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and rose again,
Laetitia Benat
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Words for Laetitia Benat

I've known Laetitia Benat since 1996, when she worked as an intern at Purple magazine, where I'm a regular. She was still a student at the Ecole de Beaux Art in Lyon, mostly working with photography and video. One day she showed a close-up photograph of a girl wearing a white plastic bag as a top, which had the words "Thank You" in red across the chest. That simple image became the cover of the summer issue, # 11, 1996, and Laetitia became a regular at Purple and began showing in Purple's occasional exhibitions, among others, and expanding her output to include drawings, collages, and ceramics.

The photographs, collages, and ceramics in her exhibition, "and rose again," combine religious symbolism, scientific artifacts, and the worldly New Age as if seen through a spiritualist's prism. A photograph of an evangelical symbol is placed with the still shot of a ceramic cruet; the picture of a monk's vestment is positioned next to that of an Asiatic votive still life image; a photograph of one of her handmade ceramic figurines lurches forward in aggressive pantomime alongside a photograph of quietly falling snow over a rooftop. The single image of a pale, nude girl reveals her bobbing on her enfolded arms in serene security at the verge of a stream. These are beautifully shot photographs — beautiful in the sense that they are balanced, nicely proportioned, and carefully ordered. The collages are taken from computer downloads and include color wheels, scientific curios, a nude figure, and hippie-era musicians. The ceramics are somewhat like her pen and pencil drawings, only in 3D. Some are abstract, some have fingerlike tendrils, some have masks, and some are of animals. In all, her images and objects, interiors and environments, and colors and textures bring to mind terms like simple, significant, and respectful.

Laetitia has an easy empathy for people and things. She doesn't aim to be hip or controversial. If anything her works are the polar opposite of stridently political art or noisy, sexy, speedy, and cheap, commercial pop art — from the Sixties up to now — simply by not being either political or pop. Her images derive instead from the quiet, inside-outside world of her careful choosing, and are imbued with her almost-Japanese aesthetic of reticent gift giving. The gift-giving aspect is especially evident, I think, in her subjects and materials, and in her close-in style of drawing, modeling, and photographing — and because Laetitia treats her subjects, objects, and chosen media so intimately. Which, I think, is one of the things that makes her work contemporary or so pertinent now.

— Jeff Rian