

Wilde

PRESS RELEASE

Fabien Mérelle & Antoine Roegiers

A l'ombre des nuages – Nos abris dérisoires

31.10.2020 – 02.01.2021

WILDE | GENÈVE

Fabien Mérelle / Antoine Roegiers,
Interview by Philippe Piguet, Historian and Art Critic

A l'ombre des nuages – Nos abris dérisoires is an exhibition that brings you together, in time and space, at Wilde. Does it feel like a dual exhibition or a juxtaposition?

Fabien Mérelle – This is an exhibition that reflects our relationship because we've been working side by side, in a way, for a very long time. It will take the form of two distinct but neighboring shows.

How long have you known each other?

Antoine Roegiers – We met at the Ecole des beaux-arts in Paris, in the early 2000s, in a technical course on painting. Fabien was making hyper-detailed drawings of war scenes that made me curious. I went to see him, and we immediately hit it off. We have never lost sight of each other since, despite the geographical distance.

How do you communicate?

Fabien Mérelle – Primarily by phone and SMS. Our efforts go hand in hand. Antoine sends me images almost every day. I'm much less prolific because I always feel unsettled when one looks at my work before it reaches a particular stage. Antoine is more at ease because he is in a permanent brainstorming phase. He needs to know what people think of his work in progress. Even if he doesn't necessarily listen to what they tell him, it helps him reinforce what he has in mind.

Where does this need come from, Antoine?

Antoine Roegiers – It's a bit as if we are together in the same atelier, as we were in Montreuil a few years ago. I need to feel his presence, not to feel alone. Fabien is much more secretive because he is much more secure in his approach than I am.

This form of a joint exhibition, you must be used to then.

Antoine Roegiers – No, not at all. This is the first time this has happened. It is very much two exhibitions side by side, even though we share many other things. There is always a risk that one will win out over the other, but that doesn't really worry us.

Fabien Mérelle – The gallery is accustomed to this type of presentation, and, like Antoine, I have no worries about this since we know each other very well and know we will stay connected regardless. After all, the exhibition is just one way of making this situation concrete.

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Certainly, two very close artists, but the works are very different. Is it not as though Antoine appeals to art historical references while Fabien appeals to its autobiography? We could also point out that the basis of Antoine's work is an idea of scenario and narration that develop in a continuum. In contrast, Fabien's approach is more of a freeze-frame. For one, there's the use of color, for the other it's the black and white palette, etc. What is it that interests you in the other?

Antoine Roegiers – For me, it's the precision in Fabien's work, his goldsmith-like detail, in the quality of the line. Then, it's how he tells a story, both in each drawing and from one work to another. There is a common thread whereby specific works resonate between one another through time and space. I appreciate this relevance, which stems from the fact that he endeavors to translate its sensations by expressing his own story. Finally, I like how he draws all kinds of elements from a more general history of humanity and civilizations, even from great paintings, to feed his point. It is more than merely narrating his family story, and it allows him to create another world.

Fabien Mérelle – What has always interested me about Antoine is his ability to make things move. Unlike me, he works with movement. That fascinates me because I tend to want to fix things so that they don't disappear. Besides, nothing beats going with him for a walk in the Louvre. He doesn't stop imagining things, starting from what he sees to what can be translated in terms of materialism. This is why fundamentally, he is a painter, even though he is a master in the art of animated films. Antoine is someone who cannot help openly expressing what he feels, driven by his deep desire to share.

Antoine Roegiers – I also like Fabien's imagination because it always starts from an element of reality that he derives from and then pours into the unbelievable, but nonetheless gives him substantial credibility.

Your imagination comes from a process of appropriation and not from a lived experience, as is the case with Fabien, and as soon as you have captured an element, you seek to transform it.

Antoine Roegiers – I appropriate the things in which I see the possibility of an action unfolding. I want to immerse myself in it, get into the work, and make my imagination exist there and make it plausible by expressing my emotions.

Is the part of the game that is very important in Fabien's work and that he openly claims, as important for you?

Antoine Roegiers – Enormously...

Fabien Mérelle – I would even say that this is what connects us. In the beginning, Antoine animated actions in the making in the painting, then he told himself stories that he only reveals to himself and that do not exist. His game relies on the principle of a hybrid between the reality of the borrowed and his imagination. He does not limit himself to a scholarly vision of things that would only pass through a quotation's anthological filter.

