

# KUNSTHALLE BASEL

## MAMMALIAN FANTASIES DANIEL DEWAR & GRÉGOR Y GICQUEL

18.1. – 14.4.  
2019

Wading boots, toilets, soap dispensers, sinks, bidets, or even gigantically oversized sweaters: all containers enclosing a negative space, corporeal receptacles of a sort. Daniel Dewar and Grégory Gicquel's early sculptures evoked the human bodies that might fill or complete their forms, but never actually represented any bodies at all. It wouldn't be until 2012, after more than a decade of working together, that the duo turned to the human figure directly. There was a prudishness, they admit, to their hesitation to portray that most enduring and central of art history's subjects. Naked, in pieces, and now overwhelmingly present in their most recent works, the previously elusive human body appears with spectacular aplomb.

This exhibition manifests its central subject—the human, a mammal among mammals—in wood. As is their habit, the British-French duo built the entirety of their exhibition from a single type of material, in this case, wood. And as is also the artists' habit, they produced everything themselves, using laborious and traditional processes, atypical at a moment when so much artistic production is deskilled, outsourced, and computer generated. They have long refused remote modes of production, not to favor nostalgia for bygone methods, but instead to plumb the depths of the very idea of manufacture in our contemporary digital age.

For years, Dewar and Gicquel—who met in art school in 1998 and have collaborated ever since—have embraced the role of dogged amateurs, autodidacts. They taught themselves to work in unfired clay, ceramic, stone, weaving, and, most recently, wood, sometimes even first learning about and then building the very tools (a giant loom, a wood-fired kiln) required to be able to go into production proper. A single piece could take weeks or months, maybe years, of self-education and then intense labor. So important is this strategy that they once declared, “There is no difference between the process of making and the object”—an unusual position given the contemporary art world's focus on commodifiable results. And while not acting as dilettantes per se (because they clearly do what they do with incredible dedication and seriousness), by choosing to switch materials and processes before they have ever fully mastered any one of them, they enact a deliberate refusal of “expertise” and create works that, as a matter of principle, are willfully imperfect.

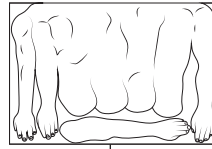
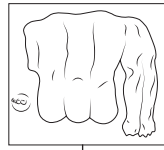
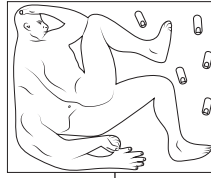
For this, their first institutional solo exhibition in Switzerland, encompassing new and recent

13  
*Oak Relief with Body  
 Fragments*, 2018  
 Oak wood  
 140 × 165 × 17 cm

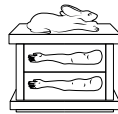
10  
*Oak Relief with Body  
 Fragments*, 2018  
 Oak wood  
 120 × 132 × 17 cm

11  
*Oak Relief with Body  
 Fragments*, 2018  
 Oak wood  
 120 × 176 × 17 cm

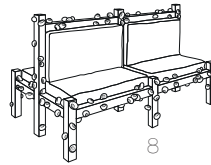
12  
*Oak Relief with Body  
 Fragments*, 2018  
 Oak wood  
 132 × 88 × 17 cm



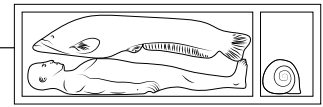
7  
*Oak Chest of Drawers with Giant Flanders  
 Rabbit and Arms*, 2018  
 Oak wood  
 90 × 104 × 57 cm



8  
*Oak Bench with Garden Tiger Moths,  
 Wild Pansy Flowers, and Snails*, 2017  
 Embroidery on cushion, oak wood  
 98 × 189 × 111 cm



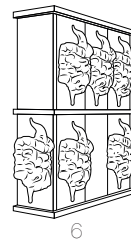
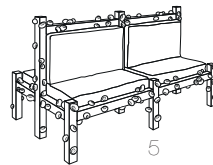
9  
*Oak Relief with Man, Catfish,  
 and Shell*, 2017  
 Oak wood  
 87 × 269 × 29 cm



