

miniatures of a world:  
windows, contours, scales, clues

Guillaume Leblon holds a singular place as a young French artist. Up to 1997, he studied at the National Art School in Lyon; since then he has mostly lived abroad and exhibited in Holland, Belgium, Italy and Germany. Consequently, his work has constantly faced up to different cultures without ever adhering to any particular artistic tendency. However, his way of proceeding and the precision of his installations also appear to be shared by certain of his contemporaries in France<sup>1</sup>, who also for the most part work abroad. Born around 1970-1975, these artists are less concerned with the past generation's interest in finding new modes of production, in de-routing economic systems, or in social "effectiveness"; instead they turn to references to pictorial abstraction, modern architecture, American sculpture of the 60's, conceptual art, process art, Structuralist cinema... taking an approach which may vary in formal terms but stems from a common concept: the art work is a clue, however slight it may be, that opens on to a spectrum of references, a construction, a story, an entire world.

This clue-like character is fundamental to Guillaume Leblon's work as a whole, as well as to the process by which he thinks out each individual work. In his peculiar way, he will retain a minor detail of some place he has visited or lived in, then present it somewhat like a piece of a puzzle which allows you to mentally construct the larger significance of the assembled whole. This is a way to read the architectural fragments in works such as *Equipment* (2002) installed at the Arti Museum, Amsterdam, or *Elévation* (2002) at the MAC in Lyon, and more recently *Mur Barasti* (2003) in the exhibition *azimut* at the Frac Bourgogne, a reconstruction in wallboard of the roof of a house designed by the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, adjusted to the scale of the exhibition space. Most of Leblon's works appear as emblematic clues that lead you through hypothetical narratives. Take, for example, *Contact* (2000) where filler is used to repair the heels of a pair of shoes. By treating the pair of shoes in this way, the artist is pointing out how worn they are – he is materialising their history. *Volume d'intérieur* (2004), included in *azimut* is another example related to the idea of the clue: the simple presence of a rolled carpet in the middle of the exhibition space introduces a temporal aspect that seemingly relates to the space in its former state – in other words, to the preceding exhibition.

When these clues, however restrained they may be, take the form of images, they go beyond the proposed narrative field – that is, beyond the spatial and temporal framework of the picture. The two photographs entitled *Chapelle* (2002) present views of warehouses in which furniture and objects have been mysteriously stored. By suggesting some future use for these contents, the temporal framework of the actual picture is broadened.

Guillaume Leblon's 16-mm films also serve to expand the frame, referring to what is located off-screen. By panning slowly over a row of flooded houses in *April Street* (2001), he makes you feel that the flood extends to infinity. The new film presented in *azimut* has a similar function. The main feature - a streak of lighting - shifts to another feature, the light coming from a house on a hill. The sequence underlines the relationship between the presence of facts or things and their disappearance. The streak of lightning could be emblematic of this, especially since its flash, echoed in the phenomenological nature of film, is accentuated by the lighting provided throughout the exhibition, where the perception of the assembled works is in fact doubled by virtue of a dimmer. The works exist both in daytime and night time, both in their presence and in their absence.

In the context of such a dialectic of presence and absence, the state of fullness defined by the spaces and objects Guillaume Leblon creates is inevitably related to the void formed within their contours. Thus, as is often the case with the artist, the work in the Frac show entitled *Contours* (2000) – a neon outline of a chandelier – is a play on container and content. In the film *Villa Cavroix* (2000), the artist's camera skims over the decrepit walls of Robert Mallet-Stevens' villa, making the exterior volume of the abandoned structure exist within mental space. On the other hand, for the installation *Interior-façade* (2001) presented at Public> in Paris, Leblon raised the floor and remodeled the existing walls of the space by erasing the interior and transforming it into a single full volume with new contours.