Antoine Roegiers – This is true both in my films and in my painting, like the ones present in this exhibition, mixing reference and imagination.

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If you each play at telling your stories and inviting us to enter them by letting our imagination run wild, on the other hand, on a purely formal level, what distinguishes you is that one operates in the mode of an iconic synthesis. In contrast, the other is more in a profusion of the image.

Fabien Mérelle – This brings us back to the idea of the freeze-frame that characterizes my work. I leave behind all that is not essential. The difference with Antoine lies in the fact he has a tool, the camera, which, if I used, I would no doubt venture to tell several stories at the same time.

There is one element you hardly ever use, and that's color. Why this rejection?

Fabien Mérelle – For me, color is only justified if one uses it to reveal something essential.

Is it, for this reason, Antoine, that you resort to it?

Antoine Roegiers – It is mainly because I see the world in color. I have an existential need for color, for material. I am a painter above all. I need the primer, the coat, the glaze. When I look at a painting, I always get very close to see the material from which it is made, and when I make films, I feel much more like a painter than a director.

Could we ultimately say that one is more sensual and the other more conceptual?

Fabien Mérelle – For me, it's more a matter of lines. What fascinates me is how to bring light into a form. How, from two lines, we can say that the light comes from one side or the other. The matter destabilizes me. I need the image to be clear, but there is a form of clarity that seems more efficient to me in the absence of matter. Each artist has his amplitude of line; mine is very centered on the element I am working on, starting very close to the body.

Antoine Roegiers – I envy his way of focusing on certain elements because it helps to clarify the working method. I function more in the form of invasion; I embrace a whole world simultaneously, which sometimes overwhelms me.

If there's anything that brings you together, it's a certain sense of humor, of derision. How does this feed your work?

Antoine Roegiers – It's more derision than humor for me. I always want to laugh, to laugh at us. It is undoubtedly the effect of this Flemish heritage, which is mine and which gives pride of place to the grotesque.

Fabien Mérelle – I would more promptly speak of burlesque, the cinematic style of the beginning of the 20th century, with all the absurdity it implies. Especially in the idea of always doing the same action over and over again and failing each time.

Another thing you have in common is that both of you are hardworking artists in the best sense of the word. Does it have to do with thinking about time?

Fabien Mérelle – In my case, certainly. I realized very early on that things are fleeting. So the means I gave myself to hold them back is to fix them and stop time. A bit like an entomologist pins his insects in a glass box.

Antoine Roegiers – Me, I am anxious about time. I'm always afraid of not having time because I give myself specific goals that require a lot. However, little by little, I'm letting go, and I no longer try to get what I wanted initially, allowing myself to be carried away by the work itself.

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The exhibition that brings you together is entitled: *A l'ombre des nuages - Nos abris dérisoires* (*In the shade of the clouds - Our derisory shelters*). How was this title chosen? What meaning should we attribute it?

Fabien Mérelle – In the beginning, Antoine proposed *A l'ombre des nuages*, referring to his series of paintings. It might have been fine with me, but I found that it lacked an element concerning the idea of protection, an idea that is dear to both of us. Hence, adding *Nos abris dérisoires* illustrates our situation well, one of collaboration and individuality.

Does this dual title allude to the confinement period we have just gone through?

Antoine Roegiers – Completely. All the work I present has been done during this particular time. What characterizes them is this notion of the invisible threat - the thunderstorm that rumbles - as if the world were turning on itself and in which these two characters wander - two carnival riders that continue from previous work. It is a world where there are no more humans except skeletons picking up the masks of the past carnival and heading towards a mysterious hangar housing an airship. We don't know whether or not they're going to take it, but they're going to take cover from something. This is only Act 1 of a future story. It's up to the viewer to imagine what happens next.

Fabien Mérelle – As for most people, this period was an opportunity to live in almost complete isolation as a family, with all the worries and even fears that the situation's novelty entailed. The work bears this stigma, especially the fear that everything will break, hence the tears in some of the drawings themselves. The ensemble shows various scenes that say a lot about the unknown of the future and question our relationship to the world and nature.

All in all, where you find yourself, it is this very personal way you each have to bring the human condition into play.

Antoine Roegiers' Atelier, Paris
29 September 2020

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