4  
*Oak Relief with Man, Pig, and Shell*, 2018  
 Oak wood  
 87 × 266 × 29 cm

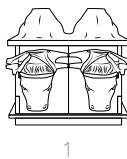


5  
*Oak Bench with Garden Tiger Moths,  
 Wild Mallow Flowers, and Snails*, 2017  
 Embroidery on cushion, oak wood  
 98 × 189 × 111 cm  
 Benoit and Francine Loevenbruck



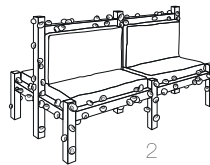
6  
*Oak Cabinet with Organs*, 2017  
 Oak wood  
 261 × 250 × 86 cm

1  
*Oak Dresser with  
 Harnessed Oxen*, 2017  
 Oak wood  
 135 × 141 × 100 cm



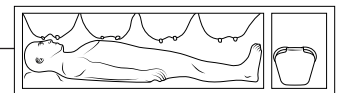
1

2  
*Oak Bench with  
 Narcissus and Snails*, 2017  
 Embroidery on cushion, oak wood  
 98 × 189 × 111 cm



2

3  
*Oak Relief with Man, Udders,  
 and Vase*, 2017  
 Oak wood  
 73 × 260 × 24 cm  
 Laurent Fiévet



3

works, Dewar and Gicquel's idiosyncratic formal language—equal parts folk and pop art—is palpable throughout. This is expressed in wood gouged and carved into the shape of either wall reliefs or useful objects (benches, cabinets, chests of drawers). These feature compositions in which the anonymous male body (not any particular man, but “man”), whole or in fragments, and other living beings insinuate nourishment, strength in unity, or intimacy.

A specially conceived scenography of curtains and deliriously carved benches (to be used as actual seating by visitors) imparts an air of domesticity to the grandeur of the exhibition's first room. *Oak Cabinet with Organs* (2017), a monumental armoire decorated with repeated, oversize intestinal tracts, exemplifies the show's overall strangeness. Lining the walls are three wooden wall reliefs, each cut from a single log, and each composed of two distinct frames, like comic strip panels or scenes in a predella, the narrative supporting base of an altar screen. In one, a recumbent nude male figure and four cow udders in the first frame, then a vase in the next (notice how the duo loves receptacles), together create a sequential effect. Skin touches skin in nearly all of them, with the male figure recalling Hans Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521–22), except in the duo's patently secular version, those udders or a sow or a catfish are positioned oddly, voluptuously, on top of him. Tactile meetings of two different species become weirdly erotic (the show's title, *Mammalian Fantasies*, hints at this), with the ubiquitous hollow vessel conceivably a winking innuendo.

In the last rooms, a series of wooden reliefs bear disembodied muscular backs and buttocks and arms, some multiplied and strangely morphed, which is odd enough, but somehow not quite as disquieting as the fingers or a full set of toes that protrude from a few of the works, as if emerging from behind the wood itself. All of the works are almost alive in their organic materiality, carefully oiled and waxed, creating a sensuous conflation between wood and represented body (or between the oily secretions of pictured bodies and the sweat of the actual artists' bodies that made them).

With the exception of the reliefs in the last rooms, all the other works on view were carved from a single block of oak (“monoxyloous” is the technical term for this), lending them a certain heft. Rather than sculptures that are built up, bit by bit, in an additive way, form here

emerges through a process of reduction: Dewar and Gicquel would tell you that the figures were all already there, just waiting to be excavated. In specific instances, when the artists wanted a certain form to identically repeat in a single work, whether snails or intestines, they combined their usual intensive manual labor with that of a now-obsolete mechanical copy-carving machine. This pre-digital ancestor to a CNC mill requires a handmade 1:1 model as input and is run manually, so the hand remains always present in the process. It is somehow fitting that in Dewar and Gicquel's world, when man and machine come together, it is in the task of *reproduction*—given the double sense of the term as an act both technical and sexual, mechanical and corporeal.

