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Pac Pobric, "Cyprien Gaillard's Decadent Visions of Decay," *The Village Voice*, March 16, 2018

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ART

Cyprien Gaillard's Decadent Visions of Decay



A still from Cyprien Gaillard's 3D film "Nightlife" (2015)

Early on in the French artist Cyprien Gaillard's 2015 film, *Nightlife*, there is a widescreen shot of Auguste Rodin's *Thinker*, set outside the Cleveland Museum of Art, which lurks behind in the shadows. The sculpture was acquired in 1917 and briefly installed in the museum's rotunda before it was

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moved to the south entrance, where it still sits. But its appearance radically changed in 1970. That March, members of the Weather Underground reportedly put the equivalent of three sticks of dynamite under the work of art and set the bomb off at around one in the morning. No one was injured, but the explosion tore the base from the bronze sculpture, mangled the thinker's legs, blew away his seat and left a big gap through the middle. The sculpture has since been restored and conserved, but it was never completely repaired, which the museum's leadership intended as a testament to the turbulent spirit of the late 1960s, when public monuments and statues were the locus for serious debate.



In Gaillard's *Nightlife*, now in its American premiere at the Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea, the *Thinker* is a ruin, and ruins are the great theme of the artist's work. A filmmaker and a sculptor with the mind of an archaeologist, Gaillard has spent his career digging through layers of the recent past, unearthing fragments and relics, and holding them up to his characteristically romantic prism. In his films,

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there is always some ghostly miasma, like in his 2004 35mm film *Real Remnants of Fictive Wars IV*. In that short (it was included in Gaillard's 2013 MoMA PS1 survey), we start with a quiet green landscape, lush with only grasses and trees. Slowly, over the course of four minutes, it is poisoned by a feverish fog recalling the intoxicating mist that seeps in from the top right of Delacroix's romantic masterpiece painting the *Death of Sardanapalus*. In Delacroix's picture, a profligate Assyrian king, lounging on a jeweled bed, drunk with excess and surrounded by his concubines, orders the destruction of his palace as his enemies draw near. Gaillard's film has no people, but the sense of some enveloping evil remains.

Gaillard was born in 1980 in Paris and had a peripatetic upbringing, spending some years in San Francisco as a child before returning to France in the late 1980s. As a teenager, he was interested in skateboarding and graffiti, and the destructive tendencies he courted as a boy (he used to steal fire extinguishers with friends just to blow them off) remain in his "cool," romantic aesthetic. He was first drawn to art as a home for various interests — urbanism, architecture, historical research — that couldn't fit together elsewhere. "I took it as a kind of shelter," he said of contemporary art in 2011. In 2005, he graduated from the ECAL art school in Lausanne, Switzerland, and won the Marcel Duchamp prize in 2010. Today he lives in Berlin and New York.

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Cyprien Gaillard, "The Recovery of Discover" (2011)

One of Gaillard's most memorable shows was at the KW Institute in Berlin in 2011, where he built a pyramid of hundreds of cases of Efes beer (a Turkish brand) to mimic the Altar of Pergamon, which was relocated from Greece to the eponymous nearby museum in the late 19th century. The cases were torn apart by hundreds of guests throughout the run of the show, which Gaillard intended as a comment on the rape of culture.

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Cyprien Gaillard, "The Recovery of Discover" (2011)

The drunken haze of the KW show, and of the style of his films, is similar to the haze of French romantic artists like Hubert Robert, who often depicted ominous clouds above imagined ruins. Robert was an explicit influence on Gaillard. In 1796, in the heat of the French Revolution, Robert painted the Louvre in Paris as a ruin, explaining that he did so not because he wished it, but simply because he felt it looked better that way. Gaillard has spoken fondly of that episode. "I relate to him," Gaillard said in 2011. "He was a good painter and a formalist, but also, for me, a conceptual painter early on."

But concepts are secondary here; like his fellow romantics, Gaillard has a deep and sincere sentimentality for beauty. That's what he's after with the 3D aspect of *Nightlife*, although the predicted effects are relatively mild. The real benefit is not so much that images pop, but that colors sharpen. In one of the film's best moments, a bird of paradise sways gently against the southern California twilight, and the whole shot is patched up from a seductive palette of midnight black and blue, cool grey, and a smear of soft pink.

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Installation view of "Nightlife (9 Film Stills)," at the Gladstone Gallery

To get from the *Thinker* to the non-indigenous plants of Southern California, Gaillard has to make a leap, and although *Nightlife* has some general momentum, the picture doesn't hang together fully. The idea, it seems, is that the *Thinker*, which was made in France, is as non-native to Cleveland as these plants are to California. Gaillard tries to pull it all together with his soundtrack, an incessantly repeating dub sample from Alton Ellis's tender song *Blackman's World*, but making plants dance wildly to the music does not do much to make them human. (*Nightlife* has neither people nor dialogue nor narration.)

About two-thirds of the way through the 15-minute film we find ourselves at the annual Pyronale fireworks show at Olympiastadion in Berlin, which last year

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drew 50,000 attendees. The event is a competition — in 2017, Norwegian and Italian teams won for best pyrotechnics — and the stadium has long been used for sport. It was built between 1934 and 1936 for Hitler's Olympic games, which he hoped would demonstrate the superior agility and power of the Aryans. His goals were spoiled when Jesse Owens, a black American, won four gold medals in track.



"Nightlife," 2015

No memory of those events is immediately evident in Gaillard's long shot of the fireworks display, taken from high in the sky with a drone. Mostly, we see bright red flashes and clouds of smoke, and at one point we are right in the thick of it, surrounded by glare and fumes. The comparison to Leni Riefenstahl's 1938 film *Olympia*, which was shot here and documents and mythologizes Hitler's games, is unavoidable: her vision of the games, which is so full of fantasy, begins with hazy shots of Classical ruins. In *Nightlife*, the history comes into focus when

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the shot cuts to the James Ford Rhodes High School in Cleveland, where Owens ran track. (You'll only know where we are if you read the release; otherwise, there is no indication.) Part of his prize from the German Olympic committee were four oak saplings, one of which has grown into a large tree in the school's courtyard. In *Nightlife*, it blows in the wind, steady and strong.

Part of the appeal of ruin is the absolute fact of inevitability; eventually, all things will dissolve. In much of his work, Gaillard enlivens this truth with his punch-drunk individual vision of entropy. There is real pessimism here; Gaillard has mostly exhibited little faith in the modernist project that drove Rodin to make the *Thinker*. To the young French artist (he turns 38 this year), the sculpture looks better as a fragment than it ever did whole. Violence makes things beautiful. In his 2007 film, *Desniansky Raion*, there is extended documentary footage of two Russian gangs battling viscusly in the streets of St. Petersburg, and there is no redemption but the aesthetic pleasure of adrenaline and fear.



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But by the end of *Nightlife*, with the extended shot of Owens's tree, Gaillard seems to second-guess himself in a healthy way. Perhaps regeneration and growth are possible too, even in the face of outright evil. That's the central theme of this recent film, which looks in a new direction for the artist. Now it is the beauty of thriving life, not decay, that he emphasizes. There are drawbacks here. The sheer power of *Desniansky Raion* is set aside in favor of a gentler tone, one Gaillard is still learning how to maximize for artistic effect. But there is also hope, and without hope, no matter how mild, romanticism becomes a perverse sort of cynicism. Gaillard — a little older, a little more mature — now wants to keep that lingering threat at bay.

'Cyprien Gaillard: Nightlife'

Gladstone Gallery

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