

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jackie Wullschlager, "Order out of chaos," *Financial Times*, April 21, 2012.

Order out of chaos

By Jackie Wullschlager

Paris's Musée du Quai Branly explores the force of disorder in ancient cultures and contemporary art



Globalisation: Thomas Hirschhorn's 'Outgrowth' (2005)

Georges Pompidou gave his name to Paris's leading centre for modern art, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing had a railway station transformed into the Musée d'Orsay, François Mitterrand commissioned the Louvre's glass pyramids and Jacques Chirac championed the construction of a radical museum of

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anthropology at Paris's Quai Branly. Now Nicolas Sarkozy, fearing that he might leave office (the first round of the [presidential election](#) is on Sunday) without a monument to match those of his predecessors, has thrown his weight behind Marseille's Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisation, opening in 2013.

In the continuum of the museums with which its presidents have identified themselves, we see France evolve across half a century in its cultural positioning: from the confident Centre Pompidou and Musée d'Orsay, whose modern and impressionist showcases trumpet eras when Paris was the undisputed capital of world art, to IM Pei's bid for contemporary, edgy glamour at the Louvre, to attempts at grappling with 21st-century globalisation and shifting social and political hierarchies at Quai Branly and Marseille.

Chirac wanted the Musée du Quai Branly to embody multicultural openness – "throughout its history France has always seen itself as a harbinger of universal values but it has also advocated the value of otherness", ran his inaugural address in 2006. But the museum was controversial from the outset: Jean Nouvel's eccentric design of curving glass wall, winding gardens and studded coloured boxes vibrantly challenges the orderly Haussmann boulevards surrounding it, and the labyrinthine, open-ended interiors, with their jumbled, theatrical displays, are the opposite of the sober arrangements at the ethnographic institutions that Quai Branly replaced.

Six years on, is Chirac's dream a populist triumph, successor to the Pompidou, or an emblem of French intellectual uncertainty and cultural confusion? Certainly Quai Branly is a classic early 21st-century democratising museum that, like

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Tate Modern, perceives its first duty to be spectacle and entertainment, rather than history and education. As it grows up, however, it is attempting to square that circle: its latest exhibition *Masters of Chaos (Les Maîtres du désordre)*, launched last week, is spectacular but academically ambitious too.

The show interposes 20th- and 21st-century art into displays of masks, sculptures and textiles from Oceanic, American, African, Asian and also classical civilisations. From a tiny pre-Columbian serpentine human/animal figure, 3,000 years old, to a Greek marble statue of Dionysius, god of disruption, *Masters of Chaos* considers the role of the modern artist as shaman, healer, holy fool, comedian – or anthropologist.

Works, celebrated and little-known alike, range across all media: Annette Messenger's fragmentary depictions of diseased body parts suspended by coloured threads in "Anatomie"; the Chapman Brothers' defacements of Goya; Gabon photographer Myriam Mihindou's potent "Déchoucaj" series of near-translucent phantom-like images, using enormous negative prints, of Haitian dancers in a trance; Paul McCarthy's video "Painter" satirising archetypes of artist and collector as a pair of clown-nosed, arse-baring grotesques.

A brilliant opening – a tunnel lined on one side with Thomas Hirschhorn's vast "Outgrowth" installation, all bandaged globes and war photographs, and on the other with a group of flattened, one-legged wooden *aripa* sculptures from Papua New Guinea's Inyai-Ewa people – is arresting in its dramatic contrast of circles and lines. But it is surprising and incongruous too. The fragile, silhouette-like ancient pieces, each with individual profiles and crescent-shaped patterned bodies, were carved by men to symbolise protective spirits for help during hunting; their elegant expressiveness instantly resonates with modernism and brings to mind the sophisticated abbreviations of Giacometti. On the other hand, Hirschhorn's taped, wounded spheres are impersonal, deliberately crude and oppressive – a vision of the chaos from which the artist/shaman seeks to rescue us.

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Costume of a 'nganga', or ceremonial healer, from pre-1889 Congo

Visitors then meander through a crowd of bizarre juxtapositions. They are ushered into a mesh-plaster maze echoing with shrieks and chatter as Anna Halprin's screams accompany her frenetic movements in the 1975 video "Dancing My Cancer" – the making of which cured her, the artist claims. Then come filmed interviews with a dozen living shamans, including a Bengali singer-poet, a voodoo priest in Togo and a Libyan mystic.

Dominant and unforgettable are the stunning shaman attires: a Ndungu dress from the Congo made from black hornbill feathers and headed with a vengeful, two-faced, black-and-white (death and life) mask, whose wearer meted out punishment and admonition; a Siberian costume

borrowed from St Petersburg, constructed from the hide of reindeer, the animal most frequently imitated by Arctic shamans; a Sri Lankan mask whose protruding eyes and giant mouth demonstrate the greedy compulsions of a demon conceived, in Buddhist-influenced Sinhalese exorcism, to represent everything human beings should attempt to transcend.

Modernism is rooted in an intoxication with such powerful, primitivist objects. Picasso famously called "Les Femmes d'Alger" "my first exorcism painting", and completed it after seeing the African fright-masks at the Trocadero's Ethnographic Museum, a precursor to the Musée du Quai Branly.

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But this lineage is familiar; curator Jean de Loisy offers instead a narrative unravelling the responses of three major artists from successive modernist generations to fetish objects and to ideas of transformation.

First, inevitably, is Picasso, whom de Loisy interprets as a "trickster of the 20th century", with a series of late self-portraits morphing into a faun, and an enigmatic "Harlequin". Here the artist paints the shadow of his own profile, as if observing the disorientated jester figure whom he saw as his alter ego – he was at the time trapped in a miserable marriage but had just met a new lover, Marie-Thérèse Walter.

Next, representing the anti-formal postwar sensibility, is the master of fat and fur, Joseph Beuys, who positioned himself as a shaman. Here he plays on human/animal metamorphosis in a 1967 film where he lectures on art history to a dead hare cradled in his arms. Then there is Jean-Michel Basquiat: the explosive painting "Exu", made shortly before his death in 1988, depicts a grinning coyote caught at the centre of a storm, surrounded by big, floating eyes that reference Egyptian hieroglyphics, and topped by the block letters EXU, alluding to the Yoruba/Latin American trickster god of travellers, chaos and death. Alongside the painting stands a ferocious Brazilian iron statue of the deity.



Picasso's "Tête de faune"

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Did Basquiat see himself as a black trickster in a white art world? Does the Musée du Quai Branly see itself as such a provocateur today, and is that position sustainable by a major museum? On the evidence here, success and failure are inseparable in such a mission: the remit of *Masters of Chaos* is so wide, the selection and quality of work so random and variable, that the incoherence is maddening, yet disorder must be the point. In every rough-hewn detail, this is a *bricolage* installation, inviting us to see, in the terms of the great anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, as a "*bricoleur*" with a "savage mind" rather than an engineer with a "scientific" one. It is a brave, fascinating experiment.

'Les Maîtres du désordre'

Musée du Quai Branly, Paris