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Grégory Sugnaux, "Did you enjoy it ?", 2023, mixed techniques on canvas, 80x80cm. Credit: Enrico Fontolan

Grégory Sugnaux

«Post Scriptum»

RESEARCH EXHIBITION

JANUARY 31 — APRIL 12, 2024

BIBLIOTHECA HERTZIANA

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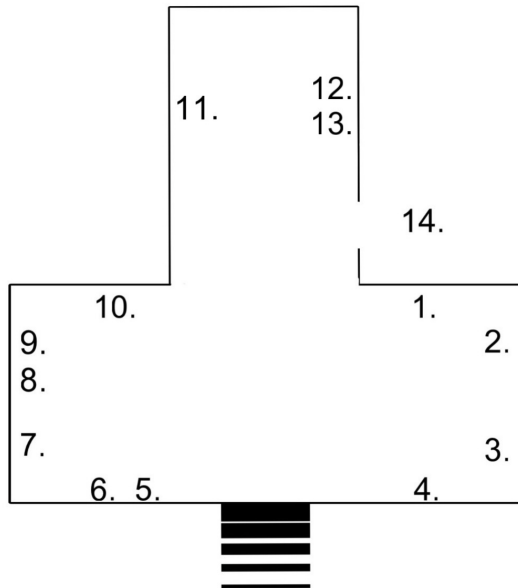
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Bibliotheca Hertziana
Via Gregoriana, 30 — Rome

Art Fellow Grégory Sugnaux presents the corpus of works he has produced during his residency at the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome, delving into the archives, the photographic collection, and the library. Resulting from the project "Shape-Shifting: Transfiguring Art History", Sugnaux's solo show will take place on the ground floor of Palazzo Zuccari, yet it will include media material recorded at the "La Cage aux Folles", a former *galleria di belle arti* owned by Ludovic Spiridon from 1910 to show his collection of paintings, which later became a club active until the 1980s.

Grégory Sugnaux (b. 1989) lives and works in Fribourg. His work is generally concerned with the status of the image through the mediation of exhibition and painting. In extracting the familiar image from its existing pictorial codes, he rejects hierarchical values in art history and tries to turn attention to the representation of alternative systems in image-making. With curation alongside his artistic practice, Sugnaux investigates the conditions of the exhibition in his varying approaches. From 2016 to 2020, he was co-curator of the project space WallRiss in Fribourg and since 2017 co-curator of Backslash Festival in Zürich. In 2015, he received the Kiefer Hablitzel I Göhner Art Price and was a finalist in the 2020 Swiss Art Awards. Recent solo exhibitions include *Into the Wolf's Mouth* at Lateral, Rome, *Mental Mask* at suns.works, Zürich (2023), *data romance* at Château de Gruyères (2022), *heute denken, morgen fertig* at Display, Berlin (2020), and *Définitif, donc provisoire* at Kunsthalle Friart in 2019. During his stay at the Swiss institute, 2022–2023, he continued his investigation into monstrous figures by creating two new series of paintings.



SALA TERRENA, FROM THE RIGHT (CLOCKWISE)

1. « Know Yourself »
2024
oil on linen
70x50cm
2. « An der Hand blutend »
2024
mixed techniques on canvas
70x50cm
3. « Did you enjoy it? »
2023
mixed techniques on canvas
80x80cm
4. « Joxter »
2024
mixed techniques on canvas
40x30cm
5. « Untitled »
2024
gouache on canvas
70x50cm
6. « Buckelige Hofdame »
2023
oil on canvas
70x50cm
7. « Diffidate della Realtà »
2024
oil on linen
80x80cm
8. « Untitled »
2024
oil on linen
30x20cm

9. « Cerchio Magico »
2024
mixed techniques on canvas
80x40cm
10. « Untitled »
2024
oil on linen
70x50cm

CORRIDOIO D'ERCOLE, LEFT SIDE

11. « The End »
2024
oil on linen
80x80cm

CORRIDOIO D'ERCOLE, RIGHT SIDE

12. « Untitled »
2023
mixed techniques on canvas
40x30cm
13. « Untitled »
2023
mixed techniques on canvas
40x30cm

SALA DEL DISEGNO

14. « Post Scriptum »
2024
4K video loop
4'15"

Grégory Sugnaux's *Unsettling Images* — Lara Demori

Coming across Sugnaux's paintings, the viewer is immediately overwhelmed by a sense of unsettledness and displacement, mirroring the disturbing and hallucinatory visions that inhabit the artist's cosmos. Attempts to interpret such a world are bound to fail, suggesting aphasia — the inability to comprehend or articulate something — and a general lack of unity. Yet, the deeper we delve into this magma of phantasmagorias, the more it resurfaces. Suddenly, a carousel of figures materializes, akin to a postmodern danse macabre: boorish fools, screaming punk kids, grotesque stock characters, and grinning and skeletal popes. With prolonged looking, however, patterns emerge, grounding the relationships between these personalities and situating Sugnaux's approach to painting and visual culture within various art historical genres, notably caricature and the postmodern trend of "bad painting."

