

STANDBY MICE STATION

EN

Camille Blatrix

At the center of the exhibition, its diminutive size dwarfed by the grandeur of the space, is a wooden children's activity table. It is not brand new, marked as it is by a child's tactile affection. A readymade, it is the one item in the exhibition not crafted by Camille Blatrix, who insists on hand-making much of his art. Comprising the exhibition are devices of various sizes, some featuring hooks or chains, some twinkling and pulsing, and all fabricated with such care that you might easily fail to notice that very care—such is the nature of technical perfection. Two of these, which have seemingly rolled themselves out of the exhibition space, greet you at the top of the stairs even before you enter; one boasts tiny double cylinders suggesting hydraulic pumps; another has wheels and a frosted yellow covering with a moon-shaped cutout, causing the details of the video playing inside the device to be barely discernible behind this outer shell. They are positioned like miniature sentinels, somehow standing guard but also, perhaps, communicating with the monumental mural on the wall in front of them. Inside the exhibition space proper, one device, with an abstracted tail and head uses a light effect to feign what looks like retinal quivering. In a back gallery yet another stands erect, poised on a single thin leg and looking at itself in a mirror; you see the object from behind, apprehending its "face" and animated simulation of flames via reflection. The seemingly industrial, ostensibly functional contours of the devices shimmer with anticipation of purpose, evoking machines of some sort, but their utility remains cryptic and their *raison d'être* utterly inexplicable.

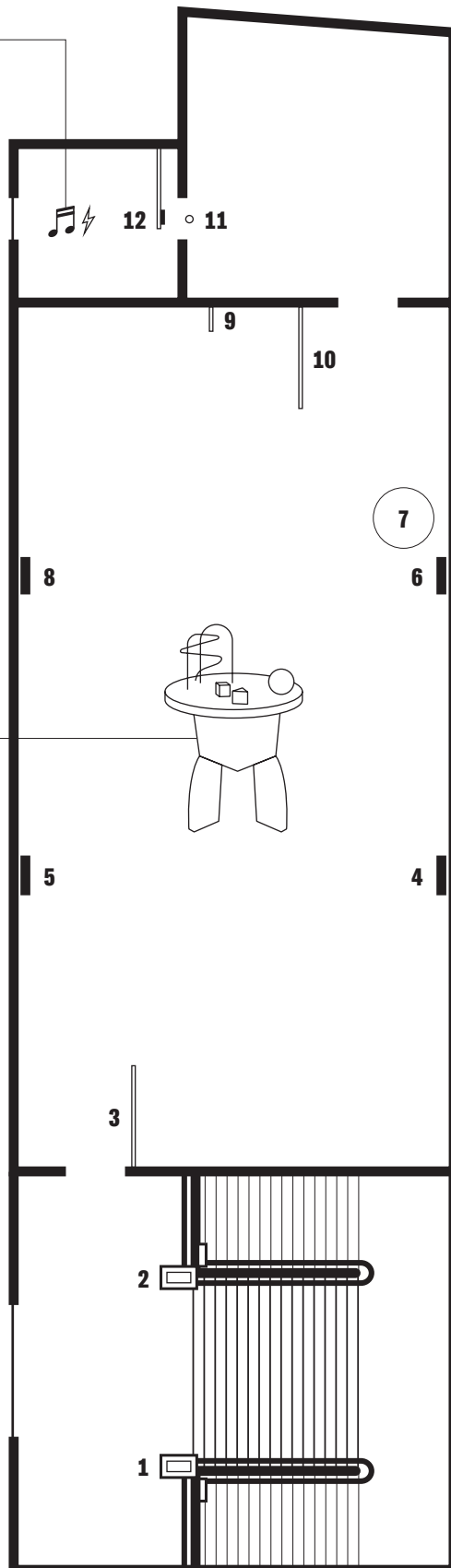
Could these devices hail from some yet unknown future? They seem to have dispersed outward, away from the two charging stations that have been laid out like barriers near the main room's thresholds. "Device," "charging station"—some of this terminology should quite possibly be put in quotation marks, because to use these words, common to the world of household appliances and everyday machinery, seems wrong somehow, in need of qualification. But how else to describe the unknown, other than by relating it to what is already familiar?

