

Feature Julien Creuzet's Complex Work: Plastic Poetics, Landscapes, Hybridizations

by Pascale Krief



Backup, Blackness ou Négritude, bleu, vert, orange, je suis fatigué, A female Negro Slave, with a weight chained to her Ankle, Blackness ou Négritude, nuances de vert de la mer, cadavérique, Amérique, Agave, Backup, bleu, vert, orange, je suis fatigué, rose chair, gris métallique en peer-to-peer, Auellaine des Indes de Acosta, stress oxydatif, Blackness ou Négritude, des mutagénèses. Barre de justice, colliers et cadenas pour enchaîner les esclaves à bord des navires négriers, persistance rétinienne, dans le dedans des songes, Blackness ou Négritude, Phasme Arumatia duplex, The Sugar Cane, in its four different Stages, rayonnements ionisants Blackness, Cassia Alata, rhum, bicarbonate ou Négritude s'écroule en part des anges, je suis fatigué, La même barque de négrier arabe, coupe théorique, pour faire voir l'entassement des malheureux esclaves accroupis et cachés entre les planchers, Blackness bains de feuilles ou Négritude antibiotiques, Pigments et Névralgies, the genotoxic, Backup Blackness ou Négritude, L'AURORE, le CBD atténue les douleurs (...), 2021. Plastic, metal, fabrics, wood, and electrical wiring. 230 × 100 × 70 cm. Courtesy of the artist and High Art, Paris / Arles.

Born in 1986 in the suburbs of Paris, Julien Creuzet grew up in Martinique before returning to study in the French capital. He graduated from the ESAM Caen (DNSAP), the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Lyon (postgraduate), and Le Fresnoy–Studio National des Arts Contemporains (Raul Ruiz cohort), and then began research for a thesis in Montreal. His work is articulated around a hybrid identity, which he fully asserts and which shapes what he does, and around the density of thinking nourished by complementary sources.

Some fifteen solo or group shows¹ in emblematic venues have established his work on the French and international art scenes. Currently in residence at the Luma Foundation in Arles,² Creuzet, whose work is on display at the Camden Art Centre until May³ and in the Centre Pompidou's permanent collection, has been appointed head of the sculpture department at the Écoles des Beaux-Arts de Paris. He is also one of eight members of the commission from the French national Mondes Nouveaux program,⁴ and he won Art Basel's BMW Art Journey award in June 2021.

His work combines precariously balanced, hybrid, three-dimensional plastic forms that unfold in space from the floor or ceiling, developed from *povera*-style materials and composite objects, with video, photographic, and graphic components, plus scripted and sonic elements made up of a complex poetic language woven from a set of historical, philosophical, and sociological references.



“les lumières affaiblies des étoiles lointaines les lumières à LED des gyrophares se complaisent, lampadaire braise brûle les ailes, sacrifice fou du papillon de lumière, fantôme crépusculaire d’avant la naissance du monde (...) c’est étrange, j’ai dû partir trop longtemps le lointain, mon chez moi est dans mes rêves-noirs c’est étrange, des mots étranglés dans la noyade, j’ai hurlé seul dans l’eau, ma fièvre (...)” Exhibition view at Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2019. Photography by Aurélien Mole. Courtesy of Palais de Tokyo, Paris.

Opera / Archipelago

The title of one of his first videos, *Opera-Archipelago, I’ve left Paris*, 2015, (HD video, 16:9, 20’, Collection FRAC-Normandie), a partial reworking of the title of a set of works shown in two previous exhibitions, condenses the specificities of his work. The combination of these two notions marks the place occupied by the textual and aural dimensions, their polyphonic organization, and the importance of the paradigm articulated by Édouard Glissant. This reference to the multidimensional notion of the Archipelago carries with it aspects of both an identity and an emancipation, and the idea of synthesis between cultures, which is reflected in the complex conceptual and formal hybridization of Creuzet’s practice. The autobiographical dimension, whose resonance in terms of identity comes across in the second part of the title, *I’ve left Paris*, questions, in a complex reversal of meaning, pre-constructed or predictable categories of thought, in a modality that Creuzet applies to the whole of his work.

This *attitude*, or set of attitudes, becomes textual, musical, and plastic forms, and organizes Creuzet’s relation to the exhibition space.

