

ROMAN MORICEAU

Appearances can be Deceptive

A Berlin-based artist marked by the time he spent in the Martin Margiela fashion house, Roman Moriceau explores, subverts and alters our relationship with an individualistic consumer world. He knows he is steering his boat through the troubled waters of a society in the process of being sucked in by a series of “i’s” (pods, phone, pads), all of which have now become genuine fictions, and he wonders what his range of action might be within an art world that has already gone through modernism and every other possible “ism”, “post” and “hyper”. Should he challenge the triumph of co-gnitive capitalism, that enterprise-ship for dematerialising knowledge into “information goods”ⁱ, by using cognitive art, its most ambiguous passenger, a possible Alien?

His work proceeds in U-turns, with a boomerang effect, forcing the viewer to go beyond first-sight emotions. Contact with the work means that an art critic cannot avoid analysing the theoretical stakes, cannot feel content with a purely formal analysis. Each piece functions initially through its seductiveness, then after reading the museum labels and/or taking time to look in detail, a critical gaze emerges. The interpretation-significance dialectic kicks in — a tension testing the notion of “aesthetic validation”ⁱⁱ. Moriceau is determined to make a contribution to Knowledge. Such an ambition is written into the DNA of all his work. Even as he spells out his love for things handmade he is hypnotically drawn to mass-market retailing.

Moriceau is fascinated by the power of the images that assail us yet disappointed by their low-grade quality. He plays around with this phenomenon — and with us. He loves muddying the waters.

Somewhere between graphic design, painting and object design, the fabrication process is most relevant for him at the conception stage. Post-it printing (Fridge, Computer, Desk, Lamp, 2002-2003), stamped out drawings (Kate in..., 2007), flies used as a printer (Chic on the wall, 2008-2012) — all these choices show to what extent the medium intensifies his statements.

Don’t trust appearances

In today’s context, Roman Moriceau poses the following question, using it as his creative programme: is it still possible to create work whose purpose is to conduct a delicate investigation into economic (political) and aesthetic (theoretical) dimensions as well as a more firm-handed one into production processes without ever neglecting the formal aspect of matters? Regarding this last point, Moriceau continually questions our faculty for going beyond the retina, beyond a first-level reading of the work. He enjoys playing with appearances that are deceptive. In almost every piece, Moriceau uses easily recognised motifs, signs and “pleasant” images in order to hook in ordinary exhibition consumers and unsettle art-lovers. He feels irritated by “authoritarian” images, i.e. media images, and so prefers to interpolate them within his own work. “Artistic” images round off the database he draws on in order to set up what art critic Tristan Trémeau and his allies from the Société Réaliste call “art critical art”ⁱⁱⁱ.

Now let’s look at some of his works in more detail.

Post-its as Pixels

The Printed Post-it series was begun in 2003 as Moriceau was finishing art school, and became the founding work of the “Moricean” artistic project. It was conceived in -response to Richard Hamilton’s question on the origins of Pop Art: Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing? (1956). Post-its (I would term them “active thoughts”) convey a brief, directive message, a -little humorous note or a kind thought. They link members of a family whose schedules fluctuate. Their various bright colours highlight this convivial aspect, as if we wanted to fill a void with writing, call a halt to an “images-are-all” -intrusiveness, allot ourselves spaces that are more liveable, less antiseptic. Sticking up a Post-it personalises and humanises places that are dreary. Instead of simulating, Moriceau assimilates. He has realised that the over-presence of banal images and objects wea-kens quality. He pushes our media world’s process to the point of exhaustion. Here, image is the crux of the work. The image of a fridge, a lamp — first photographed from a commercial catalogue, then enlarged to life-size on Post-its stuck over a wall — flies back into our face like a boomerang we forgot to throw in the first place.

And more: when a Post-it has been printed like this, it veers off in yet ano-ther direction! The two-dimensional -image of a three-dimensional object (lamp etc.) is therefore not only a surface but a sculpture. Moriceau enjoys setting traps.

