

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 entwined-ments 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 deliniates 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 bidimensionnality 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,  
Associate curator of the Musée de la Photographie*

(Translated by Jenny Connell)