

Riding High in the Reading Saddle 21.05–07.08.22

You are about to enter the exhibition *Riding High in the Reading Saddle* by Alexis Gautier. At first, you are drawn to different materials that are present in the room: a metal crane obstructing the view from the entrance, glazed tiles whose ornamental character is hard to reconcile with the contemporary logic of production, a carpet that surely does not belong here. You might even feel overwhelmed by the non-human scale of this interior, clearly designed for machine bodies. Or not at all. It's nothing you have not seen before – here, during your previous visits, or in another industrial monument. Or in a dream, so vivid that you could swear, you know what's behind this small wooden door at the northern end of the room. You are probably wondering what to do now, which direction to head in. You might even consult the handout in the hope of finding some clues. But the works turn out not to be numbered; there is no recommended order of viewing the exhibition. As a matter of fact, the exhibition purposely avoids any semblance of linearity, unfolding instead through gestures of diversion.

Let me tell you about three of these gestures: leak, drift, and fork – all of which oscillate on the spectrum between intentionality and chance. While a leak is typically something undesired, a sign of a defect, in its other sense, it refers to a subversive strategy of disseminating information or material that was not meant for distribution. In this exhibition, the gesture of a leak is multiplied, mirrored, and inverted. 'Drift' can denote a movement that occurs when one loses or forfeits control: a slow and gradual deviation from a specific direction. But it can also stand for the opposite: a rapid exercise in control when performed with a car or a motorbike. A narrative drift is like the latter – while disorientating at first, it is also highly deliberate. Then there is a fork, the chassis of interactive fiction. Forking logic relies on the reader's intent, but it also introduces a speculative element by withholding the full spectrum of possibilities. With each chosen path we leave a scenario, an entire world, behind us. Leak and drift, however, have the potential to undermine the binary character of the fork.

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The reflection of light gives away the position of a puddle. The body of water is still and the light steady, creating a glass-like effect when viewed at an angle. It is an insignificant puddle, too shallow for a horse

to drink from. Suddenly, the light starts jittering and the surface tensing, as if a great commotion was happening on a molecular level. A slight bulge begins to form in the centre of the puddle, with its tip gradually narrowing and elongating into an inverted funnel and eventually – a single drop, which travels swiftly upwards, towards the ceiling.

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In *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*, a novel from 1979, Italian writer Italo Calvino combines two types of narratives: an 'actual' content of the novel and a frame story, narrating the reader's experience. Using second-person narration, the writer addresses the reader directly and draws them into the plot. At the beginning of the novel, Calvino evokes the image of a reader on a horseback, moving simultaneously in two parallel worlds: the physical world and the one of the book. This 'reader-rider', contrasted with the stark image of a reader at a lectern, represents an emancipated audience, taking the reins and driving (or rather riding) the plot home. Not without reason, the title of Alexis Gautier's exhibition refers to this figure. His working method can be compared to 'collective fiction writing' – even if the outcome is not always literary. Gautier's work, spanning sculptures, videos, drawings, and text, comes about through weaving narratives, most of them stemming from real-life encounters and situations. Inspired by Edouard Glissant's archipelagic thinking, it embraces unpredictability, improvisation, and relationality.

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'A car rushes backwards through the street, lights off, at dawn. As it quickly disappears around the corner, my mind follows it through the narrow streets. Fumes coming out from the slightly open windows - it's no fire smoke, but something closer to a smoke machine running inside the car. Driving past the fruit shop, it slows down and stops. As the engine stumbles and waits, the moustached driver lays his heel on the paved road and slowly walks to the stall. He grabs four oranges, and cuts a fifth one in half. Going back to the car, he carefully places one orange through each open window, firmly stuck between the glass and its frame. Holding one half orange in his hand, he slowly walks around the car, firmly pressing the fruit against it. Squeezing its juice as he walks, it leaves a lush trace, looping above the wheels. Burning his tyres away in circles, he then disappears around the next corner, leaving behind a smell of burnt rubber and I realise I can't remember the colour of the car.'¹

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In *Riding High in the Reading Saddle*, Alexis Gautier presents new works and on-site interventions, created during his working period at Jester. While further developing certain plot threads from his show in Leuven, he introduces new storylines and protagonists, encountered during his stay in Genk. Gautier uses a motorbike as a vehicle for both literal and narrative transportation, a so-called MacGuffin – a seemingly insignificant object tying in different characters

and plot threads: from local histories of biker communities and the landscape painters' colony to broader themes of drift, identity, and belonging.