Post-its cover the glazed façades of corporate office buildings. Employees use them as pixels. Over the grey, transparent sides of these buildings the forms are more or less well drawn but the point is to mix the colours

and interact with street-goers or neighbours: another way to think social links via a regular object. Now, ten years later, Smartphones have taken over from Post-its. Text messages have replaced them. Post-its as pixels.

Velvet Dada

Kate in... (2007), I Missed you (2009), Untitled (Copyright) (2010), Chic on the wall (2008-2012) form a set of -drawings using different techniques but having a similarity of purpose. Moriceau provokes, rails and has a propensity for mocking, ridiculing and laughing at the cognitive -capitalism that has predominated since brand names began -ruling our culture and our lives. "Domination is the power to -decide what is fictional"iv. His portrait of British model Kate Moss is a large drawing (225 x 149.5 cm) of her face. The line is crude but soft, oscillating between figurative and abstract. The way it is done is intriguing, impelling the viewer to get closer — at which point the signs intermix. Different well known logos become ap-parent. The various brands that Kate Moss has worked for have been reproduced in their millions, defining her outline. Obviously if the viewer -remains a way off from the piece, s/he will completely miss the point. This is an important element for Moriceau: he problematizes the fact that the average visitor spends only a brief moment looking at an -exhibit. Untitled (Copyright) is -another drawing that requires a close look. On first glance, anyone can see there is a target made up of two circles. On reading the caption, it becomes apparent that that the 'c' from the copyright logo © has been transformed into an 'o', the two circles have been touched up with a felt pen. With I Missed You, the title appearing directly on the surface of the screen print requires further scrutiny as does the position of the geometric form. Shifted slightly to the top right corner, there seems to be something missing. But what? Just to put you in the picture, the form is none other than the "bite" out of the Apple logo! Chic on the wall, a drawing 3.5 cm x 5 cm on a white background 65 cm x 45 cm, shows the Chanel logo made from the droppings of captive flies — a sort of parable of our faith in democratized, made-in-China luxury.

Better than IKEA, Bauhaus and Art & Crafts all rolled into one

Roman likes the design world, its aesthetic aspects, the theory and practise of it when creating a prototype, the purpose for which an object is intended, the industrial process. The social status allotted a priori to an object or item of furniture is therefore of interest to him, and maybe becoming a designer was at one point an ambition of his: he went to the Art School in Angers with this in mind. Yet he also knew that art schools are places to experiment in and so opted for the fine arts course, creating the Commode Louis Confo (2003). As the name implies, you get two chests of drawers in one. Almost everyone dreams of having a Louis XVI chest of drawers in their cosy middle class living-room yet can only afford Conforama prices. So during the day Confo wins. But at night, when anything can happen, Louis comes into being. After this piece, came a variation: Agglov glows (like a shadow) (2003), a set comprising a table with two chairs and two stools in chipboard that in artificial light look like solid wood. Today a table in solid wood costs a fortune, but apart from the financial side of things, and the choice of poor materials and the strong dose of humour and bluffing present in both works, the real subjects are consumer desire, design products available through specialist retail outlets or mass-market distribution, and designers' dreams. Here too, Roman Moriceau nails the sham.

Furniture (2006-2008) replicates Le Corbusier's LC2 chair (1928) but is made in oriented shaving board, panels of which are used by builders for their structural solidity, by others for bohemian chic and by still others for want of any-thing better. Co-designed with Emeric Glayse for an exhibition, the chair takes on the status of a sculpture. Indeed, the original model is more often seen on display as a work of art rather than in its primary function as an archetype of contemporary furniture. Recognisable for its staying power, the chair is now a genuinely fake benchmark in art galleries arousing reactions such as: What's going on? What's that doing there? Can I sit on it?

