

Jean-Baptiste Perret

Under The Radars | solo exhibition | november 17, 2023 - january 27, 2024

A watchful observer, Jean-Baptiste Perret scrutinises, explores, investigates and loves meeting people. He likes taking his time. His stamping ground—a term that seems more appropriate than the word “territory”, which might suggest something possessive or even proprietorial—covers regions located far from large urban areas. After the Forez region in central France, where a two-year immersion led him to create his first feature-length film *L'hiver et le 15 août* (2018), a portrait of both the landscape and its inhabitants, he now focuses on another isolated area of the Massif Central, the gorges of Haut-Allier, between Haute-Loire and Lozère.

This exhibition presents some of the results of several years of investigation and image-gathering: three pellucid and skilfully crafted short films titled *L'arrivée au refuge*, *La cueillette de l'osier* and *La nasse*, and a longer film titled *La surface unique*.

Perret gathers his source material from encounters that turn into friendships: with the young carpenter Pierre-Jean, the protagonist of *L'arrivée au refuge*; with Fanette, a new arrival in the area who gathers osiers; and with the basket maker Jean-Marc, who weaves a fish-trap. The aim is to share their experiences: *“I make portraits of people who have chosen to invent their own way of life by opting for a kind of radicality, a geographical and sometimes social isolation, as if it were necessary to break away from part of the world to find their own way, abandoning big political narratives and instead taking action where they live.”* Without fanfare (their discretion itself is significant), these people have decided to create possible spaces and alternative approaches to *“embrace their singularity, to isolate themselves so as to preserve their own space in a world governed by immediacy and transparency where everything has to be said right away. A space that belongs only to them”*. They’re also escaping from a sense of dispossession—suffered by the farmer in *La surface unique* whose aim is to assume control of his environment and activities. They seek escape routes in order to leave them behind. Jean-Baptiste Perret explains: *“To describe them, I prefer the adjective stealthy”*, a term borrowed from the philosopher Cynthia Fleury and the designer Antoine Fenoglio, who define it as a method that makes it possible to *“pull oneself out of the reality offered by today’s world [...]. Hidden from the radars of the contemporary panopticon, not to run away but to create [...] the renewal necessary for the elaboration of future legitimacies, those that will continue to guide individual and civilisational stories large and small.”*¹ Under the radars, then.

¹ *Ce qui ne peut-être volé. Charte du Verstohlen* (éditions Gallimard, coll. Tracts, 2022)

What Jean-Baptiste Perret takes away from these encounters with “stealthy” characters is first and foremost their movements. Slow, deliberate, precise, simple: walking, cutting, weaving. It’s as if slowness were the first political act. His aim is to work with places, people, and what they do; to twist things a little; to set up situations and produce micro-fictions that inhabit places and show how they are inhabited by actions that are part and parcel of a *land* that becomes a *landscape* produced by people who are at one with their surroundings. In *L’arrivée au refuge*, a figure slowly appears in the background and moves into the foreground; *La cueillette de l’osier* includes a variation of this. Perret’s approach to background and foreground is also a metaphor: it’s about arriving in the foreground and then vanishing. We will not be told what motivates their departure nor its ultimate outcome: what we see is a path leading from the distance in what might be described as an animated landscape painting. There’s no “before and after”: it’s up to us to build imagined narratives from each scene, thinking of what a figure in a place might mean and creating an inhabited landscape. *La nasse* suggests a discreet dialogue with the tradition of genre painting: the setting itself conjures up a stratified programme for living, like an open-air collage that is a palimpsest of historical moments, activities and materials. *La nasse* makes similar use of background: as with journeys that inhabit places, it’s not about being *in front* of the landscape but *inside* it.

This immersive dimension quietly reinforces an aesthetic attentiveness to silence, to the white noise of places, reminding us that the *genius loci* is also (perhaps primarily) a soundscape, like that of the distant countryside or the sound of water.

Within each film and from one film to the next, the aim is to weave invisible threads that wind across space, making it inhabited by connecting people and places. Walking, gathering, weaving: these are actions that Jean-Baptiste Perret seems to carry out in the films themselves, resulting in woven strands. A kind of bas-relief emerges, in the sense of a series of actions and situations which, when put together, constitute an epic *geste*, each fragment making it possible to focus on a unique situation through its autonomous details. The way in which the parts relate to the whole, as the project itself suggests, indicates a possible relationship with the environment, not in a general sense but here, precisely, in the gorges of the Allier.

Jean-Baptiste Perret gradually draws something like a re-imagined map of the spaces he explores. He highlights ways of living in the world, of sharing commons, where each detail contributes to a whole and where an idea of an imaginary future community is implicit in his attention to places and their ordinariness—what Giorgio Agamben calls their “whatever-singularity”.


In the overall economy of his films connecting actions, experiences, people and places, stories and words help to fabricate these spaces. Words that speak of a relationship with animals in *La nasse* and *La surface unique*: what Donna

Haraway calls “companion species”, familiar species whose presence we can learn from. From one place of work to the next, among such animals or surrounded by increasingly mechanical tools, the farmer’s stories point to an exacerbation of control and an alienation of the self, distanced from the world it inhabits.

The relationships with the world, with animals and with craft depicted here offer themselves up in fragments of space-time, of action-in-time, of action-in-the-landscape—on the part of the protagonists and in the films themselves: precise, exacting, devoid of inflated talk and needless trappings, methodical, concise and sharply contoured.

Nicolas Feodoroff - november 2023

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