

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Art

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Cyprien Gaillard, "The Crystal World"

The French artist reboots 19th-century romanticism for the global age.
By Howard Halle

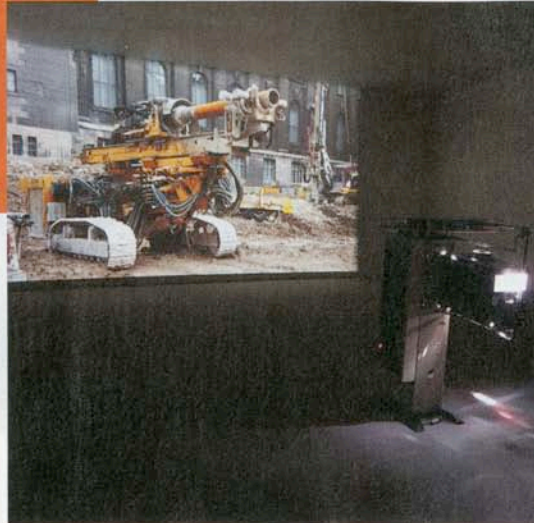


MoMA PS1, through Mar 18
(see Museums)

Google "Cyprien Gaillard" and one of the first results is a page of images of the French artist's handsome Gallic mug, a rough-hewn blend of Ryan Gosling and a young Paul Henreid. When it comes to the business of art superstars, good looks are hardly an impediment to success, especially when coupled with overstuffed ambition; just ask Matthew Barney, former J.Crew model and Gaillard's stablemate at Gladstone Gallery.

Gaillard's career goals have been certainly lofty, and he's quickly bounded up the ladder of success. Although his work last appeared in the five boroughs as part of the NewMu's 2009 exhibition "Younger than Jesus," he's become a big deal just about everywhere else since. In 2010, for instance, he won the Prix Marcel Duchamp in France, while in Germany he nabbed both the Preis der Nationalgalerie für junge Kunst and the A.T. Kearney Young Artist Award. This mantle of veritable Oscars explains, perhaps, the MoMA PS1 showcase for his New York solo debut. But there is no denying the impact of the result, titled "The Crystal World."

Compared with Barney's ormolu-encrusted Conceptualism, Gaillard's aesthetic sports clean lines. While he juggles several mediums from his



base in Berlin (including painting, drawing, photography and sculpture), his rep is mainly based upon a series of video and film installations that explore the uneasy nexus where nature, history and the built environment come into conflict. In these cinematic extravaganzas, shot outdoors in locations around the world, landscape becomes a delirious vista of modernist tower blocks and strange goings-on framed in dreamy long shots worthy of David Lean. In 2009's *Desniansky Raion*, for example, a rumble in the concrete jungle unfolds against a backdrop of brutalist architecture, as rival gangs of punks go toe-to-toe in a Ukrainian housing estate. These scenes are intercut with ones of a French high-rise undergoing a controlled implosion. The piece is exemplary of Gaillard's knack for generating kinetic kicks through filmed pageantry.

So is another epic from '09, *Cities of Gold and Mirrors*. It conjures Cancun, Mexico, as a chimerical realm of Mayan ruins and fortresslike hotels surrounded by dolphin-filled moats. This mirage is the setting for a gaggle of American college students, who pound back brewskis as a bandanna-masked cholo dances sinuously nearby.

Gaillard prefers the grainy diffusion of home movies to, say, the deep-focus approach of Andreas Gursky. But like the German photographer, Gaillard depicts a planet subsumed by late capitalism, a vision to which he adds a pinch of Debord, a dash of Baudrillard and a generous helping of the reverence for the sublime found in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich (with gangbangers and spring-break revelers substituting for mist-shrouded mountains). Transforming

the environment into a gigantic drive-in movie, Gaillard is essentially rebooting 19th-century romanticism for the global age—with the emphasis on *global*.

His work also borrows a bit from the chthonic minimalism of Robert Smithson, most notably in the objects on view here. A room full of vitrines enshrines pieces of excavator machinery as if they were pre-Columbian artifacts. Myriad Polaroids arranged in a series of diamond-shaped mosaics take viewers on a *tour d'horizon*, from Angkor Wat's temples to limestone caverns deep underground. These last items in particular reminded me of Smithsonian's spelunkings at the Palenque Hotel.

The art world's quick embrace of Gaillard's work suggests that his panoramic mise en scènes appeal to the financial overlords greasing the art market—who, after all, like to think of the world as a boundless terrain of free-market opportunities. So while some people (especially the artist) might argue that Gaillard's efforts are critical, they're less of a challenge to the status quo than a reflection of it.

Still, Gaillard manages to raise interesting questions about the ways in which the past is used to foreclose on the future. *Cities of Gold* is pretty clear about picturing Cancun as a moribund tourist trap, where the remains of a vanished civilization become visual Muzak for hedonistic pursuits.

Relevant to this issue, I was also struck by a very peculiar leitmotif in Gaillard's work: Chief Wahoo, the



grinning mascot-logo of the Cleveland Indians baseball club. This indelicately racist caricature crops up in a couple of places—on a banner behind an airplane crossing the Mexican sky in *Cities of Gold*, and as a boldly disruptive pictorial element, splashed across an otherwise conventional landscape painting.

I have to confess that as a native son of the industrial powerhouse turned Rust Belt joke, the sight of the good chief plucked at the heartstrings, rekindling memories of

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opening day at Muni Stadium (yes, this was way before Progressive Field). Not a great reason for endorsing the show, admittedly. But as I later learned, Gaillard

maintains residencies in both Cleveland and Cancun. However much this improbable pairing of addresses smacks of tourism or even cultural imperialism, it speaks to a weird sort of commitment, linking two locales that for different reasons suffer the same indignity of lost glory. It also hints at an understanding that global capitalism is basically an exercise in waste management, hollowing out whole societies before recycling them at a much more favorable profit-to-cost ratio. More than just a pretty face, Gaillard reveals the real meaning of landscape today.

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