

5.4 The Impossible Collection

Saint-Louis, Foundation Fernet-Branca



Stéphane Thidet, *Untitled (I mean it could really exist, in theory, in the middle of this table [...])*, 2008

Billiard table, ceiling lamp, various materials (200 x 400 x 180 cm)
Collection Frac Alsace

© Stéphane Thidet / photograph: Marc Damage

This site, the largest in the exhibition "*Pièces Montrées - Frac Alsace, 30 years collecting*" has the advantage of providing a choice from the Frac collection that is both far-reaching and complex. It has been organized by Roland Recht, honorary director of the Strasbourg museums, professor at the Collège de France and member of the Institut de France, in tandem with Olivier Grasser. Roland Recht is a historian and specialist in medieval art, but he has for long shown a deep interest in modern and present-day creation, having staged notable exhibitions over the last thirty years and been an active critic, with the eye of a cultivated connoisseur and the mind of a humanist, on the contemporary art scene. For him, our vision of the art of today is a continuing renewal of our relation to the past. This means that our own individual experience also helps to change the history of art, which must thus always be rewritten. With his strong ethical convictions, he asserts the power of art, ancient or contemporary, to overcome historical divisions. Here, his vision encounters that of an institutional director specialized in contemporary art, committed to promoting the public role of art and concerned to enhance the relations between the artist's creative activity and the society from which it emerges.

Several considerations were taken into account in planning the exhibition:

- showing the wealth of the Frac collection, and equally the diversity of its aesthetic options
- identifying thematic guidelines in the collection and the showing how they can be enriched
- structuring the collection's diversity by presenting the visitor with visually and aesthetically meaningful sequences of exhibits.

The impossible collection

The title of the exhibition conveys something that is a fundamental reality for the Fracs. While they are generally referred to as collections, these sets of works do not correspond to a logical acquisition policy or to the regular monitoring that this would involve. Even after thirty years of reflection on acquisition policy, the Frac "collections" remain very mixed assemblages, interesting precisely because they reflect the nature of current artistic expression in its ever-increasing diversity and constant renewal. The acquisitions of a Frac are guided by a succession of artistic projects which open up new trails as well as reinforcing older ones, suggesting that if the works of the Fracs retrace 30 years of the history of taste, this is something that can be better appreciated when taking into account all 23 Frac collections rather than each one individually. Here the collection principle proves impossible to respect and any exhibition organized on such a basis is confronted with the difficulty of bringing together works whose connections seem at times remote. Collecting the art of a particular time thus comes to seem like an impossible challenge.

Gems, sets and curios...

Every Frac has its gems, works that have become treasures as their approval rating has gone up, or that have acquired the status of museum pieces, like Cy Twombly's very fine set of lithographs, *Natural History Part I*, which opens the exhibition, or again Jean-Marc Bustamante's *Tableau n°103*, a work with the status of a theoretical manifesto, on the interface between photography and painting. Each Frac collection is also an experimental space, the bets taken on works depending on the confidence one has in the artist, on intuition or taste. What becomes of them on looking back? The Fracs are lucky to be able to hold onto pieces that as well as being paradoxical, surprising or intriguing are deeply rooted in their time, like Bernard Quesniaux's pictorial triptych *Vue dans la rue* (Seen in the street). A collection is also enhanced through individual acquisitions of rare works in which one instantly recognizes a combination of visual strength and richness of meaning, like Stéphane Thidet's installation *Untitled (I mean it could really exist, in theory, in the middle of this table [...])*, or the incredible *Sections of a Happy Moment* by the Belgian video artist David Claerbout.

A range of themes

The Impossible Collection is nonetheless an opportunity to display some of the thematic guidelines that have been mapped out in the Frac collection over the last thirty years. The question of landscape, natural or urban, is treated here transversally. On the one hand, it is seen from an aesthetic angle as the relation between plant forms and ornamental ones, in which the works of Jean-Marc Bustamante and Bernard Quesniaux are brought face to face with Fernande Petitemange's set of photographs *Étrangers anonymes* (*Anonymous strangers*).

Architecture, on the other hand, functions not just as an environment or a critical object but also as a motif, for example in the work of the painter Christophe Cuzin, in Stéphane Couturier's photograph *Monument-Séoul n°1* or in the *Dead Set* series by Sophie Ristelhueber. As well as landscape, there is also an interest in the place in society of the individual, enacting the dictates both of his individual conscience - Marc Bauer's *Dread* (08/2019) - and of collective interplay - Walter Niedermayr's *Vedretta Piana III*. The exhibition closes with an imposing multimedia installation, *Tu crois que je voulais te tuer ?* (*Did you think I wanted to kill you?*), from the *labOratoire / labOfilm* series, a four-hand work by the dancer and choreographer Olga Mesa and the mixed media artist Francisco Ruiz de Infante. The visitor, invited to move freely among arrays of images disrupting and displacing his perception of depth, becomes the protagonist of a metastaging of his body in space.

The sequencing of the rooms in the *The Impossible Collection* is therefore conceived as a series of propositions on the shifting, complex nature of present time as experienced by the artists. From more spectacular works to more intimate ones, an organic vision of the world unfolds, linking representation and abstraction (*Erased Drawings*, Susan Morris), the poetical (*Traversées*, Étienne Pressager) and the political (*Save Manhattan 01*, Mounir Fatmi). But above all, beyond the themes they evoke, the arrangement of the works aims to reveal their aesthetic qualities.