

Mental Garden

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At Charles de Gaulle airport, in a room that air-traffic controllers walk through on their way to man the controls at the top of the tower, there is a fascinating, slightly run-down object that never fails to fascinate the rare visitor who sees it (the room is off limits to the public). It is a multi-coloured tangle of rods representing the air corridors used by planes when landing and taking off. Each coloured segment twists into curves, bends and loops, intertwining with the others in a seemingly chaotic profusion. To explain the meaning of these circuits, and counter the inevitable impression of anarchy, model planes are stuck on each rod. The model dates from the 1970s, so these are vintage aircraft, some no longer in service (Concorde, for example). But despite the age of the object, it still creates a powerful impression, as we stop to track the yellow, orange and green lines, reach out to touch them, and become aware for the first time, as if they were solid constructions, of these invisible interchanges that structure airspace.

Standing before Élisabeth Ballet's sculptures is like standing before that didactic display of the Aéroports de Paris: I see, I touch the striations, the lines and the partitions that divide up my mental and sentimental perimeter, things that usually I never perceive. My space, the space I project onto things, the space I assemble by linking together objects and that I constitute around the body – my space is never empty: it is folded, marked, perforated, cut up. It is all these invisible markers that Ballet brings to the fore, as if they were solid objects, marked perimeters. Suddenly, I am walking in my head, suddenly the extent is perusable, snaps shut, forms a loop. Suddenly, there are no longer places or itineraries, but only capsules, rails, quaysides and corridors.

I write in the first person because I find it hard to imagine this very personal reading of Ballet's work striking a chord with others, or even jibing with the artist's own, for that matter. But that is how it comes across to me and, being more accustomed to storytelling than art criticism, I prefer to relate my experience of what for me is a mental garden rather than construct a coherent interpretation.

In my view, Ballet does not isolate traces: the trajectories and closures that she makes visible exist only mentally. I am not supposed to see them, let alone touch them. And yet they are there, before me, almost unreal in their materiality. This *Corridor noir* (1994), these *Flying Colors* (2010), this *BHCN* (1998) are cavities that I carve out in the real, the lines that I project onto space in order to join two zones that are apparently identical but differently

perceived, the shelters that I create around me. This is the first time I have experienced them with the senses and not just intellectually. The materials used by Ballet in her work heighten the almost hypnotic impression of getting into one's own head as if entering a garden: the surfaces, lines and sides are reflective, glossy, rustproof. They are sensorial follies buried inside my skull.

Unlike the didactic object exhibited in the maze of administrative corridors at Roissy, the lines, partitions and borders assembled by Ballet are never captioned. Even their names are abstract, or enigmatic. I never know what these constructions refer to, and that is why they are so troubling: there are no signs to come between them and me, no protocols to prevent me from recognising these structures as my own or recognising the curves followed by my senses and the interlacings that surreptitiously mesh my reality.

This sensation is particularly strong when looking at two works, both made from the same multi-coloured rods found in the sculpture at Charles de Gaulle: *Smoking & Brillantine* (2011) and *Road Movie* (2008). These are colourful convolutions, trajectories without axes or coordinates that suddenly manifest the abstract paths taken by my senses and my thoughts. How these trajectories are named doesn't much matter: what counts is seeing them because, precisely, I never see them and they regulate my senses.

As a viewer, it seems to me that all Ballet's work revolves around this question of mental spaces, of 'percepts', as Leibniz so aptly called them (as did Wittgenstein, two centuries later). A series of works evokes this more frontally than others, its title, indeed, being 'Vie privée': private life. These are closed spaces constructed from perfectly identifiable materials whose use is essentially domestic: breeze block, cedar wood, Plexiglas, cardboard, etc. Each configured perimeter is on a human scale. The series is organised around two videos of a naked man looking out of his apartment window. To my knowledge, this is the only time Ballet has shown what, to me, is the 'reverse shot' of her works, namely, a wandering gaze, absorbed both by itself and by what is outside it, and discreetly trying to make its perception and the urban environment coincide. The man at the window is the double of the beholder in 'Vie privée', suddenly placed in front of a mirror; this dreaming posture, this self-forgetting in the maze of mental construction, is what happens to me.

The appearance of the man in the window is at once reassuring, in that it offers a key to the work, and troubling, because it shatters the organic intimacy between the viewer and the works, breaking off the silent dialogue between these spaces that are never truly *felt*, and an astonished perception at finding this construction we so often project onto the world out there in the real. Under the gaze of the man at the window, I discover and recompose myself: I am

no longer alone with my 'percepts', I see myself perceiving, I understand where these inner perimeters that Ballet lays out before me come from, I emerge from that unformulated dialogue with the works.

This purely mental origin of Ballet's sculptures also explains why they often show no way out. With the exception of the *BHCM* corridor, they are closed in on themselves, like the rings of *Deux bords* (1993), like the capsule of *Leica* (2004). That is because, for these perimeters, the question of the outside is superfluous: they exist only in superposition. They are projected forms, embodied in a different material than the one that constitutes the real and that the body given them by Ballet causes to momentarily coincide with the world. But this coinciding is only apparent: these constructions cannot be reconciled with what exists, and the break between the space that they close off and the space surrounding them is as deep as the one separating what is perceived from what exists.

Sometimes – less often – Ballet takes existing forms and empties them of their content, turning them into pure abstraction: *Flash* (2007) and *Eyeliners* (2007) belong to both categories. The first is a ladder that links two pieces that are normally closed by going through a hole bored into the floor. The second is a ribbon of rubber bunched into a pile showing the surface markings of a road. The road, and the ladder, both as universal links or as a lines, are suddenly deprived of their rigidity and their use, are just simple segments placed between real spaces. Ghosts of supports that have become simple perceptual frameworks applicable to all surfaces.