

Pentti Monkkonen, the butterfly effect

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SEPTEMBER 29, 2021 - 502 words

PARIS

Little known in France, the American artist exhibits his caustic outlook on ecology at the High Art gallery.

Paris. On the wall facing the entrance to the High Art gallery, a large painting (acrylic on canvas mounted on wood) by Pentti Monkkonen, inserted in moldings at the end of the 19th century as if it had always been part of the decor, evokes in the distance a large boat on the sea, with an ultramarine sky and a seagull, and waves and a strip of sand in the foreground [see ill.]. A postcard image? Not really, there is nothing idyllic about the scene: the ship is an oil tanker, the seagull certainly has oil in its throat and the sky is an improbable blue. Even the moldings are false since the artist, to give the impression of an authentic setting, had perfect copies of those present in this large room of the Halévy mansion where Georges Bizet lived. A perfect trompe-l'oeil, a caustic pastiche and a subtle diversion to, on the one hand, caricature a decorative side of the painting, even the decorative painting and, on the other hand, denounce the ecological disaster of the El Segundo refinery, near Los Angeles where the artist (born 1975 in Minneapolis) lived for a long time before now living in Berlin. The exhibition is also titled "El Segundo Blue", named after this endangered Californian butterfly.

Pentti Monkkonen has also turned to the plant sector and more precisely to coccoliths, these underwater algae often close to oil-bearing bottoms. He reproduced their fossilized skeleton in white resin to make lamps that he hung on large paintings composed of painted wood panels whose recurring motif, in a very pattern painting or wallpaper style from the 1970s, evokes the grid. the first four-level freeway interchange built in Los Angeles. If we add that Monkkonen punctuates its panels with switches and brass electrical outlets which take up the moldings with the floral ornaments of the gallery, we quickly realize that its interweaving of patterns and meanings have juice.

To further enhance this collection of works designed for this exhibition, which is one of the most successful and unique of this re-entry into the galleries, two other paintings are presented in the last room. They are the exact copy of an advertising campaign by Chevron, the owner of the refinery, which in the 1980s extolled the merits of the biodiversity within this oil complex, with the aforementioned butterfly in the foreground and in the sky a Boeing 747. What did not lack air and gives food for thought: the one that the artist leads, with a lot of humor, on our world and in particular on questions of ecology and pollution.

Between 5,000 and 25,000 euros, the prices are all the more affordable because, if Pentti Monkkonen is relatively little known in France, he already has a good international career, in the United States as in England or in Germany with the Rob gallery. Tufnell (London and Cologne).