

Unexpected, subversive and provocative, Gilles Barbier sees the world upside down, from the Micronesian islands where he grew up. "I was born down there! (...) a geographical and cartographic bottom¹", he writes. This biographical element, which is neither asserted nor decisive in his aesthetics, is nonetheless partly at the root of his relationship with the world. It's with the feeling of living inverted, upside down, backwards in time, that he fashions worlds that collide with our own: possible and impossible spaces, dreamlike and unthinkable. These worlds are themselves inhabited by other territories, forming a cartography that is both coherent and chaotic. His work does not follow a linear trajectory: it functions according to the principle of network, arborescence, foliage and proliferation. Right from the start of his career in the 90s, he proceeded - like the mechanisms of the brain - by associations, shifts and telescoping to establish a working methodology. This device, which has become the foundation of his work - known as the "production machine" - is nourished by his reflections and fields of exploration. Inspired by his reading of Luke Rhinehart's *Dice Man* and mathematician John Horton Conway's cellular automata, he imagines a checkerboard of 437 squares, under which he slides folded sheets bearing statements such as "working on Sundays" and "inhabiting painting". After throwing the die, he discovers the statement that indicates the works to be created. The statement can sometimes generate several interpretations. Curious and eager to learn, he integrates chance, gambling and probabilities, as well as concepts borrowed from quantum physics and other fields such as comics, science fiction, literature, human sciences and artificial intelligence. A bulimic, he devoured texts by Deleuze and Guattari, science fiction novels by Philip K. Dick, William Gibson, J. G. Ballard and *2001*, and cult films such as Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977-83) and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). Eager to learn, he began copying pages from a dictionary - the 1966 *Petit Larousse Illustré* - using gouache to represent the illustrations, and pen to represent the words. This work of art has punctuated his work - his life - for 35 years.

By situating his creation within this vast mesh, the artist weaves dreams of another world. Like the spider, sensitive to all external vibrations, he absorbs information from the world and retransmits it in a system of exchanges and perpetual movement. This web - constantly at work - is the image of a work in progress, where what has already been created encourages the formation of the new. "It's an immense sensibility, a kind of enormous spider's web made of the tightest silk threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and holding in its web all the atoms floating in the air. It is the very atmosphere of the mind, and if that mind is imaginative - (...) - it draws to itself the subtlest breaths of the living, and converts into revelations the very pulsations of the air²." Barbier not only extends this image by Henri James, he also exploits its full metaphorical potential with great virtuosity. He transfers the spider metaphor from the realm of thought to that of creation. The web becomes the seed of a world. It condenses all the world's thoughts. It is the operator of space.

¹ Gilles Barbier, *Vu d'en bas*, Jannink, 2013, p. 12.

² Henry James, *The Art of Fiction* (1884), *Literary Criticism*, éd. L. Edel, New York, The Library of America, 1984, p. 52.

Explosive and generous, Gilles Barbier develops a body of work of unprecedented plastic energy, colorful and polysemous. A maker of worlds, a “remaker” of realities, he constantly returns to his previous productions, to the narrative sequences that led to them. These revisits, mixed with new pieces, lead to unexpected extensions and forks in the road, drawing the spectator into a profusion of connected and recombined ideas and images. His work is not confined to any one medium, moving from sculpture to drawings, painting and photography, casting and installations. The artist sees each of his productions as a simple version of itself, leaving the field of possibilities wide open.

A world-work, a voracious work, it plunges with humor into the heart of human nature, which the artist addresses through contemporary issues: the place of the body as a commodity, the role of the media, chronic crises... He has also developed a theory on the “pornosphere”, denouncing the discourses of today's society: the bulimia of the media, the dramatic reduction of stimuli, the growth and efficiency of production systems. *Porno city 2000* marks the entrance to an imaginary city conceived as a veritable “fiction factory”. With its simple graphics, round shapes and bright colors, the work evokes the formal codes of the comic strip. They are reminiscent of Lucky Luke's town signs, riddled with bullets and topped with the names of the dead. In Barbier's world, bubbles are “holes in the image”. Holes for better or for worse: holes to puncture the too-smooth surface of the real world, holes to produce a multiplicity of scenarios. He uses bubbles “as a spotlight, a bulb illuminating a scene - a hole in the darkness of a black gouache³.” Like the diptych *Untitled (Les images bulles, 2003)*, Barbier uses the codes that make up comics to generate a double language: one that can be seen, the other that can be spoken and read.

