



Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany

According to staff at the Kunstverein in Düsseldorf, few artists have shown such an interest in the building as Guillaume Leblon. He studied it from roof to cellar, quickly gaining an overview of the architecture, pinpointing hidden gutters, rummaging through basement storerooms and inquiring into the construction of the overhead lighting. And the Brutalist building on Grabbeplatz appeared to acknowledge this: for just as Leblon's show was opening on the top floor, the façade became covered in scaffolding, the entrance hung with plastic strips, the front obscured by black sheeting and wooden slats – a coincidence due to construction work, but one couldn't help feeling that this hulking mass of a building was showing Leblon its flexible side, permeable and willing.

For his first solo show at a German institution, the French artist took an offensive approach to the space. Arriving on the top floor, visitors found the usual entranceway blocked by *Raum* (Room, 2006), a white cube that appeared to have landed with the force of a meteorite in the gallery space. In fact, Leblon had placed two U-shaped wall sections, made from blocks of plaster, on either side of the wall between the foyer and the exhibition space, in such a way that they appeared to form a cube running right through it. The walls were too high to see over, and because the artist had taken a hammer to them after they were installed, they were covered with a network of hairline cracks, holes, crevices and a fragmented zigzag of fissures that competed for attention with the more regular grid of untidily smoothed joins. As a result, the lightweight walls gave the impression of being an extremely solid block that had been damaged as it crashed through the concrete wall. An architectural misfit, it appeared too small in relation to the surrounding spaces: closed, beaten up, separate.

L'arbre (The Tree, 2005) – uncomplicated titles are a characteristic of Leblon's work – was a ginkgo tree laid out on wooden trestles in front of a window offering panoramic views of the square outside. As if the ginkgo had died of some strange disease, its leaves were black, grey and white. On closer inspection, however, the tree revealed itself to be an object of hybrid artificiality: its trunk and branches were real; the leaves shop-bought plastic replicas. Leblon appeared to be quoting Robert Smithson's *Dead Tree* (1969), which he deposited in this same space for the 'Prospect 69' exhibition.

Progressing through the exhibition, it became clear that Leblon thinks not only in terms of objects when installing his works but also in terms of lines and directions of motion. Take, for instance, the 'Structures' series of 2006 – chest-high, freestanding wall modules that the artist had either staggered, arranged in lines or spread out to form a low podium. In the latter case the open sides of the modules revealed how they were made, showing the wooden frame faced on both sides with pale grey cardboard. The 'Structures' operated as an installation in their own right, drawing the viewer's attention in particular directions. Their lightweight frameworks recalled those of stage-set designs, an interpretation enhanced by the appearance of other works – such as the two melon-sized clay *Olives* (2006) or *Chrysocale* (*Lampe*) (2005), a softly glowing lamp made out of a shimmering golden alloy – beside, under and on top of them, like theatre props whose meaning is not yet clear to the audience at the beginning of a play.

In his catalogue essay, Luca Cerizza, long familiar with Leblon's work, considers the artist's *oeuvre* in relation to the uncanny, to the feeling of being watched and to the presence of the past. But here it seemed more like the *mise-en-scène* contained a story from the future. His looped film *Villa Cavrois* (2000), for instance, explores

Guillaume Leblon
2006
Installation view

a decaying villa constructed in the International Style by architect and stage designer Robert Mallet-Stevens. In the gutted ruin one could perceive many similarities to Leblon's hollow sculptural forms, the games he plays with revealing and concealing, and even with his peculiarly proportioned furniture, such as the *Banquettes* (2006): benches whose seats are too low and whose dimensions are dictated by the size of the leather used to upholster them. Like the work clothes on one of the 'Structures', apparently abandoned by the artist after setting up the show, and which were thereafter kept damp for the duration of the exhibition to give the appearance of having only recently been removed, Leblon's art frequently evokes different physical states: frozen motion, latent activity or an artificially animated, almost painful, absence.

The varying sizes, formats and conceits informing Leblon's work, along with their careful positioning in time and space, recall a very timely form of *Arte Povera* – although this is a classification with which Leblon does not concur. There are also echoes of Gerard Byrne's stage-like installations and Rosemarie Trockel's films, as well as a predictable Conceptual connection with the work of two former fellow students at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam: Monika Sosnowska and Bojan Sarcevic. However, while Leblon and Sarcevic have both positioned sculptures across the corners of gallery ceilings, Sarcevic did so with a purpose: to fit the structure of a mosque wall into a museum. In contrast, Leblon's awkward, almost aggressive, gesture of fitting a cluster of stones into the upper corner of the ceiling offered no handle in terms of content. And it is in moments such as these that Leblon's work comes into its own – in the tension he successfully creates between this denial of clarity and a very tangible, straightforward materiality.

Catrin Lorch

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

Guillaume Leblon