

Clément Mitéran, *Représentations*

by Renée Malaval

“Mosaic is at the beginning of the exploration of its possibilities, in the way painting was during the 20th century. After disappearing from the artistic scene during a few centuries, it is making up for lost time.”, explains Clément Mitéran, by showing it in a majestic way in his *Représentations* exhibit, from June 14th to September 9th of 2022 at the Pavillon des Arts et du Patrimoine, in Châtenay-Malabry.

“Réprésentations” is a two-meaning notion: it is about representation, because the exhibition is about portrait and Clément Mitéran represents et renders people’s lines and characteristics. Those personas who have in one way or another, crossed Clément’s path. The artist wished to present them to us again from a different angle, as a full ensemble enriched with a new chapter and new images.

This exhibit with about 50 portraits classified by the artist himself in 3 different series, that were birthed over time and are all carried out in parallel to each other. The first one, initiated in 2008, is the *Figures de la mythologie moderne et contemporaine* (*Figures of modern and contemporary mythology*), the second, starting in 2015, brings together *Figurations anonymes* (*Anonymous Figurations*), and the third, entitled *Consecratio/Abolitio nominis* presented here for the first time. Three different paths, on which the 30 year-old artist has taken us during the past 15 years, exploring portraits in a pioneering way, placing it at the center of his artistic research.

These portraits bring photography and mosaic together, using a sophisticated and unique technique by which both mediums blend in a unique way, giving each series a different approach to the portrait as an art form.

These words, portrait, photography, mosaic, bring immediately to mind images and names. The mosaic portraits presented at the Naples National Archaeological Museum, in Italy from the byzantine era that we can see on Ravenna's monument's walls, the mosaics of Gaudi and many others.

However, by discovering the work of Clément Mitéran, our convictions are rattled. The pieces are beautiful, esthetic, with different shades of greys, whites, white gold, almost attaining monochrome, with a few chosen colors from a pallet of burned tints, showing personas with imprecise delimitations, soaking in an intemporal atmosphere.

Figures of modern and contemporary mythology

The artist shows three portraits of this series, Charles Baudelaire, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Houellebecq. These are classical portraits, on marble and smalti. There is a very pictorial style to them, realistically represented, Baudelaire standing, Houellebecq seated in a chair, and close-up for Deleuze. The spectator’s eye goes from a figurative angle to a global reading of the piece where texture, material and composition work together. Thanks to the reflection and refraction of the light on different parts of each portrait, the persona’s characteristics become abstract.

In order to make Houellebecq’s portrait, made in 2015 and highlight of his research, Mitéran met

the writer and took preliminary pictures, prior to undertaking the mosaic portrait. His work took about 4 months. "If I decide to allocate that much time to such a complicated technique, I believe no other medium can associate so many elements with such liberty. And that the time is worth the result.", explains the artist. By choosing a path that reinvents the historical portrait, Clément Mitéran reassures Michel Houellebecq, who was worried about its progressive disappearing in art. The personas Mitéran chose to represent are mythical figures of modern culture. The artist pursues this series in his workshop, with a research around personalities.

Figurations anonymes

The exhibit reveals about 30 portraits from *Figurations anonymes*. Mitéran approaches this new chapter of his research in 2015, by suppressing film development and replacing it by development directly on the mosaic. The surface of the white Venetian smalti or white gold tessels is made photosensitive beforehand. A split-second moment is then imprisoned on a potentially eternal surface. The dialogue between photography's instantaneity and mosaic's durability is unlocked.

The portrait is then printed on a fragmented surface. This choice of medium may surprise, or seem unfit to portrait printing, but it is, in reality, what gives the work its vigor and power. Abstract shapes emerge from the facial features.

By reuniting mosaic and photography in his creations, Mitéran opposes photography's impermanence to mosaic's permanent aspect. An art, which embodies eternity by excellence ("Mosaic is the true painting of eternity.", to cite Ghirlandaio's famous words), another whose purpose is to capture eternity. The first durable & encapsulated in a timeless manner, the later perishable and ephemeral. Two mediums who could seem foreign to each other but who can be brought together because both are revealed by light. If it seems obvious for all of us that photography is linked to light, let us be reminded of the inscription in the byzantine chapel of Ravenne, *Aut lux nata est aut capta hic libera régnât* that we can translate by "Either light was born here, or it was captured, it reigns here with liberty".

Figurations anonymes features artists who use mosaic as a medium, men and women from different generations, origins, who Clément has had the chance to meet. The artist himself photographed the mosaists, imposing a frontal and inexpressive posture, as we can see on ID pictures.

The series *Monstre* (les monstres), *Spectre* (les spectres), *Trace* (les traces), *Simulacre* (les simulacres), and *Lintoleum* flow in front of the spectator. *Lintoleum* is the portrait of the Polish artist Matylda Tracewska; it was realized with an Opus reticulatum technique with a subtil play on the variations of the tassels which delimitate the face. In *Simulacrum V*, the artist made the portrait of the Japanese artist Takako Hirai. He chose a venetian smalti with a white gold surface, which evokes the artistic treasure the artist is building, in contradiction with her fragile social situation, by sacrificing her personal life and devoting herself to her lifeswork while living in Italy. The *Scarti* features Aude Fourrier and Sarah Vasini, and is made of salvaged materials, echoing their work. In *Trace I*, which paints Felice Nittolo's portrait, the placement of the tassels are byzantine inspired.