Windows appear frequently in Guillaume Leblon's work; they are contours of another sort, serving to link interior and exterior. In *azimut*, vapor seeps through the baseboard of one of the rooms (*qi*, 2003) and a small opening has been pierced in a wall of the Frac supposedly for a dog to enter from the neighboring garden. Both these works play on introducing the outdoors indoors. However, a window is something that opens on to the world. It opens a domestic space on to a cosmos which the artist

reduces to primary elements: a trickle of rain for *Essai gris* (2000) at W139 in Amsterdam, or two fires for *Ordinaires* (2000). Guillaume Leblon's art cultivates a meaningful relationship with the physical world and with natural phenomena in various states, particularly climatic ones influenced by factors of time and chance. In his recent works especially, the exterior world is re-transcribed into clues – smoke, lightning, the presence of a dog – which evoke an elementary, uncontrolled state that contrasts with the domestic aspect of other works.

In the context of a show like *azimut*, such clues help to expand the parameters of the space, and to open the mind to an elsewhere. Guillaume Leblon sees the exhibition as an occasion for folding, reversing and switching acts, generated by the works that function as mental projections or as transitions from one state to another, from less to more. This is how the 3 x 4 m poster *Bleu-nuit* (2004), a monochrome of the sky at night, should be interpreted, its apparent simplicity evoking iconic depth and intensity.

In *The Poetics of Space* (1957), Gaston Bachelard speaks of the possible relationships between the intimate and the infinite, microcosm and macrocosm, and more specifically between the miniature and the immense. Although his reflections apply mainly to poetry, the sensitivity of his writing is relevant to Guillaume Leblon's approach. In the chapter "Miniatures", Bachelard tries to link "the immensity of the world to the depth of the space within"; he defends a "phenomenology of extension, expansion, ecstasy, in short a phenomenology of the prefix":

"(...) Sometimes the transactions of the great and small echo and multiply. When a familiar image grows as big as the sky, we suddenly feel that familiar objects become miniatures of a world. Macrocosms and microcosms are correlative."<sup>2</sup>

A number of Guillaume Leblon's works function in a similar way. One, *Present* (2002), is a paper bag containing an indoor plant, emblematic of a condensed virgin forest. Apparently minimal and opaque, *Trunks* (2000) consists of chests containing all the artist's belongings from his studio at the Rijkakademie in Amsterdam. Reconstituted in a new version for *azimut*, the chests symbolically contain the vast amounts of materials and mental matter brought together for the exhibition. These thus serve as a metaphor for the updating of the artist's work.

More interestingly still, the work *Models in a box* (2003) is a cardboard box containing scale models of works, some of which have been realised, others not, mixed in with hybrid objects on different scales. The models are prototypes evoking architectural fragments, landscapes (a piece of plaster with a fold in it recalling mountain scenery), hemispheres (a world map by Buckminster Fuller). They appear as attempts to tame nature, as is the case with the sheet of paper which has been rolled up into a ball and whose creases have been remodeled by the artist. As the title indicates, each of these miniatures is a model. They are placed in boxes representing the full exhibition model. Contemporaneous with the elaboration of *azimut*, *Models in a box* represents a prefix to Leblon's work, that is to say a pre-visualisation of Guillaume Leblon's act of exhibiting.

Typical of Guillaume Leblon's way of working, *Models in a box* creates a tension between different states of the same object. *Mur Barasti*, which features in this model of the Frac show, exists on different scales – in the form of a folded piece of paper inside the model or life-size in his studio. This question of scale is at the core of Guillaume Leblon's concepts; it determines not only the relationship of each work to the others or to the exhibition space, but also of the artist to the world. In *azimut*, these "miniatures of the world" correspond to a horizon traced by the exhibition itself.

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1. I am thinking here of artists of the same generation such as Dove Allouche, Isabelle Cornaro, Marie-Jeanne Hoffner, Gyan Panchal, Evariste Richer, Bojan Sarcevic...

2. Presses universitaires de France, *Quadrige*, 8th edition, 2001. p. 157.