JÉRÔME ZONDER
décryptage
d’un « dessin d’enfant »

Thibaut de Ruyter

Autour de l’œuvre *Pierre-François et le chat qui rit* (2013), Thibaut de Ruyter sonde le rapport de Jérôme Zonder aux arts modestes, dont le travail emprunte à la culture populaire autant qu’à l’art contemporain.

Lorsque l’on demande à Jérôme Zonder d’évoquer son rapport aux arts modestes, il répond sans aucune hésitation par une de ses œuvres : *Pierre-François et le chat qui rit*, un dessin au fusain et à la mine graphite sur papier, de 2 mètres par 1,50 et réalisé en 2013. Cette œuvre, typique de sa production, associe des registres formels et graphiques différents (du naïf à l’hyperréaliste) pour représenter un jeune garçon, debout sur un pas de porte, les mains croisées sur son ventre. À l’intérieur de son corps on devine une pénétration anale, une petite fille qui parle avec un homme d’âge mur, un type masqué qui entre dans un étrange intérieur de maison. Le petit garçon est accompagné d’un chat aux traits caricaturaux, personnage tout droit sorti d’*Alice au Pays des Merveilles* tel que l’enfant lui-même pourrait le représenter. Enfin, une moulure de cadre ancien borde tout le côté droit du dessin, soulignant le fait qu’il s’agit d’une représentation mais surtout – ce cadre n’étant qu’un fragment –, il implique qu’une bonne partie du dessin reste « hors champ », que nous ne voyons qu’un détail d’un ensemble plus grand et plus complexe. Comme souvent chez l’artiste, la thématique principale est celle du passage de l’enfance à l’adolescence, de la découverte d’un monde intérieur fait de peurs, de sexualité plus ou moins dévoilée et de rapport aux adultes.

**MISEและการมีส่วนใช้**
Jérôme Zonder rappelle que, durant ses études, il était intéressé par Robert Combos : « un des seuls artistes à travailler la figuration dans les années 1990, une véritable ouverture pour un étudiant des beaux-arts de "Pierre-François et le chat qui rit". 2013. Fusain et mine de plomb sur papier. 200 x 150 cm. (Coll. privée). Charcoal and graphite on paper. ”
Jérôme Zonder Deciphering a “Child Drawing”

Focusing on Pierre-François and le chat qui-rit (2013), Thibaut de Ruyter considers Jérôme Zonder’s relation to the modest art and shows how his work draws simultaneously on popular culture and contemporary art.

Ask Jérôme Zonder to discuss his relation to the modest art and he will answer straight back with the name of a work: Pierre-François and le chat qui-rit (Pierre-François and the Laughing Cat). He made this drawing (2 x 1.5 meters) in charcoal and graphite in 2013 and its combination of diverse formal and graphic registers—from naïve to photorealistic—is typical of his work. It shows a young boy standing on a doorstep with his hands folded over his stomach. Inside his body we can make out a close-up on anal penetration, a little girl talking to a middle-aged man, and a masked man entering a house. Next to the little boy is a caricature cat, a figure that seems to have come straight out of Alice in Wonderland, and as the boy himself might picture it. Finally, all along the right side of the drawing runs the edge of a traditional molded frame, which of course tells us that this is a representation, but also—because it’s only a fragment of frame—that a large part of the drawing is “out of the picture” and that the ensemble is bigger and more complex. As is often the case with Zonder, the main theme here is the transition from childhood to adolescence and the discovery of an inner world of fears, of sexuality and its perversion, and of the relationship to adults.

FLATBEDDED
Zonder tells of his interest in Combas as a student. “He was one of the only artists to be doing figurative work in the 1980s, which represented a real opening for a student at the Beaux Arts in Paris.” Also during those years he took an interest in Raymond Pettibon, Mike Kelley and a handful of other American artists who drew on popular culture but did not do Pop Art. In both their style and subject matter, Pettibon’s drawings, for example, reference comics and underground culture, not consumer culture. And indeed, adult comics would be one angle for approaching Zonder’s relation to the modest arts. He references the graphic novelist Gotlib and his work for *Fluide Glacial*, a French magazine heavily influenced by American underground culture, whose obsessions and perversions it cleverly transposes into French culture. The point here is not to produce erotic drawing—Gotlib is primarily a humorist with a penchant for bawdiness—so much as to reveal a raw and unambiguous form of sexuality. Take, for example, the nine drawings of *Proud Mary*, a sequence in which a singer puts out so much that the microphone shows its gratitude with an equally generous facial ejaculation.

Another formative moment from Zonder’s studies was his reading of an “Encyclopédie des Arts” published by Larousse.[1] He says that what fascinated him about the book is the way it unpacked genres, styles, images and periods, laying them all out flat, without
categories or hierarchies, in a spirit also characteristic of the modest arts. And, going back to Pierre-François et le chat qui-rit, we will see that the reference here is not just comic books but also movies genres such as horror (the man entering the room is taken from Friday the 13th, 1980), while the little girl talking with the serious-faced man is taken from a catechism manual. This flatting out is a constant of Zonder’s drawing, with its juxtaposition of different graphic systems of registers. He calls what he does “constructing within the relation between things.” The material can be B-movies or educational books and in the process the work takes a swipe at contemporary art whose habit of self-quotting sometimes lapses into private jokes. Finally, one more reference and influence quoted by Zonder is Satoshi Kon’s anime, Perfect Blue (1997). Once again, here, drawing technique plays an essential role. This work is a long way from French TV’s cheap productions for children, which could explain Zonder’s interest, but the subject too is fascinating, and very close to his own artistic universe. Perfect Blue tells the story of a starlet who has gone from singing to acting and is obsessed with a dangerous and perfectly illusory stalker. The result is a psychological horror movie worthy of Alfred Hitchcock, a long way from your usual cartoon fare. The main character is young, a teenager, and like Zonder’s Pierre-François, is in between two ages, prone to obsessions that she seems not to understand. And to ensure the ritual transition from one age to another, she is forced to play a rape scene, the better to tarnish her image with her earlier admirers. Eventually, she becomes consumed by her own inner world.

Zonder’s work and characters, too, are consumed by demons: childhood, fantasies, history. To express them, the artist plays with images and references that are not drawn uniquely from contemporary art, flat-bedding genres, mediums and styles to create a universe nourished by popular culture. The popular culture that, from Ghanian movie posters to collections of heterogeneous objects to art brut, forms the unifying field of the modest arts.

Translation, C. Penwarden

(1) In fact, this is not the actual title, but the artist’s distant memory of the title.

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Fusain et mine de plomb sur papier. 200 x 150 cm.
(Coll. privée). Charcoal and graphite on paper.