In the past, the city of Genk was known as a refuge for landscape painters, and its popularity amongst artists was the reason for the extension of the railway. To this day, it remains its last station. Painter-passengers, attracted by the appeal of 'pristine' nature, must have looked out of the window in anticipation, observing the landscape in passing. I wonder if some of them took out their watercolours or charcoal and tried to capture its flow. How different must it have been from their usual plein-air set up with an easel, a portable chair, and a toolbox – much like the reader at the lectern. "There are lines in the landscape because every landscape is forged in movement, and because this movement leaves material traces along the manifold ways of its proceeding. To perceive these lines is not to see things as they are but to see the ways along which things are."² Perhaps the most natural way of looking at the landscape is in motion?

'Driving a plot', 'narrative transportation', 'plot drift', 'running the lines' – transport-related metaphors lend themselves very well to discussing the mechanisms of fiction. This association has accompanied Alexis Gautier for a while now. In Marseille, during Manifesta 13, on invitation from Nico Dockx, he presented a drawing on the sail of a moving boat. As part of his project in Leuven last year, curated by Eva Wittocx, he was hired as a taxi driver, going in 'cinematic loops' along the ring road of Leuven. In Genk, he has taken up the position of a passenger.

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As the thin red line of the speedometer moved forward, the landscape around them disintegrated into lines – first horizontal and parallel, then warping and zigzagging along the sides of the bike. The driver's vision was growing narrower and narrower until he could no longer see anything but a slim tunnel, a bizarre and potentially deadly 'raree-show'. The passenger, in turn, blocked by the body he was holding onto, could only observe what would be the driver's peripheral view. The speed, melting down the landscape, seems to have melted their two bodies too, into one, codependent viewing organism.

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Since William Turner allegedly roped himself to a mast in order to experience the storm to the fullest, many artists, writers, and filmmakers have studied the impact of physical conditions and restraints on the acts of perception, ideation, and creation. Alexis Gautier explores this idea by using the motorbike as both a constraint and an instrument to make drawings with and from. Paul Klee once said that drawing is "taking a line for a walk". How would it be to draw while being taken for a ride, relinquishing some control over the line? Gautier's sketch for a floor installation, realised together with artist Richard Tuttle as part of his show in

Leuven, is executed outdoors by a motocrosser, while indoors, Gautier presents a new series of drawings made from the saddle of a moving motorbike and a film capturing a drift of a chalk line, on the tarmac.

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‘The ideal position for reading is something you can never find. In the old days they used to read standing up, at a lectern... Nobody ever thought of reading on horseback; and yet now, the idea of sitting in the saddle, the book propped against the horse’s man... seems attractive to you... having your feet up is the first condition for enjoying a read.’¹³

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Feel how soft this carpet is... With your chest and elbows buried in the silky fibres, and with your feet up, you are looking into a small reflective surface of the screen, like one looks at their reflection in a pond. Around you, other visitors engage in all sorts of gestures, working together to manipulate a gigantic roll of drawings, leaning over the screens, or laying flat on the floor, gazing up and being gazed back at.

Now, you slowly get up and put on your shoes. Or keep them off – some say that stepping barefoot on warm stones is good for your circulation. After finding your way outside, walk behind the school building, towards the open field where, soon, the new infrastructure of Jester will be built. Do you see the four metal poles, each topped with a lightweight sculpture, which delineate the corners of the future building? Can you imagine its volume, its shape? Within this suggested architecture, Alexis Gautier has realised the first artistic intervention on the new site – a choreography for a motocrosser, resulting in a temporary drawing, traced in the barren soil while drifting. The drawing follows the pattern used for a collaborative floor piece, realised together with Richard Tuttle in Leuven. “The floor piece can be called, ‘Welcome’,” wrote Tuttle in the email with instructions, which Gautier then translated into a drawing. In Genk, another translation of this piece welcomes the visitors to a new site and a new chapter of Alexis Gautier’s work.

List of Works

Indoor:

Alexis Gautier
Keys Series, glazed ceramic, papier-maché, cardboard, paint, 2022

Hermeslaan, print on blueback paper, 2022

Fabulations Series, print on blueback paper, 2022

Twan & Jarra, video, loop, 2022

Spa, video, loop, 2022

Cambio, video, loop, 2022

Mullberry’s Weight, silk, tennis ball, 2021

Fabulation Series, 45, ink on paper, museum glass, 2022

Arjun Das & Alexis Gautier
Swimmer, carved oak, 2022

Outdoor (behind LUCA School of Arts, on the construction site of Jester):

Alexis Gautier
Welcome (Genk), on site intervention.

Alexis Gautier
In Front and Behind, aluminum, steel

In Front and Behind, aluminum, steel

Selfportrait, steel, 2022

Bert Vangompel
Spiral, steel mobile sculpture, 2022

Colophon

Text

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