The devices are now fully charged, and you might imagine them having just previously unplugged themselves from their charging stations—which, you'll notice, bear quirky interfaces, each

17.01.-15.03.
KUNSTHALLE
BASEL

Stand By Me
(*Winter Remix*) by
Hugo Benayoun Bost

Baby Forest Activity
Table—Janod®



1
Winter Guard, 2020
iPod touch, plastic,
plexiglass, resin, rubber,
stainless steel
13 × 6 × 17 cm

2
Winter Guard, 2020
Plastic, resin, rubber,
stainless steel
4 × 7 × 24 cm

3
Standby Mice Station
(*Autumn Box*), 2020
Black anodized aluminum,
electronic component,
painted foam, plexiglass,
resin, ribbon, rubber,
stainless steel, wood
20.6 × 73 × 250 cm

4
Grumpy Cat (Summer),
2020
Maple, wooden marquetry
35 × 30 × 2.1 cm

5
Roche Tower (Spring), 2020
Maple, wooden marquetry
35 × 30 × 2.1 cm

6
Dawson Crying (Winter),
2020
Maple, wooden marquetry
35 × 30 × 2.1 cm

7
Weather Stork Point, 2020
Electronic component,
feather, maple, wooden
marquetry, painted foam,
plastic, PVC fabric, resin,
stainless steel, wood
20 cm height, Ø 150 cm

8
Maxinmarine (Autumn),
2020
Maple, wooden marquetry
35 × 30 × 2.1 cm

9
Mouse, 2020
Electronic component,
maple, plastic, plexiglass,
resin, rubber, stainless
steel
138 × 20 × 12 cm

10
Standby Mice Station
(*Winter*), 2020
Black anodized aluminum,
electronic component,
painted foam, resin, rubber,
stainless steel
50.6 × 14 × 250 cm

11
Stork, 2020
Electronic component,
plastic, plexiglass, resin,
rubber, stainless steel
129.5 × 15 × 12 cm

12
Two Candles, 2018
Glass, mahogany, wooden
marquetry
113.7 × 52.1 × 5.6 cm

divulging the device meant to plug into it for sustenance of unspecified kind: Do they do this at night, when the exhibition is closed, huddling together around their energy source as if around a hearth? The two things (devices and their charging stations)—each made to fit into one another—implore connection. Yet that relationship remains deliberately equivocal, suggesting something both practical, electric, and something somatic, emotional, existential even. While it may seem odd to describe Blatrix's objects in this way, the characterization is not incongruous with the whole of his oeuvre, which could be described as objects united by a quest to belong (to something other than themselves) and to connect (to each other and, most importantly, to you, dear viewer). Intimacy is what they are after.

How odd to describe sculptures as having a will, and more than that, something like sentimental longing. But such is the peculiarity of the French artist's objects. They are the epitomes of contradiction: as hard as they are smooth, seemingly rational and technical, but also curiously creaturely and alive, emotive and sensual. While inspired by the mass-produced objects that surround us (like the children's activity table that was the artist's starting point for this body of work), they are lovingly fabricated from wood, resin, plastic, and stainless steel using traditional techniques and exquisite handcraft. As such, each element is imbued with inexplicable affect, somehow rendering it not only animate but sentient.

Mute, ambiguous: these objects are, in so many ways, diametrically opposed to the predilections of our present moment. The digital age asks us to be disembodied; its endlessly available images and data circulate bloodlessly. Blatrix, for his part, is not afraid to be naïve, romantic, to return us to the hand and the heart: "I like to start with ideas with a certain pathos, and then I make them increasingly abstract until the result is something more twisted and strange."

