

"We're a few to consider creation, within our respective context, as the gradually perfectible result of several *advances*; not as the sudden fruit of a beautiful and secret detour. All of us take detours."
Edouard Glissant, *The Caribbean Discourse*

We all take detours. As a matter of fact, this even is one of the goals Cecilia and I had set when we opened the gallery: seeking to operate through capillary action or by digression; prepared to let our desires get the best of us. The title Mathieu K. Abonnenc suggested for his second exhibition at Marcelle Alix therefore seemed ideal to me: instead of connecting two points via the most direct route, the Creole "*chimen chyen*" is a byway. It alludes to the fashion in which dogs move about through space, to the way they zigzag from one smell to another or change direction as soon as they're arraigned by new sounds: a course that may lead them to take narrow or perilous paths. Regardless of speed or efficiency, following a "*chimen chyen*" enhances the journey in recognition that the destination may change along the way. We share this alternate course with artists.

And indeed, Mathieu K. Abonnenc's work can be seen as a subtle art of taking detours. For several years now, he has invited us to partake in the material he unearths from his family archives, relating images of objects his grandfather—a military nurse and entomologist—gathered in Africa to the *Brief Set of Instructions for Collecting Ethnographic Objects* published by Musée de l'Homme on the occasion of its 1931 Dakar-Djibouti ethnographic expedition.

The artist's fictional work then puts the autobiographical part of this research into a broader perspective in narratives he overlays on one another. Take Betty for instance: the main character in the film *Secteur IX B* (2015) is an anthropologist whose studies combine items pertaining to Mathieu's grandfather's life with Michel Leiris's account of his African sojourn during the Dakar-Djibouti mission (*in L'Afrique fantôme*, 1934). Betty's interest for insects (and the medications she ingests throughout the film to protect herself from them) recalls the ambiguous relation scientists entertain with their field of study: Emile Abonnenc had described a species of mosquito that his colleagues named *Abonnenci Phlebotomus* after him. *Secteur IX B* questions the classification standards still currently used by Natural History and Anthropological museums to bring "The Other" (the native, the animal, the plant) closer to researcher's experience so that it can be dissected until fully understood, until it is rendered transparent. Indeed, to sort, name and study are processes that relate closely to the colonial denial of The Other's integrity: denying its "right to opacity", it makes it an object of study and so as to better exhibit them, dissociates objects from their original context.

"But does not the world, in its exploded oneness, demand that each person be drawn to the recognized opacity of the other?" Edouard Glissant, op. cit.

The detours Abonnenc takes can also be embodied in individual stories—the threads of those sometimes getting lost (precisely because the artist cherishes their "right to opacity"), but which always corroborate elements of a comprehensive search. In the gallery's ground floor, the items on display originally belonged to Joseph Bernes, the former owner of Mathieu's mother's house in Wacapou—a village on the banks of the Maroni River in French Guiana. Images of the house or of the surrounding forest and river are recurrent motifs in the artist's early works. In this case, they're implicitly portrayed through the objects connected with Bernes' story: a native of St. Lucia, the man had supposedly moved to Guiana in the late 30s to try his luck as a gold-digger. Beyond the anecdotal personal story, this account reflects on the overlapping processes of time and history and the work's core is to be found in the gaps between objects; in the tenuous links they entertain with other exhibited pieces; in the way the colonial past haunts everyone's present and—precisely, in the way it just does not *pass*.

Panning for gold, in the region known as the Upper Maroni, was an activity that was primarily operated by Creoles coming from the Caribbean to take up an area they had to share with the Maroons and Amerindians. The disappearance of the Wacapou house (destroyed in a few years by the rain-forest's progresses) gives the artist an opportunity to relate the story of his family to that of the river which still forms the natural border between Guiana (an overseas department and Region of France) and Suriname (a free state, formerly Dutch Guiana) and which happens to be disputed by the descendants of the Maroons' nations. It thus recalls the queer peculiarity of the French State as the only European country to retain American borders.

Just like Marguerite Duras in *The Sea Wall*, Abonnenc negotiates with the colonial history that inextricably blends with his family's history and reflects on the necessarily resulting cultural mix. In her book *Duras la métisse*, Catherine Bouthors-Paillart suggests that the author's style (marked by a simplicity of syntax and the absence of verbs) is cross-bred with the Vietnamese language she spoke throughout her childhood and adolescence.

One can thus read Duras texts—and the works of Abonnenc—as Métis speech. Like Duras, Abonnenc is not working "on" the colonial past; he's neither a historian nor a teacher but attempts to create a language that's apt to express what History and the written standards of the metropolis have put aside: a taste for detours, a right to opacity and an ambivalent relationship to a landscape that's haunted by violence and that one seeks to alleviate.

Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc was born in 1977, he lives in Metz. He has had personal exhibitions at Kunsthalle Basel and Bielefelder Kunstverein in 2013 and at the Serralves Foundation, Porto, in 2012. He participated to the 8th Berlin Biennale (2014), to the Triennale, Paris (2012) and to Manifesta 8 (2010). His work is currently shown at the occasion of the exhibition *Leiris and co* at Centre Pompidou Metz, at the Venice Biennale (international exhibition and Belgian pavilion) and at the Kiev Biennale. His film *Secteur IX B* (redshoes production) is selected by the TIFF festival, Toronto and was screened at Tate Modern in July. Mathieu K. Abonnenc received the Bâloise Art Prize at Art Basel 2015, thanks to which the Museum für Moderne Kunst (MMK) in Frankfurt will organize a solo exhibition of his work in 2016. The Pompidou in Paris is devoting a Prospectif Cinéma screening to the artist on Sept 24, 2015.

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