

The Collection Stripped Bare by its Artists, Even **text by Silvia Guerra, co-curator of the exhibition and artistic director of Lab'Bel.**

A collection of butterflies, of Venetian glass, or of stamps ... the word collection may be understood as an assemblage of the same types of items. The collection of the Bel Group's Artistic Laboratory was initiated 6 years ago. It is made up of artistic '*objets*', which are generally referred to as contemporary works of art, all created since the beginning of the 21st century. Every collection has something which distinguishes it from others: some present only paintings of women's legs (I know a collector of this kind of art in the Val de Loire), others feature solely video artworks, or national artists (although I wonder what that might mean in today's world given that art cannot be reduced to nationality alone). Selecting recent works of art is not something that is done by accident—rather it is done by choice. Every collection consists of an assemblage of works that translate the spirit of the age—*Zeitgeist* as coined by the intellectuals of times past. Every work of art reflects the thinking, politics, society, concerns and materials that surround it. And the scope of an artwork, or indeed its influence, may extend well beyond the borders of a particular nation. The choice of a certain work of art in a world where art abounds depends also upon the person choosing it. We could say that humour is one of the determining factors in our selection process. Neither is our collection a 'trendy' collection, i.e., featuring the stars of the art market. The artists we present come from a range of different countries, and are of a variety of ages. After all, the term contemporary could also apply to the art created by an eighty year old.

2001: A Space Odyssey is the name of the epic film created by Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke.

When we wanted to show our fledgling collection in 2012, the title we chose for the exhibition was *Touching the Moon*. Our collection too was a vision of the future.

Our first acquisition *Night and Day* (2008), a video by artists John Wood and Paul Harrison, is a compendium of sorts on the themes of light and darkness. Using the closed setting of the artists' studio as its backdrop—an alternative white cube gallery space—the video is punctuated by the turning on and off of a light, revealing in a tautological fashion a play on meanings, and the world manipulated by the artists. The second piece we acquired was *Grande Camera Oscura (Menina I)* (2002) by Jan Vercruyse. This photographic diptych shows a teenage girl, dressed in the costume of one of 'Las Meninas' by Velázquez in the one photograph, and doing a handstand in the other.

Here art seems to play with its past, cataloguing its history with the humour and irreverence of a child.

One piece after another including skis by Roman Signer, an artist known for his performances with explosives, who occasionally skies in Iceland. His *Skis de fond* (2010) would surely have been appreciated by Marcel Duchamp, alluded to in the title of this current exhibition.

Indeed, why did we chose this particular title for our second exhibition, showcasing the latest acquisitions of our growing collection?

If Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* is ultimately an extremely conceptual piece, this is due in part to the transformation of the pictorial frame by the cracking of the glass panes: *The Large Glass* is composed of 'two panes of glass with materials such as lead foil, fuse wire, and dust, etc. ... The work was broken during transport [a few years later] and carefully repaired by Duchamp', if we are to cite the rather banal Wikipedia. In a sense, we too wanted to shatter our very young collection by presenting it within a range of very different spaces: a corporate art museum that is very dear to us, La Maison de La vache qui rit; a museum that brings together collections from very distant epochs, the Musée des Beaux Arts de Dole, where the collection is on long-term loan; and the remarkable gardens of Calonne de Sappel in Baume-les-Messieurs. Lab'Bel is a travelling laboratory which does not have a single dedicated site for its exhibitions and regularly works in co-production with other institutions. This allows us to reach a broader range of audiences. If the public for *Touching the Moon* was primarily made up of students using the university library of Angers, it also attracted more diverse exhibition-goers. What does stripping bare a collection mean and what exactly does it entail?

It means revealing that which seems to be hidden, the 'intimate' side of something. Sometimes there is a personal story behind an artwork. This is the case with the work entitled *Crackers* (2013) by Jonathan Monk. Monk collected copies of an artist's book by Ed Ruscha and used the collection as the subject of a video work, depicting a succession of images of the book cover. I saw this video in an exhibition on films about books and I asked the artist to sell it to us for our collection. But rather than simply selling it to us, Monk asked us to instead acquire other copies of the book he was collecting. This is how we acquired an artwork that in itself hides another collection. Ours was a transaction involving an exchange, a rare occurrence in today's art market...

The majority of the artworks were bought from art galleries and international art fairs, some widely known and other more obscure ones.

Identities on Display (2013) by Karin Sander is the artwork that connects the three exhibition venues. Initially designed for the ethnological museum in Dahlem, the work consists of glass lockers rather like the lockers found in the foyer of museums, used to store bags and clothing. Here it is transformed into a participative sculpture, exhibiting the clothing of those who work at the three different sites—the house, museum and garden. The various items of clothing each have a story to tell. Revelatory of their owner's relationship to society, the items are therefore charged with an anthropological meaning.

In his oeuvre Hans-Peter Feldmann strips bare our vision of (art) history through his unsigned and unnumbered artworks. He does this through the valorisation or the 'disguising' of ordinary, everyday objects. He paints plaster copies of some of the greatest and best known classical sculptures in garish colours, hues that would in fact have been used in Roman times. Or, he paints a red nose on one dollar bills as a reminder that money is just another, albeit ludicrous collection in today's consumer society.

These are just some examples to show how Lab'Bel intends to strip bare its collection.

Our examination of what constitutes a work of art is also a way of deciphering it, from a perspective unimpeded by the weight of critical assumptions. Exhibiting a work is a way of affirming an aim or an intention that evolves over the course of the exhibition layout designed as a white path like a carpet, which unites these three venues thanks to the cleverly discreet exhibition design by Michael Staab.

Why a collection of contemporary works of art? Because art speaks to us about ourselves. The lamps designed by Ryan Gander as a gift to his wife may be read as either the demonstrations of love or possible peace offerings following a domestic argument, unless of course they are like the women in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*. We interpret the artworks, or rather we strip them bare, through the prism of our own imagination.

Every time I re-watch Anna Molska's video piece *Hecatomb* (2011), I am reminded of the legend of Saint George fighting the dragon. However, instead of flames, he breathes a tide of foam into the greenhouse. Art has a way of laying bare our subconscious. Just like the fragmented movement of Dewar and Gicquel's minuet (*Le Menuet*), 2012 which evolves in the Bélvédère Calonne de Sappel venue.

A collection is a composite work of fragments which together create an ensemble. From this, we can create new relationships, connections, encounters. A collection is a way of composing fragments. Have you ever begun a collection of, say, strawberries?

Our collection—now yours—stripped bare before you, allows us to travel from one place to another, creating snippets and surprises, and relating something of life and the world through art.