hierarchical approach to his materials.

Creating fictional cityscapes or altering existing spaces has long been Leblon's favoured technique for fuelling uncertainty and doubt. For his exhibition 'Parallel Walk' (2008) at Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea in Santiago de Compostela, he covered the walls with sheets of coloured paper in order to undermine the stark purity and perfect finish of the space. He has also taken exception to the fact that art is habitually displayed in enclosed spaces: for his 2013 exhibition at Galerie Jocelyn Wolff in Paris, he dismantled an interior wall and rebuilt it on the pavement outside the gallery, parallel to the façade. This makeshift extension exposed the art works inside it to the elements, confusing the line

between public and private space; it also left the exhibition looking characteristically unfinished.

Some of Leblon's objects likewise disrupt the architecture of the exhibition space, by exceeding the physical limits of the rooms in which they are displayed. *Four Ladders* (2008) consists of giant windmill sails that appear to cut through the walls encasing them. The work recalls François Morellet's 1971 sculpture of tilted aluminium tubes that also bisects walls at an angle, thereby undermining the stability of the horizontal and vertical lines that define the traditional exhibition venue. (It can also be read as an allusion to Jane Bennett's theory of vital materialism, explored in her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 2010.) Even more dismissive of the dimensions of the gallery space is Leblon's *National Monument* (2006–14): swathed in fabric to prevent it from falling apart and artificially kept 'alive' by constant watering, this enormous block of clay extends into the next room, having 'grown' through the wall. Belying its bleak exterior, Leblon's post-apocalyptic world teems not only with innumerable partially perceptible thoughts, but also with movement and life.

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Guillaume Leblon is based in Paris, France. His solo show at the Musée de la Cristallerie, Saint-Louis, France, opens 25 September. His work will be included in the Festival d'automne, Paris, in October, and he will have a solo exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada, in 2015.

1
À dos de cheval avec le peintre
(On Horseback with the Painter), 2014,
installation view at Institut
d'art contemporain, Villeurbanne

2
Foreground: *Backstroke and Other Bird*,
2013, plastiline, sand, shells, paper,
metal, foam, plastic, 68 × 195 × 85 cm.
Background: *Whashed chemtrail I*, 2013,
pastel on canvas, 2.2 × 1.6 m

3
Sea Brass (fish), 2012,
brass, sand, shells, towel, 145 × 85 × 3 m

All images courtesy
the artist, Institut d'art contemporain,
Villeurbanne, Galerie Carlier | Gebauer,
Berlin, and Galerie Jocelyn Wolff, Paris;
photographs: Blaise Adilon



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