At the end of the fifteenth century, Leonardo da Vinci, fascinated by the peculiarities of human faces, created a series of grotesque heads. This was a collection of caricatures *avant la lettre*, in which the artist, with a scientific eye, imbued every fine line and facial feature with human emotion, exploring ugliness through the radical exaggeration of physical characteristics. Since the Renaissance, caricature has evolved, abandoning mimetic and realistic intentions in favour of exaggerated forms used to emphasize physical deformities that reflect moral corruption. Thus, it became a tool of political satire, as seen in England and France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where it was associated with the rise of illustrated magazines and newspapers, and ultimately mass media.

Since the early 2000s, caricature has embraced digital technology, resulting in the creation of cartoons, animations, and memes often based on illogical yet always ironic and entertaining relations between mass visual culture and language. Sugnaux works with similar associations, drawing from the same mishmash of contemporary images, accentuating their every facet, and playing with the grotesque. His paintings act as explorations of the human soul and its external appearance, questioning the leitmotiv of portraiture.

For instance, the work that serves as the face of this exhibition, entitled "Did you enjoy it?" (2023), depicts an archetypal court jester — red and white with a tacky, spiked hat — but placed in our contemporary reality to the point of adopting our (crude) gestures and customs. The title does not explain the subject, but it elicits a hidden laugh from the visitor without fully revealing its mystery. The figure originates in the Hertziana's "Echaurren Collection," a compilation of cultural and political fanzines from the 1970s donated to the library by the artist Pablo Echaurren. During his four-month residency, Sugnaux meticulously dissected Hertziana's vast collection of books, and archives in search of protagonists for his images. This cast of characters will also live in some of the building's

offices during the exhibition, mingling with the people who inhabit those spaces. A video made in the long-defunct nightclub "La Cage aux Folles" closes the show in the Sala del Disegno. La Cage aux Folles, on via Gregoriana 9, was the showroom of Ludovic Spiridon at the beginning of the century and became a disco club in the Seventies and Eighties. Temporarily installed there, Sugnaux's paintings gave life back to the place and, with a spooky twist, materialize the memories of the club's past.

These images are in keeping with the 1970s tradition of "Bad Painting", a trend that grouped together painters who departed from modernist and classical norms to explore "bad subject matter," like Anselm Kiefer in *Heroic Symbols*, or an "aesthetic of ugliness", which involved a deliberate process of deskilling. This approach included a child-like style of painting (as in the work of Jean Dubuffet), animistic and primitive figuration, and deliberately imperfect or crude painting.

Sugnaux's pastiches, which often rely on ugly and kitsch imagery, enter this postmodern tradition and engage in a meta-discourse that reflects on the medium itself. They analytically deconstruct painting to reveal its possibilities, limitations, and, perhaps, its very "end" — potentially foreseeing the Hegelian concept of the "end of art." In one work displayed in one of the Hertziana's offices, a painted and framed door of a refrigerator — an objet trouvé the artist discovered from the street — Sugnaux depicts an old skeletal figure, perhaps a pope (?), emerging from a coffin. The eerie subject, rendered with an unrefined technique of messy brushstrokes, parodies modernist painting and its aspirations for purity, introducing disruptive elements such as the fusion of high and popular culture. The cheap material support paired with a figure high up in the religious aristocracy, mixes pastiche, imitation, appropriation, political nihilism, and commercial complicity.

Sugnaux's images play with these features without resolution, leaving the viewer with an ambiguous sense of unease. Upon closer inspection, however, they seem to whisper: "There is only bad art because there is no such thing as art."

Grégory Sugnaux: Post Scriptum — Annabelle Hirsch

In the 15th century, an anonymous artist penned his observations about working in the recently discovered “chambers” of the Roman Domus Aurea: “The summer feels cooler here than the winter... Along with supplies of bread, ham, fruits, and wine, we crawl on the ground, presenting a spectacle more comical than the grotesques.”