There is a persistent strangeness, even impropriety, to this duo's anatomical-meets-zoological-meets-erotic-meets-pastoral iconography, and the fact that it often takes the form of domestic furnishings only makes it more so. And then there is the issue of their titles. *Oak Relief with Man, Udders, and Vase* (2017), *Oak Chest of Drawers with Giant Flanders Rabbit and Arms* (2018), *Oak Bench with Narcissus and Snails* (2017): Dewar and Gicquel's artworks are called—dumbly, unadornedly—what they represent. In their unassuming directness, there is something almost deadpan. Which is to say, the artists are not afraid of humor, even a touch of perversity.

But their works are not ha-ha funny. Instead, there is always something at once so literal and yet so surreal as to seem *not quite right*. The sculptures are carefully crafted and often demonstratively massive, but too light-hearted to be overly precious; they are classically and unabashedly figurative, but don't attempt to signify quite the way that figuration so often does; they deploy popular, vernacular crafts (and might even from a distance seem plucked from a quiet mountain village home), but undermine the usual language of that tradition; they look old-fashioned, but are equal parts conceptual and utterly contemporary; and finally, their results are comely but somehow too impolite and bewildering to easily please. They are a bundle of contradictions, at once “sublime and ridiculous,” as curator Zoë Gray has noted.

Among the contradictions that the artists court is their insistent pressing of categories. After all, their works ask, what is the difference between a sculpture and a design object, between

art and decor, between artist and artisan, between something to be contemplated and something to be used, between high and low? Dewar and Gicquel's output is hard to place: it is art, to be sure, but relentlessly disturbing and ontologically perplexing art. Yet if the traditional distinction between art and ornament is that art is meant to stimulate the intellect, while ornament is solely pleasing to the eye and comfortably un-engaging to the mind, Dewar and Gicquel challenge this dichotomy. They make sculpture into something alien, uncomfortable, and thus, somehow more itself.

Daniel Dewar was born 1976 in the Forest of Dean / Gloucestershire, UK; he lives and works in Brussels. Grégory Gicquel was born 1975 in Saint-Brieuc, FR; he lives and works in Paris.

Thanks to  
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#### GUIDED TOURS THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

Every Sunday at 3 pm guided tour, in German

20.1.2019, Sunday, 3 pm

Curator's tour with Elena Filipovic, in English

21.2.2019, Thursday, 6:30 pm

Multi-sensory tour with artist Pina Dolce, in German

21.3.2019, Thursday, 6:30 pm

Guided tour, in English

11.4.2019, Thursday, 6:30 pm

Multi-sensory tour with artist Pina Dolce, in German

#### EDUCATION / PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Basel Museums Night

18.1.2019, Friday, 6 pm—2 am

A lively program for all the senses, including

the workshop *Please Don't Touch the Art*:

For once you can use your hands in an exhibition!

Visitors of all ages can take a blindfolded guided

tour to explore the extraordinary sculptural

objects of Daniel Dewar and Grégory Gicquel.

*Fantastic Mammals and How to Write Them*

24.1.2019, Thursday, 6:30 pm

As a performative reading, students from Theobald

Baerwart secondary school are presenting poems

developed together with writer Claudia Gabler;

in German. A cooperation with the 16<sup>th</sup> edition of

Internationales Lyrikfestival Basel and Lyrik –

Deutscher Bundeswettbewerb für junge Lyrik.

Multi-sensory tour and workshop for the whole family

24.3.2019, Sunday, 3–5 pm

A special guided tour and workshop for all senses

and all ages, with artist Pina Dolce, in German.

In the Kunsthalle Basel library you will find a selection of publications related to Daniel Dewar and Grégory Gicquel.

Follow us on Facebook and Instagram and share your photos and impressions with #kunsthallebasel.

More information at [kunsthallebasel.ch](http://kunsthallebasel.ch)