

Claude Gigon

Recent Works

Hélène Joye-Cagnard

Ice Cream

One of Claude Gigon's latest paintings, *Ice Cream* (2010), shows a larger-than-life face half hidden by a black sphere of the same size; the whole seems to be balanced on the slim foot of a (sundae?) dish. The black sphere is what first attracts our glance at the center of the painting: it is presented within the dish, like a kind of crystal ball in the negative, its transparency denied. Next we see the eyes of the face, just above the sphere. Surprisingly, those barely half-open yet tremendously lively eyes reach out to us, penetrating us with their piercing gaze. Reiterating *Faces* (2006-2007) and *Têtes* (heads / 2008-2009), the *Ice Cream* face features the same larger-than-life format, the same evanescent lines, the same inwardly-oriented gaze. A color scheme reduced to black and white is something new in Claude Gigon's painting, usually more colorful. Black and white have nevertheless been present in his production for a long time now, both in the drawings he's worked on since childhood and the charcoals he has been producing daily since 1986. He himself specifies: "Working with charcoal is very important to me; it allows me to outline the basic concept and practice the gestures on a daily basis."¹ The color white already illuminates his *Faces*, *Têtes* and *Enveloppes* (2009-2010) series, whereas *Ice Cream* is a transitional painting unattached to any series. Yet it has its importance in terms of heralding his next and current series, of which it contains the seeds: *Snowmen*.

Snowmen

Corresponding with the subject matter, black and white remain in this new series. Possibly even, being reduced to these colors is what suggested this new theme. Or else the suggestion came from the "ball of ice cream," or again from the winter season during which the theme cropped up or even, and more likely still, from the radicalization of the circular forms that appear throughout this painter's oeuvre, in the frequent recurrences thereof, be it in his organic forms - in faces, among others. Now the bowl, the sphere and the face have been reduced to three huge snowballs set one atop the other. Quite the opposite of the *Ice Cream* face and, above all, of those in *Faces*, the eyes here are wide open: no longer any hint of an inner world, but a direct, intentional contact with viewers. The three simple black signs stylizing the eyes and mouth of these *Snowmen* lend them a surprisingly expressive force. They come across as at once naive and fully ironic, ferocious and gay, disarming... These snowmen, which would not survive in Nature, seem to be poking fun at us. And it is a fact: in painting, they are the ones who have the best chance of surviving us! The artist seems more to have modeled than painted his canvasses, thanks to his energetic strokes with a wide brush. It is, moreover, a difference in the brush movement that marks the limit between the subject and the background, more so than a clear-cut change of color. In parallel with his paintings, there are also numerous snowmen in charcoal; these Claude Gigon modeled in the same way as their brothers, the painted snowmen, with the same momentum and the same facial expressions. Already in the *Enveloppes* series, he had be-

¹ E-mail from Claude Gigon to the author, 11 January 2011.

gun to depict volume: the articles of clothing float as lightly as banners, yet hold on to the memory of the bodies that once inhabited them. In their sculptural theme and the contours conferred upon them by the paintbrush, his *Snowmen* series relate as much to painting as to sculpture. One thinks of sculpture in Constantin Brancusi terms: the superimposition of simplified volumes, and the incorporation of the base into the sculpture piece. In their repetition of a same element, the *Snowmen* bring to mind minimal art. Or is it a thumbing of the nose at modern sculpture in the same vein as Valentin Carron's *Sweet Revolution* (2002)? Carron's piece is a sort of ironic synthesis of modern sculpture consisting of a cube set atop a sphere, which is in turn set atop a truncated upside-down pyramid, and with Popper bottles on hand as if to revive it.