The hybrid and mysterious three-dimensional forms, often precariously balanced, originating in the collection and in the recycling of manufactured or natural materials — clothing, plant elements, plastics, statuettes, cord, nets — recall the archipelago paradigm by their composite aspect, their votive dimension, and an inhabited materiality resulting from their previous uses. They constitute a possible synthesis between the *arte povera* artists’ relationship to materials — or that of certain post-Minimalist conceptual artists influenced by it — and a reinterpretation of the ethos of recuperation that is omnipresent in Africa and the Caribbean. The sculptural work of making these plastic forms in the studio involves well-identified techniques such as hot-shaping and molding of polymers, sewing, but also Creuzet’s own techniques such as assemblage with knots using ropes, cords, and threads, in a formal hybridization. Their precarious equilibrium is perhaps a reminder that this archipelagic paradigm involves the search for the right balance or position between different tropisms or influences, in a permanent, deliberate oscillation, while their dissemination in space evokes the geographical reality in which it originates.

Plastic poetics

The importance of the textual and sonic dimension as a central element in the work and as a key to understanding it — although he also affirms the sensory dimension — has been evident since Creuzet’s first exhibitions. For him, it constitutes a form in its own right, which contributes to sculpting space in a complex way, while the plastic dimension of his work can be seen as its possible deployment in space. As he analyzed during one of our conversations,⁵ “Poetry makes it possible to convey an imaginary, a complexity, things that can be difficult to formulate in a frontal way. [...] What is interesting about this writing is that it may be a way of telling a story, or history. [...] In the context of this very specific space, that of the Marcel Duchamp Prize at the Centre Pompidou, where we are now, I felt that there was something that could be done, a sort of inventory, something to be affirmed in a stronger way than is usually the case in my works, but with subtlety.”⁶

“Backup, Blackness or Negritude, blue, green, orange, I’m tired, A female Negro Slave, with a weight chained to her Ankle, Blackness or Negritude, shades of sea green, cadaverous, America, Agave, Backup, blue, green, orange, I’m tired, flesh pink, metallic grey in peer-to-peer, Auellaine of the Indies of the Acostas, oxidative

stress, Blackness or Negritude, mutagenesis. Bar of justice, collars and padlocks to chain slaves on board slave ships, retinal persistence, in the interior of dreams, Blackness or Negritude, Phasma Arumatia duplex, The Sugar Cane, in its four different Stages (...) I am tired, (...) Blackness leaf baths or Negritude antibiotics, Pigments and Neuralgia, the genotoxic, Backup Blackness or Negritude, L’AURORE, CBD alleviates pain (...)” This excerpt from the wall text, printed in very small characters, off-center at the bottom, like a secret message intended only for those who would like to see it, constitutes, as is often the case with Creuzet, both the title and its explanation, evoking Duchamp’s statement: “The titles add a new dimension; they are like new or added colors, or, better yet, they can be compared to the varnish through which the image may be seen and amplified.”⁷

Three songs of pain — “They split my heart. Do I have the wrong color?” — printed on the wall and transcribed in English in yellow letters on a video screen also sculpt the sound space over trumpet improvisations based on compositions by the mathematician and semiologist Jacques Coursil. A bibliography, displayed on wall and screen, which refers to a series of books that have shaped Creuzet’s thinking, completes this textual triangulation. On one wall, a wallpaper contains the critical text on the exhibition published in the catalogue. Printed in a very large format and augmented with black marker by Creuzet, superimposed on a set of photographs augmented with graphic elements, it constitutes another voice in the polyphonic textual dimension of this opera.

Landscapes

The forms that unfold in the space directly or indirectly evoke these words, which they subtly materialize. Some might evoke ships, skeletons, votive forms. The ensemble takes up the usual visual codes of Creuzet’s works, with large horizontal formats and vertical forms anchored in the floor.

For each exhibition Creuzet invents a complex landscape that articulates and renews different archipelagic forms in a multiform polyphonic opera that takes into account the specificity of each venue in a subtle alchemy.

