

Exhibition Guide

30 April – 22 June 2014

Michel François

Pieces of evidence

First and Second Floor Galleries

Belgian artist Michel François (born 1956) has been making work since the early 1980s, using an impressive range of media that includes objects, photographs, video, light-based works and architectural installations. All these he considers to be sculpture. With its overarching theme of duality – between growth and disintegration, structure and chaos, and so on – this exhibition is his first survey in the UK. It is intended to be read as a whole, integrated with the entire building.

François readily engages with socio-political issues and the exhibition's title, *Pieces of evidence*, refers to the collection of confiscated objects, specifically contraband seized at international borders. In the key installation here we see a film of hands examining everyday objects before revealing hidden compartments and illegal substances within. He describes these rededicated objects as 'hybrid, unclassifiable, a compilation of real and unreal.' Another work, *Achoppement* (Stumbling Block) (1989) is a large block of polystyrene secured to a wall, which can be read as a gargantuan representation of the concealment of illegal substances strapped to a human body. François thus equates criminality with artistic practice, an art object with contraband.

Several pieces in particular deal with notions of border crossing. *Golden Cage I*

(2008) is a large free-standing steel box that has had sections uniformly cut and removed to leave a fragile framework, gilded but on the verge of collapse. The cut metal is scattered within. It alludes to attempts to cross the border from Mexico into America and the realisation that the object of desire is the frontier itself, what lies beyond is of questionable value. In the video piece, *Arpenteur* (Surveying) (1993), we see an inch worm making its way across a road atlas, unaware of 'borders, boundaries, sensitive places, where political issues founder ...'

François often perforates architectural structures in order to suggest the possibility of movement between two sides. *Retaining Wall* (2014) for example, is a massive concrete block penetrated by carefully drilled holes, and its placement just outside Ikon's main entrance raises questions about the integrity of architecture. Inside, on the first floor, François makes a similar hole in a gallery wall through which we can see the outside world.

Nearby on the first floor, he makes a similar breakthrough. *Néons brisés* (Broken Neon Lights) (2003) is a long, neat row of four hundred neon tubes, in parallel on the floor, smashed-up by the artist as if he had deliberately trodden on them. They now bear the trace of his transgressive gesture.

Autoportrait contre nature (Self-portrait against nature) (2002) features the artist viewed from above, smoking and pacing around a concrete floor as empty wine bottles fall and smash around him. Whilst this could be viewed as a portrait of self-destructiveness, François insists 'there's no sense of fear, it's like a ritual.' The resulting broken glass creates a "chance composition" in a sculptural process that François describes as 'midway between dancing and painting.' Chance compositions are also created through

molten bronze thrown onto a cold floor and solidifying in the series *Instant Gratification* (2011).

François uses a variety of materials and forms in his 'attempts to reconcile opposites.' *Pièce détachée* (Parts) (2010) for example involves a complex system of steel rods held in place by magnetism, constantly on the brink of collapse, a combination of fragility and strength. The idea of such precarious balance has environmental implications and in *Ecosystem* (2014) we see objects – asphalt, ice, cacti and bronze casts of peanuts – which, according to François, are 'suspended in time, dense matter liquefying, compact matter scattering, things that are fragile, unstable, in between states...' *Ecosystem* is juxtaposed with plaster works dipped in black ink, from the series *Contamination* (2014), that similarly suggests the corruption or a winding down of an ordered scheme of things. Here, as in the rest of the exhibition, meaning is derived from the placement and combination of works, giving us a bigger picture.

Ian Emes

Ikon Icon: 1970s

Tower Room

Ikon 50 presents *French Windows* (1972) by artist and filmmaker Ian Emes. His first animated film, inspired by the track 'One Of These Days' from Pink Floyd's *Meddle* album, is described by Emes as 'a continuation of my body of work as a painter and kinetic artist, with no thought to its prospects other than the joy of making it. I was a self-taught animator, inventing my own techniques through trial and error'. The film went on to win awards across the world and led to an invitation to work with Pink Floyd.

The Tower Room is only accessible via a number of steps.

Michel François

Déjà-vu (Hallu)

Offsite installation

Fletcher's Walk, Birmingham B3 3HJ

Déjà-vu (Hallu) (2003) shows the artist manipulating a sheet of tin foil, creating ever more complex sculptural shapes. Filmed using a camera lens that produced a mirror image, the symmetry makes organic structures and is reminiscent of a three dimensional Rorschach test. François's process explores a seemingly infinite number of forms.

Fletcher's Walk is a 5 minute walk from Ikon, towards New Street station.

Visit the Resource Room where you can find a selection of books, audio and film.

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