Sometimes, we have the fleeting feeling we recognize someone, but it is just an impression, as we move, the portrait mutates, we can only see a few characteristics, such as in *Monstre II* for example: the portrait shows the upper part of the face of a member of the CaCO₃ group, associated with another member's beard. In this series of *Monstre*, the spectator thinks he can

recognize faces when they are fictions.

Clément Mitéran mentions these artists' status in contemporary society : however not as a celebration. The artists are made anonymous by the choice of processing an image on a mosaic. With time, the impression of the picture will fade, the portrait will disappear and only the mosaic will remain. What will come out of these portraits is the specificity of each artist's work, their artistic identity. The artist doesn't celebrate his colleagues but pays tribute to them. He represents them as they are in our society, in the current world of culture, invisible, diluted in a contemporary reality, anonymous.

Consecratio/abolitio nominis

18 portraits are presented in the third series. Antique Rome designated by *abolitio nominis*-expression we can translate by suppressing the name- sentences pronounced post mortem. By extension, the expression is used for any post-mortem convictions, designating a systematic annulation: destruction, decapitation, resculpturing statues, erasing of names on inscriptions, on coins, portraits...

The oldest example is Erostate's, who set fire to Artemis' temple. His only motivation was to become famous. The Ephesians condemned him to not have his name pronounced anymore. It is because of a historian who mentioned his name that he is still known today. His act qualifies him as the first terrorist. Roman emperors frequently erased their predecessors' names. However, by wanting to eliminate known figures, the Romans preserved and reinforced the myths of a large number of people they had damned. Erased people were sometimes remembered as martyrs. When the statues were simply buried, instead of being burned or destroyed, they were then discovered later in time.

In the Sant'Appolinare nuovo basilica, in Ravenna, some people were also erased from mosaics. During the Byzantine empire (726-843), there was a destruction of images, because of their political and religious characteristics. It was the same process for the Hagia Sophia mosaics. During the Renaissance, we can mention the *damnatio memoriae*, the covering of Marino Faliero's portrait, of family members from the Pazzi family in Florence, of Jan Hus... The modern world still uses these practices today, throughout the denial of genocides. The decapitation of Josephine's statue in 1991, in Fort-de-France in Martinique, the "cancel-culture" acts: many erasing modalities still exist. We wonder today if the terrorists' names should be mentioned, in order to not participate in the martyrs glorification. Everything should be between *consecratio* and *damnatio*, and these back-and-forths are present in Mitéran's works.

The technique he elaborated for the realization of the *Consecratio/Abolitio nominis* is quite complex and needs few successive operations. It rests on the printing of a picture on a surface. This surface is either a marble plate (the final work appears without a frame), or a surface in mosaic made by the artist (the final work then appears in a black frame); we call it a classical mosaic, with a black epoxy joint, with *andamento* which differs from a mosaic to another, and asks for extra sanding work. The printed image is made thanks to a special software, with an original photography treatment. It is obtained by the superposition of two pictures, the original photography in color, and the correspondent *Figuration anonyme's*. The artist then does his touch-ups. Once the picture is printed on the chosen surface, the artist then intervenes as a mosaicist, in a unique way for each artwork, echoing the main subject. It isn't about touching-up the surface, but a work motivated by aesthetics. It is then up to the spectator to detect the artist's intentions throughout the work.

The artist brings up the idea of restoration : restoration of mosaics has become a necessity

but the cost has nothing to do with the small investment given to contemporary mosaic. Mitéran's interventions on mosaics are multiple: white restoration, tassels in Opus tessellatum, Opus vermiculatum, new faces, monochrome masks, black and white reminding mortal iconography. He can also intervene on the marble plate such as how he did with *Kintsugi*, by using gold tassels. *Ricoperto* shows the artist's next researches.

The first series, *Figures of modern and contemporary mythology*, shows the consecration, the apotheosis, the glory, and the tribute paid to artists known as mythical figures of our society.

Throughout the two next series, we can witness a phenomenon of invisibility, and then tension between consecration and omission. What is the artist trying to say to us ? He questions us, he tells us about contemporary mosaic, about its actors: this is the essence of this corpus of works. He tells us that contemporary mosaic artists are "the invisibles" of the art world : by the profound inequality they are victims of, very far from entering well-known galleries, national museums, by lack of consideration, medias, and art critics. The artist denounces the precariousness and anonymous situation. It is a silent beg for recognition that the artist expresses by the programmed erasing of the faces. Will they forever stay anonymous ?

When photography disappears, the mosaists' faces will fade. The mosaic will be the only trace left, the one that the artist will have created. The ongoing characteristic of mosaic enables us to imagine the historization of the works, and that of the artists.

The actual cultural world refuses to give artists the glory they deserve. But according to history, of victims of the *abolitio nominis*, tables could turn, given the quality of the works, and as it was the case for Erostate, they could finally get the glory they are entitled to.

Clément Mitéran presents works which brings up a lot of questions, and that he wishes to pursue. Which mystery does the opposition between short-lived photography and eternal mosaic hide ? Does the art of portraiture belong to reality or fiction ? Portraying is a work about identity, affirming a certain status, an existence: in his portraits, Clément Mitéran asks an underlying question about the contemporary artist's status. Who is the contemporary artist ? Should he erase himself, and become a simple executant ?

By choosing to work on portraits, the artist wonders about his place in society, insisting on the distortion between the absence of portraits, and the numerous invasive selfies on smartphones and social media. Those portraits don't tell anything about their authors or the context. Mitéran chose to make portraits with a specific technique, characterized by a very slow process, revealing the intimate part of each artist, its artistic identity. It belongs to the small world of young artists who bring unestimated value and future to mosaic.