The way in which the works are distributed in the space contributes to establishing a radically new relationship with the viewer, encouraging him or her to break away from previous categories of thought and embodying in the space the specificity of this *attitude* and its archipelagic form. Their format and positioning establish a horizontality and physical immediacy in relation to the work. The pieces echo each other in such a way as to progressively enrich our understanding, to create “landscapes” to be explored, which are constituted in the visual juxtaposition of the forms and their perspective, and in which the viewer becomes one of the elements. “I make sure that there is no frontality in the relationship to the work, but a kind of horizontality, and a visual telescoping. I believe that this allows us to understand better. For example, from this particular point of view where I am, I see three or four forms at the same time, which also give me a perspective, a depth, with this bibliography that appears on the wall. [...] The way in which the works meet each other, and are articulated with our own bodies as they wander through the space also interests me [...]. The interaction or the relationship between the different types of forms, the fact that we can walk between them, or rather in the middle of them, to have this landscape — the idea of a landscape, which would be to be lived in and to be explored, is closely bound up with my work.”⁸

This overlapping of pieces via the gaze establishes shifting and secret relationships between them,

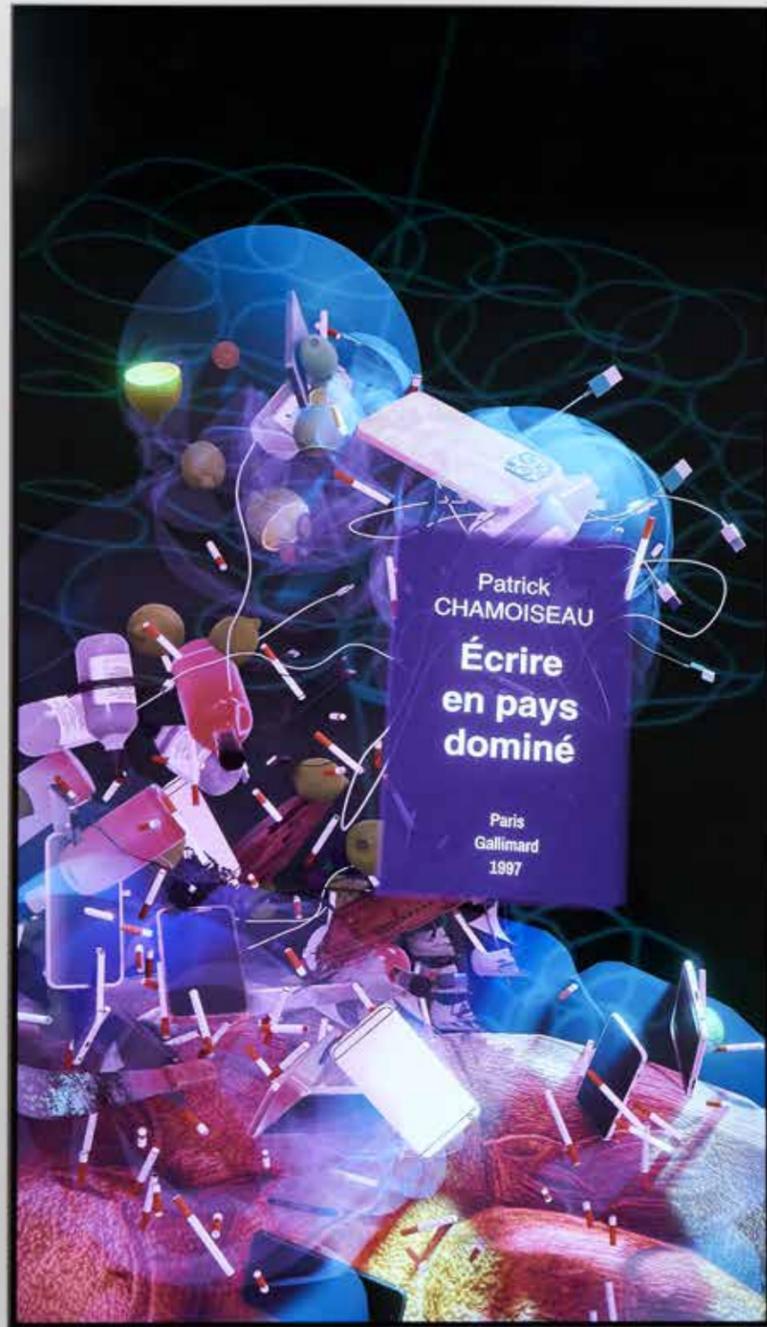




"Too blue, too deep, too dark we sank..." Exhibition view at Camden Art Centre, London, 2022. Photography by Rob Harris. Courtesy of Camden Art Centre, London.

Prix Duchamp 2021. Installation view at Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2021.
Courtesy of the artist and High Art, Paris / Arles.





Oswald DE ANDRADE, «Manifesto Antropófago», *A utopia antropofágica*, São Paulo, Editora Globo, 1990, p. 47-52. Maya ANGÉLOU, *Poems*, New York, Bantam Books, 1993. Marie-Célie AGNANT, *Femmes des terres brûlées*, Montréal, Les éditions de la Pleine lune, 2006. (...), 2021. 4K video animation. 8'00". Courtesy of the artist and High Art, Paris / Arles.

which change according to point of view, the place where we find ourselves, giving rise to new readings, helping to deconstruct and question the very notions of exhibition space and of the uniqueness of the work.