100%

In his *Snowmen* series, Claude Gigon's painterly touch is livelier, more prone to modeling in the sculptural sense of the term. Not that this artist's interest in the three-dimensional is restricted to his painting; he has already carried out two sculptural projects: an architectural intervention (*Dialogue*, 2000), and a project linked to his first profession as a chocolate-maker confectioner (*Sweetdreams*, 2010). As its title conveys, *Dialogue* invites exchange between two monumental steles, each carved out of a different limestone. *Sweetdreams* was a project for a special occasion at the C(laude) G(igon) confectionery: a performance evening dealing with dough modeling: the artist cast parts of his own body in salt (modeling) dough made on site, and then poured sugar syrup into the casts to make lollipops. He then taught the audience how to use this simple technique to make their own lollipops. Resorting to salt dough was intentional: a fine salty coating was thus conferred on the lollipops; to taste them was to metaphorically express the contrasting feelings one has upon discovering one's own body, coming to grips with it over time, and perceiving it anew every day. Since the late 1980s, Stephen J. Shanabrook has been traveling to morgues in various countries. He makes chocolate casts that show even the wounds or organs of his models. Nicola Deane casts a single part of her body to make her *Chocolate Vaginas*, several of which she proceeds to distribute to the audience during her *Virgin. Home Economics* performance (first put on in 2002).

An earlier work, *Moulin de la Mort* (watermill of death - 2007), already staged Claude Gigon's body. For their 2007 exhibition *jenesaisquoi* (whatever) at the Contemporary Art Space of Porrentruy, the Haus am Gern (Barbara Meyer Cesta and Rudolf Steiner) had invited him to do make a video on the Jurassic identity: that is when he decided to have himself videotaped as a performer in order to speak about his identity as an artist from the Jura region. Like a new Sisyphus, he tried to swim against the current of the Doubs River, which he calls "my river." This particular act made clear how he conceives of art: not art, but the artistic labor, is the goal - and what's more, in the Jura region. This would perhaps be the revealed secret for which the artist was to be punished at the very time he admitted it, just as Sisyphus was for having revealed Zeus's secret. To carry out his sentence there, Claude Gigon dove into the Doubs, at the spot where formerly towered the Moulin de la Mort (watermill of death) and where, still today, rise up the Echelles de la Mort (ladders of death) cliffs, a former smuggler hideaway. Fortunately, the video was shot as a loop, thus saving the artist if not from his combat, in any case from disappearing altogether. The sound track does not play noise made by the water but by the 21st-century windmills of Mont-Crosin. After all, Sisyphus was the son of Aeolus! In this combat against the current in which the artist tests his physical limits along a geographic boundary line, the material being "modeled," be it tirelessly and absurdly, is the water of the Doubs River.

In *100%*, the piece Claude Gigon created specifically for his show at Moutier's Musée

jurassien des Arts, his modeling technique stands out more clearly. The project involved a basic confectionery product, namely white chocolate (100%...cocoa butter, or almost), to produce a large-format piece as well as a physical feat: one ton of chocolate standing 370 cm long, 270 cm wide and 70 cm high. Since shaping the chocolate entailed passing it through hot and cold, the artist resorted to a technique similar to that used by Joseph Beuys to work with fat and chocolate. Indeed, considering them to be symbols of heat and energy, Beuys particularly appreciated these two materials, and the process by which they could be modeled. Gigon chose to shape his chocolate into a wave expressing movement, livened up perhaps by its responsiveness to the ceiling decoration. On the other hand, perhaps it is more evocative of an enormous slab of painterly material deposited by an equally enormous paintbrush. This time it's the other way around than for his *Snowmen*: here it is the sculpture that brings painting to mind. The piece's powerful presence derives from its size, its smell - which could go bad - and the fact that it's been set up in a limited space. Chocolate also takes over the space in Anya Gallacio's *Stroke* (1993): the walls of Karsten Schubert's London gallery were painted in brown chocolate to await the transformation that time was bound to bring. The same installation has since been readapted to other galleries. Back in 1970, in protest against the war in Vietnam, Ed Ruscha covered the walls of the American pavilion at the Venice Biennale with 2360 sheets of paper entirely silk-screened with Nestlé chocolate (*Chocolate Room*). In no time at all, visitors had covered the sheets with anti-war graffiti.

