

AN ISLANDER AND AN ALIEN

By Gaël Charbau

*As for the subject of my work, it's fairly trivial.
Something like the crossing of an era by a man
who, when the journey begins, inherits the
body of a consumer...¹*

It's no easy task to write yet another text on Gilles Barbier. Indeed, so many papers and interviews have already been written about or commented on his work, and so prolific are the themes and forms he tackles: science, science fiction and comics of course, figuration and above all "auto-figuration", holes, bubbles, pawns, motors, ribbons, organs... An entire catalog could already be no more than a nominal census of all the elements he constantly tackles. Like talking to a stranger, docking with an asteroid or approaching the coast of a new continent. Gilles' work is indeed an ecology of boarding, and the artist himself, the most flamboyant pirate. His origins, which bind him forever to the ocean, mean that he can land any subject that crosses his horizon. On the subject of his famous Dessins noirs, for example, he explained to me a few years ago "(...) The black drawings I've been doing for fifteen years come out of a very precise program. Their format is defined, as is their technique (...) Their subject: anything that impacts my sensibility - the memory of a drunken evening, a phrase, an image, a vision, a piece of music, a discussion with someone... (...) I don't need to work anymore, things just happen, so to speak, by themselves."² It's clear that he alone is Robinson on the island, while it's the forms of the world that gravitate and let themselves be captured on the large parabolic mirror of his studio. "Where to begin", asked Pierre Sterckx, "anywhere. Above all, no chronology! There are a thousand entries in Gilles Barbier's work. His work never ceases to appear riddled and tentacular."³

I would add that, faced with such a work of art, one can only begin and never come full circle. Organically, like the Universe, expanding: "In 1992, I set up my first Game of Life (...) in six months I had launched more programs than I would have been able to do in my lifetime without this device"⁴. But if his work is thus planned and intended to be infinite, it remains unpredictable. The last exhibition "Entre, dans, derrière, sous, sur..." presented in autumn 2020 at Galerie GP&N Vallois surprised many of us, so much so that it opened up and clarified new, more intimate and surely more psychoanalytical compartments.

¹ Pierre Sterckx, Gilles Barbier, Un abécédaire dans le désordre, Ed. Du Regard

² "Le jeu de la vie" interview with Gaël Charbau, exhibition catalog 'Echo Système', (comm. Gaël Charbau) Ed. Actes Sud, Friche la Belle de Mai

³ Pierre Sterckx, Gilles Barbier, Un abécédaire dans le désordre, Ed. Du Regard

⁴ "Le jeu de la vie" interview with Gaël Charbau, 'Echo Système' exhibition catalog, (comm. Gaël Charbau) Ed. Actes Sud, Friche la Belle de Mai

I would venture to hypothesize that there are two invariants in Barbieresque work⁵ : on the one hand, the manifest or symbolic presence of language, and on the other, realism as a system. Gilles Barbier is indeed a realist artist, in the sense of the eponymous literature that emerged in the 19th century, which sought to express “reality” with accuracy, precision and veracity. Materially, sentimentally, psychologically. We immediately think of the crazy details that haunt and illuminate his paintings and objects. They are not copies of the real, but the real. One example: to create one of his famous “pawns”, representing a Gille de Binche, the artist entered into a technical correspondence with this famous congregation from northern France and Belgium, to ensure that his work respected all its codes and procedures (and there are many). We know that Flaubert seriously researched arsenic poisoning when writing *Madame Bovary*, and it's with the same desire for “veracity” that Gilles Barbier engages in everything. He is a scrutinizer, an explorer, but above all a duplicator of our reality. The two “treasures” (*The Treasure Room I* and *II* from 2012 and 2019) are striking examples of this.

This comparison with literature is not artificial. The more I delve into his work, the more I get the impression that Gilles Barbier is a writer, and that his works are short stories, novels, encyclopedias, treatises, essays or poems. The famous copy of the dictionary, the emblematic undertaking of his work that keeps him busy on Sundays, could thus appear as a formidable decoy, a sort of degree zero or “level 1” of understanding or entry into his work. I've often suspected him of slipping interpretative “traps” into the reading of his work. It would be a mistake to try to appreciate his work by comparing it to that of other visual artists. His Great Work is not so much about creating forms, but rather about preserving his extraordinarily complex language, and indeed, when Gilles talks to us about his work, we clearly understand that he is trying to translate into our common vocabulary what is unspeakable in his own original “plastic language”. In other words, the work is autonomous, indigenous to him. “As far back as I can remember, language has played a physical role for me; it's something like a presence at my side. I see it as a color, or rather a light. (...) The integration of text in all strata of my work is linked to a twist, a fold, that my upbringing has imprinted on my behavior.”⁶

In our universe, Gilles is both an islander and an alien. Exactly at the center of his world and definitely on the edge of ours. Among his many passions is a passion for the most experimental science, such as quantum physics, which postulates, for example, possible “superposed states of matter”, measuring not reality but the probability of finding a particle here, rather than here, or even in several places at once! The aforementioned realism would no longer be at the service of a simple “copy” of the world, but a quasi-educational means of addressing us, for him who, from his pirate planet, glimpses realities quite dizzying and forbidden to our understanding. The craftsmanship and obvious beauty of his images, and the virtuoso execution of everything he produces, are not an end in themselves - the artist's narcissism - but an obvious means of letting us glimpse the delightful complexity of what is, all within us, and all around us. At the center and at the edge. Banal and extraordinary, like the bananas and verses that punctuate his writing. Once again, on this track, Pierre Sterckx

⁵ Expression by Pierre Sterckx

⁶ “Le jeu de la vie” interview with Gaël Charbau, ‘Echo Système’ exhibition catalog, (comm. Gaël Charbau) Ed. Actes Sud, Friche la Belle de Mai

had a lot to say: "Don't explain anything. Don't want to write simply and clearly, but to help this art unfold, to increase its essential potential with the public; Gilles Barbier's work needs no analysis, suggests no little secret to be interpreted. To want to justify every element at all costs would be tantamount to wanting to clarify that Newton's apple was a golden and not a granny smith. Such new works need a new accompanying discourse. "⁷

This right accompanying discourse to come, as we perhaps understand it here, is above all always late. That's the problem with a work of this magnitude. Responding to its own principles, it cannot satisfy any order or trend. Its style, moreover, is invariant in its variety. It will never adapt to our tastes; the islander-pirate-aboriginal will fiercely guarantee its ultimate independence. We're behind the times in this infinity of forms.

Talking with Gilles is like getting on a train that's been running at full speed for a long time. And then realizing that this train is not a succession of linear carriages, but is built like a star. Like the compass rose at the bottom of old maps. Then it's understanding that the map isn't flat, but shaped like a bubble, touching a thousand other bubbles. Finally, it's to imagine Gilles telling us that we are indeed on the surface of the small bar of soap on his bathtub, and suggesting, in a harmless tone, that we visit his apartment.

Gaël Charbau

⁷ Pierre Sterckx, Gilles Barbier, Un abécédaire dans le désordre, Ed. Du Regard