The landscape Creuzet constructed for his exhibition at the Camden Art Centre, "Too blue, too deep, too dark we sank...", also centers on questions of identity and history. The exhibition focuses on Caribbean identity in order to interrogate it with regard to the notion of diaspora, by building bridges between the diasporas from the French and English islands. It is articulated around a new set of plastic works employing the symbols that appear on the flags of the now-independent islands along with a new video, which mixes self-portraiture and reflection on a traditional dance close to trance, which incites mourning for the condition of slavery, deepening, along with other plastic and textual works, the reflection begun for the Marcel Duchamp Prize exhibition.

Conceptual and formal hybridizations

This historical concern is not always so much in the foreground of Creuzet's work, although the references, direct or indirect, to "Blackness" and to a hybrid culture are almost always asserted. "What I expect from art is the freedom to be able to formulate things that come from my imagination, from my encounters: how can a life situation trigger my desire to generate forms to try to dialogue with others?"⁹ At the Palais de Tokyo in 2019, his exhibition "dim lights of distant stars LEDs of warning lights indulge, lamp post embers that burn wings, mad sacrifice of the light butterfly, twilight phantom from before the birth of the world [...] it's the uncanny, I must have been gone too long that place far away, home is in my black-dreams it's the uncanny, strangled words while drowning, I howled alone underwater, my fever" was thus articulated around a vast ensemble of metal structures and photographs augmented and printed on posters supported by these structures, wallpapers, and elements on the ground that indirectly evoked elements of a then-ongoing political situation. At the Centre Pompidou, a work acquired in 2019, *Can you feel me on the ground, little games, hair in the dust. Solar source, I am a witch. Head in the air, worshipper, androgynous endocrine, ovary-less, I have a date at 9am, sweetness of heart, at 9 am, I have expectations at 9 am, disagreement at 9 am, I have moods at 9am, sweat fury at 9 am. At 9 am or at any other time...* (2018), on view as part of the Centre Pompidou's permanent collection, with a room dedicated to it, does not refer explicitly to these origins but to "the difficulty of getting along, in love stories."¹⁰

Above all, this formal hybridization links Creuzet to the latest generation of artists for whom boundaries between mediums do not exist and for whom the very notion of medium specificity belongs to the archaeology of the artistic field, having been replaced by perfect porosity. It appears as a formal correlative to the hybridization of identity or persons asserted here. It also corresponds to a radical emancipation from standardized forms, which interrogates preestablished or preexisting categories. Creuzet thus produces his own relationship to the critical categories of the artistic field and rethinks its fundamental notions.

(Translated from French by Charles Penwarden)

Julien Creuzet's solo exhibition "Too blue, too deep, too dark we sank..." is on view at Camden Art Centre through March 13, 2022.

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- 1 Notably: Lyon Biennale (2017), Bétonsalon and Fondation d'Entreprise Ricard (2018), Rencontres d'Arles (2018), Palais de Tokyo (2019), Museum für Modern Kunst (2020), Prix Marcel Duchamp, Centre Pompidou (2021), permanent collection display, Centre Pompidou (2021), Manifesta 13, Wiels (2020), Miami Art Basel (2021), Lafayette Anticipations (2018), Rencontres de Bamako (Mali, 2017).
- 2 November-December 2021 and April-June 2022.
- 3 Julien Creuzet, Camden Art Centre (January 14-March 13, 2021).
- 4 With a budget of thirty million euros to finance artworks on national sites.
- 5 Julien Creuzet interviewed by Pascale Krief, Centre Pompidou, Paris, November 29, 2021.
- 6 Idem.
- 7 Marcel Duchamp, in: Laurence S. Gold, "A Discussion of Marcel Duchamp's Views on the Nature of Reality and Their Relation to the Course of His Artistic Career," PhD thesis, Princeton University, 1958, pp. 8-10.
- 8 Julien Creuzet interviewed by Pascale Krief, Centre Pompidou, Paris, November 29, 2021.
- 9 Centre Pompidou film service, *Interview with Julien Creuzet*, October 11, 2021
- 10 Julien Creuzet interviewed by Pascale Krief, Centre Pompidou, Paris, November 29, 2021.