Anyone who witnessed the Swiss artist Grégory Sugnaux emerge from his personal Domus, his grotto in recent weeks, ascending, coughing and panting, from the basement of Via Gregoriana 9 – the main setting for the video central to this exhibition — wearing an almost startled expression, as if he had lost awareness of both the temporal and spatial dimensions to which he had been transported, will inevitably recall those early reports. You might find they are evocative of those Renaissance painters who descended through narrow shafts not far from the Colosseum, stumbling upon a perfectly preserved past just a few meters beneath the floor of their own time. Enthralled by the frescoes of antiquity, these artists were captivated by the ‘grotesques’ — hybrids of human, animal, and plant species — to such a degree that they conjured forth these beguilingly disquieting monsters onto the surface, recreating them within the contemporary context, even to embellish the rooms of the Vatican.

Forming a central theme in Sugnaux’s artistic approach and practice are elements of descent, digging, retrieval, and breaking of boundaries between yesterday and today, between the sacred and the profane, as well as integrating figures and elements that seem disparate or incongruent upon first glance. Equally significant is the bewildering simultaneity of emotions that this process evokes. Fear, affection, mockery, disgust, attraction, and repulsion are feelings that simultaneously sustain and fragment in face-to-face encounters with his art, as well as in the process of creation. This holds true for his works around the so-called “cursed images.”

Those images that have surged to the surface from the depths of the internet since 2016 distinguish themselves not only by their questionable quality and disconcerting content (usually involving cuddly toys, food, disparate body parts, teeth, animals, nothing is where it is supposed to be), but mainly because they evoke a sensation within us that we don’t fully grasp or comprehend. A diffuse pleasure in agitation, a hunger for the ambiguity embodied in the image. This holds true for the series created during his four-month scholarship at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, as well as the video and exhibition titled “Post Scriptum.” Where the Swiss artist would once have typically immersed himself in the internet for his research in preparation of his artistic endeavors, seeking hovering/floating ghost images, lost visual souls, and providing them, if only momentarily, for the duration of a show, with an anchor, a sense of a place, a contextual backdrop, he has now plunged into the seemingly endless expanse of the Hertziana archive, allowing images to unfold before him.

At the beginning, there was a word, a search term: “grotesque.” Hertziana’s website responded with “over 3500 results.” Sugnaux kept scrolling, looking, sifting, and feeling, until something concrete began to take shape. Certain patterns. Connections spanning epochs and genres. Figures and gestures that served as an echo of his experience in the city of Rome, its layers, its decadence, its irreverence.

As was customary for him, he quickly and intuitively replicated initial elements: a caricature of Pope Innocent XI smoking in bed by Bernini, which he sketched in an elongated form on a wooden board found on a street in Rome. A naked old hag pulling her hair like a curtain, which he painted over a preexisting image depicting the Halloween disaster in Seoul. Harlequins, punks, witches. Many of his characters stem from magazines of the seventies and eighties. Others, like the Alexamenos Graffito (depicting Jesus as a donkey, one of the earliest caricatures of its kind), derive from books that researchers left lying around in the library, the pages of which the artist secretly leafed through in their absence. They are often the unloved protagonists of the visual memory of art and pop culture, the quirky fringe characters, those images, which Sugnaux has chosen in an affectionate gesture as they are rarely sought after, represents an attempt to elevate the comedic. They are the so-called Roman fools.

Grégory Sugnaux’s artworks seldom exist in isolation; rather, their true potential is unveiled in dialogue with others, in the juxtaposition within the context of an exhibition. It is the encounter with elements that do not seamlessly align that propels movement for the artist, revealing truths that already exist but seemingly lurk and are often overlooked by us. In the case of “Post Scriptum,” Sugnaux’s images came together for the first time even before the exhibition, shielded from the gaze of viewers. The clandestine gathering took place in the mentioned “grotto,” into which he disappeared for days — a location fittingly named for this mysterious convergence. Its name is “La Cage aux Folles,” the Cage of Fools.

This modern ruin is nestled in the heart of Rome, just a few meters from the Spanish Steps, and a short stroll from the Hertziana. Like almost everything in this city, this abandoned, forgotten structure has lived through several incarnations. In the 1920s, it housed a gallery, whose founder became a notorious smuggler and forger in history. Later, in the seventies and eighties, the Roman youth gathered here to dance and lose themselves in the night. In the future, the overflowing library archive will find a new home here.

Before the impending arrival of books with their categories, styles, and epochs, the artist liberated their overlooked heroes. He welcomed them to wander through these spaces, intermingle, expand, adhere to the walls, and claim the ruin entirely for themselves. Much like parasites. In a way, akin to the artist himself. It is conceivable that he and his subterranean fools will persistently linger in the scholarly halls of Hertziana, even after their departure, intermittently disrupting the established order.