

## Press Release

### *Circulus*

"The core of my nature, no matter what anyone says, is the clown." (Gustave Flaubert in a letter to Louise Colet)

Carlotta Bailly-Borg, Valérie Belin, Nina Childress, Michele Ciacciofera, Erik Dietman, Sylvie Fanchon, Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux, Natacha Lesueur, Lucile Littot, Mathieu Mercier, Chloé Quenum, JC Ruggirello, Elsa Sahal, Thomas Schütte

An invitation to Colette Barbier

March 11 - May 6, 2023

Opening Saturday, March 11, 3pm - 8pm

Why has this clown so awkwardly painted, purchased long ago on a sidewalk, followed me throughout all these years? He reigns. He mocks. He worries !

At Claudine Papillon's invitation, I immediately thought of this small painting installed in my home which evokes, I think, a whole world that has always fascinated me : that of the circus, carnivals or other communities living on the fringes - like those so brilliantly filmed by Clément Cogitore, Jean-Charles Hue or Bertille Bak.

Bringing together artists and works which confront the notion of derision and question the role of the artist in contemporary society is not new. At the beginning of the last century, Paul Klee had already been using the figure of the clown to address the precarious living conditions of artists. Has nothing changed ? Has this character, who has been used throughout the history of art and literature, kept his usefulness to signify, in a parodic and indirect way, the place of art in society - as well as the sometimes pathetic character of existence ?

After my invitation, Sylvie Fanchon wrote me these few words: "The burlesque is an arm to accept the tragic, laughter is a detachment from the tragic." Her painting plays with contemporary orders to keep one's spirits up in any situation. Erik Dietman, having chosen to be represented as an almost naked satyr balancing on a rock playing the flute for the posters of his exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in 1994, would certainly not have balked at appearing in this colorful selection. The portrait of him that we exhibit, *Geranium lake*, shows the artist with his nose drowned in a clownish red spot from which a fish emerges.

As for Carlotta Bailly Borg's limp and contorted character, it belongs to a large family of grotesque and awkward painted figures ; he seems to want to come out of his frame but his destination remains a mystery. Lucile Littot, who likes to define herself by this Audiard quote, "Happy are the cracked and damaged, because they let the light pass through ! ", proposes two disarticulated and fragile dolls. They are at the same time graceful and slightly ridiculous. Michele Ciacciofera's touching and battered ceramics,

arranged in a circle, remind us of a small merry-go-round; but a closer look will reveal a proudly raised middle finger, which makes one wonder to whom it is being addressed. Jean-Claude Ruggirello, for his part, uses video as a way to talk about sculpture. In the one we



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have chosen for the exhibition, absurdity is pushed to its maximum. The puppet of Mathieu Mercier, totally disembodied, would like to stir up the world but in vain.

Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux, for whom grotesque figures are used to question the values of art, proposes a figure of the artist/clown in this drawing in which no one could guess if he has been knocked out or has indigestion. Elsa Sahal, with such natural audacity, delightfully models the earth to release more and more monstrous figures. *Clownesses* chosen for this exhibition evokes without question the figure of the red nosed Auguste clown and *Clotho*, one of the Greek Fates who holds human destiny in her hands. The farce is no longer in doubt.

"You can paint nonsense and I would even tend to think that it is better to paint nonsense if you want painting to remain a little exciting !" asserts Nina Childress. This nonsense, for the exhibition, will be self-portraits as a clown and an equally comical Sylvie Vartan. Thomas Schütte, for whom "the works are intended to introduce a twisted question mark into the world" is present here with three engravings that belong to a portfolio of one hundred and two engravings entitled *Quengelware*. Among other subjects dear to the artist, there are jesters, circus performers and other deeply clownish figures.

*Lady Heart*, the work of Valérie Belin, is part of a new series of photographs entitled *Heroes*, which is partly inspired by the codes of theatrical representation and mime. Chloé Quenum, a multidisciplinary artist, has created a work especially for this exhibition in which the African fabric patterns she is particularly fond of are replaced by the iconic squares of the Harlequin's costume. Natacha Lesueur's self-portrait, whose ambition is to produce images which show what the eye cannot see, crudely uses the codes of clown makeup to produce a mocking and disturbing figure.

In this exhibition, the figure of the clown acts as a pretext to look at things sideways, to bring out the grotesque nature of the conventions that govern our contemporary lives. Fascinating, it holds our gaze in a space of questioning and incomprehension, constantly sending us back to our individual condition, to the way in which we take on the subjects that are scattered throughout our daily lives. The clown responds to all of these more or less known dramas with a big burst of laughter, which for a moment, turns the world upside down.

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