ALMINE RECH

Bertrand Lavier
A cappella

Mar 4 — Apr 15, 2017 | Paris

Ad Reinhardt, who knew his stuff, once gave this both wicked and hilarious definition of sculpture: "something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting." Since the beginning of his career over 40 years ago, Bertrand Lavier has always avoided this unfortunate dilemma by making light of the academic opposition between these two fine arts. For instance, his painted objects from the 1980s debunked one of the most classical assumptions about sculpture embodying what painting represses.

For his new exhibition in Paris, the artist goes on playfully tackling this question of painting and sculpture with one additional twist: *A cappella*, the title of the show, serving him as a method. Indeed, Bertrand Lavier enjoys spinning the musical metaphor, actually describing his practice as a *stridence*, which consists in "turning up the acoustic or visual volume to a level that could be compared to the phenomenon of incandescence." That said, no instrumental accompaniment was needed here, hence the artist's three monochromes that welcome us into the exhibition: *Bleu cobalt* (2017), *Jaune cadmium clair* (2017) and *Vert permanent* (2017). These three works further a series of monochromes, which was initiated in 1986. They are photographs of previously colored surfaces, over which the artist repainted identically, that is, the most illusionistically possible, the initial compositions. If Bertrand Lavier originally meant to highlight in this series the difference between painting and photography, the didactic dimension has since disappeared. Even though it remains visible, the distinction has now become subtler and requires more attention from the viewer. The brushwork over the photographed monochromes isn't that of Van Gogh, which the artist qualifies as "modern," yet it evokes the more "contemporary" touch of abstract expressionism, a spontaneous and popular equivalent of which Bertrand Lavier found on the display windows sprinkled with whiting of rue Louise Weiss or avenue Montaigne in Paris. This blurring effect takes on another form in the landscapes *Paysages aixois* (2015) and *Sombernon* (2016), which were made on found tourist signs. The artist mimetically covered them with acrylic paint and this time, *impressionism oblige*, a hint of Van Gogh's stroke. What we end up seeing are both a painted tourist sign and a landscape painting. Whereas such signs are primarily designed to point at a landscape unfolding beyond them, Bertrand Lavier's process of repainting over (and after) them forces us to reconsider the object before our eyes as a landscape that has been cut out of its context. Thus these touristic means, which are intended to index typical places or monuments, gain the status of paintings. Through this operation, Bertrand Lavier uncovers the true etymological sense of the *picturesque*, that is, what is worthy of being painted.

Reversed logics: similarly and exhilaratingly so, Bertrand Lavier's *Walt Disney Productions*, an ongoing series of paintings and sculptures made after pictures from Walt Disney comic books, shows us how his referential images have as much to do with the history of modern art as they have with that of cartoons.

When in 1984 Bertrand Lavier hauled a fridge up onto a safe, he put into critical perspective the dialectic initiated by Rodin and Brancusi between the pedestal and the statue, all the while *grafting* them (a notion that the artist retained from his studies in horticulture).

In *Colonne Ford* (2017), the artist clinched a Ford sedan's taillight into an old stone column, which literally and spectacularly expresses this *grafting* operation by offering an unprecedented visual situation based on elements that have already demonstrated – although in a different context and in a different way – their efficiency.

Finally, *La Vénus d'Amiens* (2016) is reminiscent of *Nautiraid* (2002), although it inverses the latter's logics. Whereas *Nautiraid* gave a slightly futuristic twist to the practice of archaeology with the restoration of a contemporary object, a damaged kayak, *La Vénus d'Amiens* defies the laws of History in an even more untimely way. The referential object is over 23,000 years old. It consists of 19 fragments of limestone, which were found as a shapeless pile on the site of Renancourt in 2014, and which – once assembled – almost integrally reconstituted a 15-centimeter-high Venus from the Paleolithic era. Using the most contemporary tools of 3D modeling, Bertrand Lavier has transformed this statuette and its exaggerated sexual attributes into a near 2-meter-high sculpture. In doing so, he has displaced it from its archaeological context to grant it instead an eminently sculptural status within the great tradition of academic statuary. This academic dimension is further highlighted by the use of plaster. Plaster casts have been used in Europe since the 18th century as means allowing the students to access the "originals" of antique or classical sculptures without having to leave the academies or travel anywhere. Bertrand Lavier could have transposed this Venus into a nobler material (such as marble or bronze) or a more contemporary one (such as resin or nickel bronze), but he chose a material, which belongs – classically speaking – to the realm of the copy or reproduction. Reversing the usual order of precedence is a way for the artist to make this statuette from the Cro-Magnon era enter the global history of sculpture, as well as to short-circuit the temporalities of History and Art. *A cappella*, that is, without useless sophistication, with the humblest material there is.

Bernard Marcadé
(translated from French by Violaine Boutet de Monvel)