

Never, in any of his achievements, has François Méchain chosen facility or simplicity. The sculptures he conceives enter into a place and into history. They are a result of a long process of reflection based on a complex to and from between the essential concepts that revolve around man and his existence. The past, the present and the future, reality, that which is given to be seen and the perceived, oneself, others and hybridization, the sacred and weath, the machine and ecology, the need to find a meaning... all of these are a part of that which concerns François Méchain.

Belgium has an eventful political history. In turn under the control of the great European powers, it was only in 1830 that Belgium was created. Today, with three national languages, six governments and a cosmopolitan culture, it appears to be a model of complexity, and as such could only present a challenge for François Méchain. When invited by the Musée de la Photographie in Charleroi to become its artist in residence, he developed an interest in the history of the country, and also in that of the region which welcomed him. With its thriving metallurgical past and its active industries, the Charleroi basin presents a characteristic landscape moulded by economy.

François Méchain immersed himself in all these facts, he sought to seize the atmosphere of a region both marked by its past and surging towards the future. He needed to find a cradle for his future sculpture. The park at the Musée de la Photographie soon proved to be the obvious choice. It would make it possible for the artist to reunite nature, man and history in an ephemeral work.

Nature is represented by a weeping ash. A splendid and tortuous tree, intrigant, already sculptural. Its branches twist, cross, entangle themselves and, inevitably, remind one of those tentacular factories which dominate the Charleroi landscape. Standing before these forests of canalizations, one thinks of an organic mass which must have developed and arranged just to form these rust-coloured monsters. The similarity was obvious, and that is how the pipes emerge around the trunk of the ash. They enclose it, accompany it in the heights. They slip between the branches and start living in the unison with the tree. The branches anchor themselves in the pipes, the pipes substitute themselves for missing branches, a tangle of nature and of fabrication is forged...

Suddenly, the tree and the tubes become one. A network is created, links are woven. From the anomalous and the difference is born a union which now seems inevitable. The second surprise comes from the ground. The pipes plunge underground and thence arise in the heart of the museum, in what was once the cloisters of the convent. They install their entwinements in the place where a tree, a well or a statue would have stood, a human creation in Christian symbolism. Not in the centre of the square which delinates the cloister, but a little to the side, for the feat of man cannot be perfect... Here again the pipes

return underground to re-emerge in the chancel and end by establishing a palpable link between three of the great powers of our society: nature, religion and the economy.

Nothing is ever simple for François Méchain, nor is anything ever terminated. Reflection continues. Ideas cross each other, enriched by their encounters, and push the project ahead. Now it is that photography intervenes, but not the simple recording of a sculptural act, leading from its vegetal state to its disappearance into a more or less near future, but a new interpretation, by its bidimensionality of course, by the choice of standpoint, single or multiple, by framing and playing with scale, by fixing a moment defined by light, the elements, movement... At that moment, photography is a shutter of the work, in the future it becomes that work.

*Christelle Rousseau,
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(Translated by Jenny Connell)

To meet the sculpture of François Méchain, without warning, in the turning of a wood, erect in a field or in the clearing of a glade, could not fail to arouse questions on the motive of such an assembly in the average witness, and I do not exclude myself from this category. Either one is in the presence of some method of collection or of harvest that follows a an erudite technique distinguishing it from another region or another society; or one has come face to face with the jokes of truant adventurers, nevertheless amusingly applied; or perhaps it is associated with some ancient ritual dating from the times when the forest was questioned, when the forest replied, when the elders offered divine praise to such oaks and rocks when they did not construct barrows. Lastly, it could also be a matter of a caprice of nature, in that it draws our attention by rejecting those trimmed hedges, those marked out paths, those harvested meadows, by suddenly shaking its coat, by straightening the spine and the bark like a wounded animal.

What astonishes next, is the apparent disorder of the undertaking, its spontaneity and its urgency, an impression quickly unmasked by the revelation of a meticulous organisation of material, drawn from of the site and seldom imported. In this way, when François Méchain selects a site, he takes into account its resources to provide for the synthesis, and to supply a source in the cycle of the seasons. So much so that for him, landscape, in the geographical or historical sense of the term, assumes equal importance with that of which it is composed, its physical, geological or vegetal elements.

Another impression is not of a submission to nature, or gratification with a sculptural act, but of a development of this, a revolt or a start of which the artist is just the instigator, the activist. The possibilities of nature, this is what animates Méchain, cherishing the hope of a time of hidden demiurge.

More than twenty years ago, his *Equivalences* linked four to six photographs vertically, arranged for a panoramic view, from sky to earth. By capturing elements likely through analogy to start a poetic process: from a cloudy sky to sheep in a meadow, the syllogism worked on both language and the image (*Equivalence*, 1978) by suppressing the border, although clear separation between each negative concealed nothing of the organisation of the work, and denied the photograph some objectivity, some reference to reality.

Thus, in Quebec, this concentration of conifers erect and crowded together, pruned on the periphery but leafy in the centre, as if saved from war or a flood, regroups to confront a final attack (*Chemin au Parc-épic*, Canada, 1990). Likewise, this roll of grass and plants which seems to advance in conquest of the hills around Athens or to be the ultimate plant witness of a lost city (*Kaissariani*, Greece, 1993).

I also see the expression of a sense of «natural rebellion» in *Sculpture Fiction n° 7* (France, 1988), standing like a wood shaving on the board of a wood carving, a ridiculous

tentacle threatening the sky; and with *Double négatif* (France, 1995), a photographic diptych in positive and negative according to different the shots which shows two strips of grass lifted from the earth and rolling themselves across the main branches of a tree.

Elsewhere, it is the hint of a wooded hill on the horizon which arouses the realisation of the sculpture in the foreground that accumulates branches and tree trunks to reproduce the undulation of its setting (*La Rivière Noire*, Canada, 1990), an imperceptible work, almost camouflaged, which would escape the inattentive witness if the photograph did not offer us an explicit model, a simulation of the mountain on a smaller scale.

The problem of reduction of scale is also declined in *Pieges à lumière* produced for Chicoutimi in Canada, large baskets of woven branches, placed like nests in the grass, or modelled on the trap by «corners», considerably enlarged in the photographic print, and mounted like totems.

One can imagine land art of course, but with some exceptions, François Méchain invites a more intimate vision, with the conception of the tracker rather than that of the landscape designer on his study, in his *Territoires/Traouiero* (1992), the rustle and the tension of foliage, reproduced as if for a physics lesson with the words «flexibility», «resistance» separated by the trunk, of the branches of a chestnut tree bound together with a white strand so as to suggest the apparent immobility of force and tension.

For François Méchain yet another aspect, perhaps another temptation, is the intervention of the word in images, as in this fragile screen of branches which he stretches in Canada between Toronto and the island where it is held, superimposing two definitions, written in english, of the word «island».

That François Méchain lives in the Land of Jacques Chardonne, with its reputation as a place where one takes the time to live and to observe, does not displease me, in his ability to perceive before acting, in his comprehension and his accord with the landscape.

On rereading my text, I realise that I have hardly spoken about photography. Is it, in Méchain's case, significant to know if he is a sculptor who takes photographs or a photographer who sculpts? For him, photography is one element of the process of his work, a process leading from the walk to the discovery of the site and on to the realisation of the installation, its future or its destruction. It is not so much an image of a memory which determines Méchain, but another possibility that he offers to his work, another state, a compromise between that which is not and that will be no more.

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(Translated by Jenny Connell)