As sensually smooth and luscious as chocolate's texture may be, as appealing as it is in small quantities, it can seem repulsive when presented in excess. *Sweetdreams* already inspired these opposites. This was also the case for the very large chocolate fountain *Cacao* (1994) by Helen Chadwick, and the chocolate bathtub *Braunes Bad* (2009) by Sonja Alhäuser: both pieces seem to fall short of their promise to bring voluptuous delight. Likewise for Janine Antoni's binge-eating act of biting into, chewing and then regurgitating the corners of an enormous mass of chocolate and another one of lard, each weighing 270 kilos (*Chocolate Gnaw, Lard Gnaw*, 1992), before going on to make consumer society standard products: chocolate wrappings and lipsticks. She used her teeth as a tool to attack the two perfect cubes, thus eroding those minimal sculptures. In another piece, *Lick and Lather* (1993), she licks and washes chocolate-and-soap busts of herself to the point of wearing them away. Nor is the body allowed to endure in Jana Sterbak's chocolate human bones piece, *Catacombes* (1992). These works all feature white and black, while in his *100%*, Claude Gigon favors white - a color, that, when used alone in painting, makes the motif vanish, whereas in sculpture it creates clear-cut shadows that bring out the relief.

Vik Muniz makes drawings of famous paintings on plastic using a needle dipped in chocolate syrup; afterwards, he photographs his compositions, before licking them perhaps, once they have been immortalized by the camera lens (*Pictures of Chocolate*, since 1997). *100%* arouses the same desire but also, since not meant to be eaten, a certain frustration. This holds true as well for Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, out of which two films were made and which inspired François Curlet's 2005 Willy Wonka Plus project: only one of the 3500 chocolate bars produced by the Villars chocolate firm contained a gold ticket. In 2007, also in association with a Master Chocolate Maker, Paul McCarthy turned New York's Maccarone Gallery into an actual chocolate factory producing 1000 figurines a day: a Santa Claus of his own design (*Santa with Tree and Bell*). In fact, the chocolate, mayonnaise and ketchup to which Paul McCarthy so often resorts symbolize bodily secretions and excretions, which are figures of speech for violence, sex and defecation. An artist who transformed his own studio into a kitchen to produce a large number of works and editions in cast chocolate, including several derisory self-portraits, is Dieter Roth. As of the late 1950s, but especially during the 1960s, he and Joseph Beuys were the first artists

to regularly use chocolate and comestibles. That was when “Eat Art” began, notably in the eponymous restaurant-gallery that Daniel Spoerri opened in Düsseldorf. Here Spoerri came up with his chocolate cake *Schokoladenscheissdreckröllchen* (1969-1970), a tribute to Piero Manzoni’s *Merda d’artista* (1961), as well as his snare-pictures seeking to debunk art works as such. In like spirit, Dieter Roth was wont to make fun of the art world’s propensity to conserve works and take it all so seriously. From the viewpoint of Joseph Beuys, chocolate, or food in general, immediately recognizable, is a visual metaphor for art as food meant to fulfill humans both physically and intellectually.

Instead of the customary invitation card, once again Claude Gigon has come up with a very distinctive object: a real cookie whose round shape and three holes immediately bring to mind the *Snowmen* faces, and even those of the *Faces* piece. In the final analysis then, human beings - their physical body and their emotions - are central to each of his works. Markedly present humans then, but who are at any time capable of dissolving into a brush stroke, being carried off by the water, melting under the effect of heat, or being swallowed up during a cannibalistic act of reappropriation. Claude Gigon has no qualms about exposing his works to risk, interested as he is in having us thoroughly immerse ourselves in them.

Indicative bibliography

Beil, Ralf, *Künstlerküche: Lebensmittel als Kunstmaterial von Schiele bis Jason Rhoades*, Köln, DuMont, 2002.

Chocolate!, exhibition catalogue, Swiss Institute, New York, 06.04-20.05.1995.

Cacao & Co, exhibition guide, Musée de Carouge, 19.09-29.10.2006.

I thank art historians Eveline Notter and Justine Moeckli for their information.