

SCENIC DRIVE

Jean-Baptiste Bernadet in Marfa

May 1-26, 2013, Marfa Book Company

Two years after his Artist's Residency at the Chinati Foundation, Jean-Baptiste Bernadet presents *Scenic Drive*, a new body of paintings, at the Marfa Book Company Gallery.

The exhibition opens with a public reception on Wednesday, May 1st, from 5-7pm, and will be on display through Sunday, May 26th.

A prolonged meditation on the possible equivalencies between the mineral, human and pictorial realms unites the work.

The Writing of Stones, The Reading of Paintings

Nature is a temple in which living pillars
Sometimes give voice to confused words;
Man passes there through forests of symbols
Which look at him with understanding eyes.
– Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, 1857

In 1970, French intellectual, poet, and translator, Roger Caillois (1913-1978) published *L'Écriture des pierres* (*The Writing of Stones*). In this book, Caillois examines the relationship between forms generated by the mineral world and those born of the human imagination. He attempts decrypting agates, onyxes and various Tuscan marbles that men have historically collected for their resemblances, to a landscape, a city, a face, and so forth. Ever and always *there* - the absolute presence of these stones fascinates us. Sought out for their unique character and the curious drawings they contain, they are framed, made into paintings and used as supports for creating other works. In Florence, l'Opificio delle Pietre Dure (literally, The Workshop for Semi-precious Stone) holds several examples of these objects, whose motifs serve as backgrounds for many pictorial compositions. For Chinese Dream Stones, for example, artists simply titled and signed the stones, admiring their powers of suggestion, and preferring this to any analogical dimension they may have.

In reading these stones, Roger Caillois both stimulates and relies on the imagination, situating the mineral realm at the heart of human existential questioning. It is not so much a question of turning these stones into works of art as of seizing their immemorial dimension.

In a passage on septaria, stones sprinkled with a never-ending variety of hieroglyphs, Roger Caillois elicits speech from one of them: "I don't signify anything," she says, "but I was smart enough to anticipate the particular economy of a restrained symbols that composes writing. Only a few are needed to enumerate the multitude of things that exist in the universe, as well as those born from desires or dreams. There is no speech too long or complex to be conserved and transcribed by them. The world is full of discarded alphabets, their codes long lost. Their beauty lives on. Not only because of the scribes' or engravers' talents, but the unemployed virtue that remains, that of being able to record everything."

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Texas, New Mexico, the West – regions explored by Old World citizen Jean-Baptiste Bernadet during his last stay in Marfa – are sand and stone books, opening onto world history. These immense and atemporal landscapes, like the stones that comprise them, provoke primordial musings and a questioning of anthropocentrism. From the writings of stones to the reading of landscapes, they offer, to those able to understand them, Charles Baudelaire’s “forest of symbols.”

Collecting stones (like Donald Judd), visiting Big Bend, Death Valley or the Petrified Forest, fashioning a belt buckle out of semi-precious stones... the human being reconnects (however awkwardly) with his origins, searching – through these mineral intermediaries– to insert himself into time, to feel the permanence of things, to regain an elsewhere that was here long before he was.

Painting was already here, a long time before Jean-Baptiste Bernadet became interested in it. But his canvases accept their insertion into a timescale that both surpasses and subsumes them. They constantly look back to painting’s primordial origins, a pre-linguistic state where univocal interpretations would be impossible but obscure meanings could emerge (“confused words”). He appropriates art historical and painting-specific codes through his various ways of working, his relationship to images, his use of recurring motifs, and his engagement with the painterly gesture. Covering the surface with glass beads or successive layers of paint, laying down thick or thin material, encrusting non-pictorial elements, veiling the surface in plastic, showcasing the painterly mark or, on the contrary, resolutely erasing it, letting contour or inversely color dominate: so many attempts to make this at once out of date and ever pertinent painting “alphabet” his own, to assemble his own breviary. But this logic of appropriation, meant to get back to the essentials of painting, “doesn’t aim at reproducing a gesture, an image, or a code, but rather a subjectification that is the result of a displacement in a singular practice,” that, because we are in the 21st, inevitably includes a critical and reflexive dimension.

Like Roger Caillois’ ventriloquist stones, the mineral works Jean-Baptiste Bernadet brings together at the Marfa Book Company are core samples from the studio, their vanishing points and exposed surfaces as sharp or inversely blunt as an agate or nodule. Cut from a daily pictorial practice, extracted from a simultaneously interior and immemorial landscape, they are an invitation to read.

Text by Clément Dirié

Translated by Benjamin Crotty

This exhibition was made possible thanks to the support of Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles.

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Jean-Baptiste Bernadet was born in Paris in 1978. He has lived and worked in Brussels since 2000, and was artist-in-residence at Triangle Studios in Brooklyn in 2012, APT Studios in Brooklyn in 2011, and Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas, in 2010.

His solo exhibitions include, among others, Saks in Geneva, Torri in Paris, Renwick in New York (2011), the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, Maes & Matthys in Antwerp, Baronian_Francey Gallery in Brussels (2010), Les Filles du Calvaire in Brussels, Chapelle des Calvairiennes in Mayenne, France, Galerie Xprssns in Hamburg (2008), and Konsortium in Dusseldorf (2007).

Since 2001, he has participated in many group shows, including Toomer Labzda Gallery in New York, Angstrom in Dallas, Texas, Klemm's Gallery in Berlin, Villa Noailles in Hyères (2012), Artorama in

Marseille, 8 rue Saint Bon in Paris, White Flags in Saint Louis, Missouri (2011), WIELS in Brussels (2009 and 2010), Galerie Crèvecoeur in Paris (2009), Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tourcoing (2005), Galerie Catherine Bastide in Brussels (2004).

Upcoming projects include a solo show at Casado Santapau, Madrid, the Young Belgian Art Prize at Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, and a collaboration with American writer John d'Agata on the book *On Knowing Not*, forthcoming this year and published by Karma in New York City.