For *Standby Mice Station*, with the full alliterative force of his deliberately nonsensical title, the artist has imagined just such an ensemble of new sculptures and images, the latter fashioned in that anachronistic technique of wood marquetry (mostly bygone in art, now more known in the realm of furniture making). These images line the walls around the ready-made object that inspired the artist's own "activity table," *Weather Stork Point* a grown up's oversized technological gadget, evoking a bizarre climate predictor meets board game meets robot vacuum cleaner. Partially covered in feathers, with balls emerging from it as if

for somehow measuring atmospheric shifts, and bearing pictograms of the sun and moon, stars and snow, it can't actually register anything. As with everything else in the show, reason is not the tool one might best use to comprehend its logic.

In the images, declared to represent the four seasons, Blatrix has abstracted this original motif until it becomes entirely unrecognizable. Summer, for instance, is represented by an image of the so-called Grumpy Cat, the feline superstar that has become an internet meme sensation and that happens to have died in summertime. Winter is represented by another famous meme, this one based on the widely-mocked "ugly-crying face" of the US-American teen TV series *Dawson's Creek's* lead character, whose visage crumples with emotion when he is abandoned by his girlfriend (in winter, of course). The associations between the other seasons and the images meant to portray them are even more tenuous and personal. Yet it isn't coincidental that Grumpy Cat looks disapprovingly at the depiction of Pharmaceutical giant F. Hoffmann-La Roche AG's Roche Tower (spring), and that an emotionally charged crying face is positioned opposite the tender image of a mother and her child (autumn). Rather, it points to narrative threads linking each element according to the idiosyncratic semantic structure that is the artist's mind.

"Imagine minimalism falling in love with surrealism": It was thusly that Blatrix's work was once aptly described, the writer adding, "It can only end tragically." So, it is. As if in anticipation of precisely such a trajectory, the artist has set up a tiny, crude effigy of himself in a corner of the exhibition. There sits a Starbucks apron, swaddled up to form a pathetic body, with a tennis ball as its head, its face scribbled with a single tear, almost emoji-like, intimating that Blatrix is there, watching it all, resignedly. As a visitor, you cannot access the exhibition's very last space. You can only take it in partially, looking past the wall-like obstacle the artist has erected. From this vantage point, with a remix of a snippet from the soulful 1960s Ben E. King song *Stand By Me* playing on repeat, you also finally get to see a real season, perhaps with rain and snow, taking place outside the institution's window located across the room.

The combination of elements, their sparseness in the space and taut tension between them, attempts to convey the tragic emotional charge of a world in which being able to experience the changing seasons will soon be a thing of the past. But none of this is explicit, even less is

it proclamative or strategic. Instead, the artist invites you—us all—into a peculiar universe where he mysteriously instills things with emotion and provokes our capacity to feel and connect to objects and people around us. To ask what any of it *means* is perhaps the wrong question. Confronted by Blatrix's art, the pertinent question is what it means *to us*.

Camille Blatrix was born in 1984 in Paris, where he lives and works.

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GUIDED TOURS THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

Every Sunday at 3 pm guided tour, in German, except on Sundays when the curator's tour takes place

Curator's tour with Elena Filipovic, in English
19.1.2020, Sunday, 3 pm

Guided tour, in English
12.3.2020, Thursday, 6:30 pm

EDUCATION / PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Basel Museums Night
17.1.2020, Friday, 6 pm–2 am
Special program with the sculpture workshop *Stone by stone* (ongoing) and a live listening session by Gerome Johannes Gadiant at 11 pm

Flee, you fools
23.1.2020, Thursday, 6:30 pm
In a performative reading, students from the Theobald Baerwart secondary school present poems developed with the lyricist and literary mediator Alisha Stöcklin (in German); in cooperation with the 17th edition of Internationales Lyrikfestival Basel and Lyrix – Deutscher Bundeswettbewerb für junge Lyrik.

In the Kunsthalle Basel library you will find a selection of publications related to Camille Blatrix.

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