Barbier has the ability to create and invent images, not only to copy reality, but also to extract or bring into existence multiple worlds. He connects all his worlds without irony, playing with signs and the multiplicity of meanings. In 1995, he began casting clones in his own likeness, inviting us, tragically or burlesquely, to reflect on time, memory and identity, as in *Papou Huli Wigman (Pawn), 2015*. Life-size or dwarf-sized, his clones make up an ever-growing population - “a pack” - that becomes the medium for absurd or sordid narratives. In the manner of sculptor Xavier Messerschmidt, some of these effigies reflect the pathologies and ills of humanity: voracity, perversity, idiocy... By putting his “self” to the test in this way, he seeks to illustrate the multiplicity and duplicity of beings in general, in line with the theses developed by Deleuze and Guattari in “*Capitalism and Schizophrenia*”. In 2002, he extended this statement by creating *Nursing Home*, the landmark piece of his career, made up of retired superheroes. They are “the age of their copyright, of their arteries”, agrees the artist. We see the Hulk sitting in a wheelchair, Catwoman slouched in front of the TV, Superman walking with a walker. It's a grotesque way of dealing with the passage of time and the anguish of death. “I try to deal with complex subjects such as the life and death drives that run through us. I try to produce simple images that everyone can relate to⁴.” A decade later, he shows *The Thing* (from *Fantastic Four*), increasingly diminished, inert in an

³ “Le Jeu de la Vie” Interview by the artist, with Gael Charbau in Gilles Barbier, *Écho Système*, exhibition catalog (Friche la Belle de Mai, Marseille, August 29, 2015-January 3, 2016), Actes Sud / 4 Friche la Belle de Mai, 2015

⁴ Interview in his studio in Marseille on November 30, 2017

armchair and overgrown with weeds - A Very Old Thing (2015) -. Stripped of his powers, he is now in a state of stasis. In complete immobility, his mineral organism blocked, he is in the process of metamorphosis. As a superhero, he transforms himself into a terrestrial substrate, suggesting the power of morphogenesis or ontogenesis, processes that fascinate the artist.

Barbier's works are the result of statements and programs he invents, multiplying scenarios and series. They are all interconnected, with one series often giving rise to another. Among the many ramifications of his work, the notion of "inhabiting" is recurrent. Inhabiting all kinds of things, starting with one's own body. Inhabiting the world, landscapes and still lifes, like this Grande fontaine de chocolat (2014) on which small white houses are glued in places. "Art allows irreconcilable things to coexist, to create shocks and interferences that cannot exist in real life. Fragile and in suspension, the houses, places of all fantasies, the place where we imagine things to last (the family), suggest, when associated with such a perishable form - in this case, chocolate - a short and precarious time". With this confusion of genres and times, he reflects contemporary society's paradoxical way of looking at the world, culture and fashion.

On the same principle, Barbier had already sought to "inhabit painting": modern white architectures were integrated into the still lifes of the painter Heda, again opening onto other spatio-temporal worlds. With the Hawaiian Ghost series (2017), he seeks to suggest "painting as an eternal returnee". Every five years, painting is announced as dead, but painting never stops dying. It systematically returns," he asserts. These spectres clad in dresses printed with floral motifs evoke both Polynesian fabrics and surf fashion, as well as the traditional motif of Western painting. "With one foot in fantasy and one in reality, I make art so that short time meets long time," he concludes.

Mouna Mekouar