"C'était un petit jardin qui sentait bon le bassin parisien..." (Jacques Dutronc)

The Flowers screen print series began in 2011, high-lighting Moriceau's need to find a stance. Corollas, stigmata and calyxes sprawl over large-format sheets of white paper in bunches and constellations. The flowers form a motif — one that has come down through the long tradition of the vanities — whose composition symbolically evokes humankind's mortality. First, all the flowers shown are on the endangered list; next, the sepia colour comes from the sump oil used for the inking; finally, the artist deliberately plays on this technique's fragility given that sump oil does not take on the support. Both technique and motif allude to human civilisation at its apex ... just before a fall. The effect on the eye — attractive bunches of flowers — draws in the viewer, who, after reading the caption, is no longer happy to merely contemplate the work.

With Flowers, Roman is also an archaeologist exploring contemporary signs of life nearing extinction in -order to archive them. In fifty years' time, how will people -regard works that were intended as fossils from a society in pursuit of -"happiness" founded on fossil plenty?

So ... Moriceau as a connoisseur, an archaeologist of our finiteness

Roman is a modern artist in the romantic sense of the term: "The aim for him is to extract from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical envelope, to distil the eternal from the transitory" (Baudelaire, The Painter of Modern Life). And not only this, for some of his formal choices — ad minima and cognitive — relate to certain avant-garde movements. The geometry, the primary colours including black and white, the use of series are reminiscent of the great moments in early European and American modernism. His statements are iconoclastic. He takes hold of new icons from the world of marketing reducing them to their lowest

dimensions. He is paddling upstream against Warhol. On the other hand, he has no complexes about the subjects he is dealing with. His intellectual approach is to lure in -by means of discrete episodes — references to post-modernism. His is an artistic project that is at one remove from the usual dogma about originality and novelty. In Marcel Carné's film *Les Enfants du Paradis*, Baptiste's father puts it perfectly: "Novelty is as old as the world!" In such a fabrication process, the weapons of postmodernism thwart any notion of belief in a better world. The artist is not a fool. It's not a question of 'Just do it!' but 'Do it with'.

In conclusion, these early paths now being trodden by Roman Moriceau seem to echo philosopher Francesco Masci's thoughts on entertainment. Let's hear what he has to say: "With entertainment, the separation between culture and society that came into being with the pre-Romantic scission comes to an end. Entertainment is the final stage in absolute culture, socially effective in its realisation. [...] In the world's fictional future, it is the negative powers of images that bring people together by safeguarding the -reality of their separateness."

Text by Christophe Le Gac – 2013

I. Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne – Rapport sur le savoir*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, Critiques, 1979.

II. Jac Fol, *Arts visuels et architecture – propos à l'œuvre*, Paris, Editions L'Harmattan, L'Art en bref, 1998.

III. "Ultimately, this art critical art is one hell of a counter-Utopia just like the Société Réaliste that Walid Raad deciphers on two levels of today's art world and its markets: one level is the global market via curating and marketing and the other the marketing - of information about the network." (Tristan Trémeau, *In Art We Trust – L'art au risque - de son économie*, 2011, Editions Al Dante + Aka, Limoges, p. 85-86.) The main thrust of this work is to unravel the fraud involved in the artists' pension fund: APT (Art Pension Trust).

IV. First phase of the book. Francesco Masci, *Entertainment ! Apologie de la domination*, Paris, Editions Allia, 2011, p. 7.

V. Aggloméré, often abbreviated to agglo, is the French term for chipboard (translator's note).

VI. 70s song by Jacques Dutronc about Parisian gardens disappearing under concrete (translator's note).

VII. Masci, op. cit., pp. 17 & 26. The following line of thought exemplifies this phenomenon, ongoing since the industrial revolution: "And as humankind's existence, divided as it is between what is technical and what is fictional, takes place outside any brushes with reality, it must be agreed with Hobbes that knowledge of the world is now shut off

to people. Yet ignorance has not brought them to the despair they ought logically to be wracked with." (ibid., p. 117).

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