

GLADSTONE

Cyprien Gaillard, "Artist Cyprien Gaillard Touches the Void", *Art Basel*, June 24, 2026

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Artist Cyprien Gaillard touches the void

The modern romantic's latest take on contemporary ruins weds California's urban no-go zones to European high culture and decline

By Tom Morton

‘I think if it was another century, I’d be painting,’ Cyprien Gaillard tells me, as we sit in a Berlin post-production studio, where he is making final edits to a major new 35 mm film, *Deterrent* (2026), which forms the centerpiece of his solo exhibition at the Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria. The French artist pauses, reflects. ‘I’m just trying to use the camera like you’d pick up a brush, making a sort of landscape painting, whatever that means today.’



Cyprien Gaillard, *DETERRENT*, 2026. Photo: Max Paul. © Cyprien Gaillard. Courtesy of the artist.

This is a question that is at the core of his practice. Since coming to prominence in the late 2000s, Gaillard has become one of contemporary art’s foremost chroniclers of the built environment, and how it is shaped both by human drives (to create, to preserve, to tear down, and begin anew), and by the ineluctable forces of entropy. Employing media including film, sculptural

interventions, installation, photography, and live performance, he tracks humanity's long passage through history, and the material deposits it leaves in its wake, from ancient Mayan ruins to Soviet-era social housing projects, antique artifacts to works of 20th-century public art. While the locations he explores range across geographies and cultures, his approach, as he explains, is 'just going there, and having a look as it lays, with the changing context around it.' This radical openness to site is what gives his films, in particular, their strange, compelling poetry. 'The essence of something has a desire to manifest itself, once you apply moving image to it [...] Things start to breathe, or have a life of their own, maybe like street animism.'



Cyprien Gaillard, 'When you expect flutes, it's whistles,' exhibition view ground floor Kunsthaus Bregenz, 2026. *Visitant (no dancing 2020 – 2021)*, 2021. Photo: Timo Ohler. © Cyprien Gaillard, Kunsthaus Bregenz. Courtesy of the artist, Berlin Atonal, Sprüth Magers, Gladstone Gallery.

The Bregenz show, 'When you expect flutes, it's whistles', borrows its title from the lyrics of *Fortune Presents Gifts Not According to the Book*, a 1990 track by the neoclassical darkwave band Dead Can Dance, itself an adaptation of Luis de Góngora's 1581 poem *Da bienes Fortuna*. Góngora's theme is capricious fate, and the fact that for all our prior experience, we can never wholly predict what is around the next corner. Relatedly, Gaillard describes an unexpected 'encounter' he had 'in the soundscape of the San Fernando Valley,' California, which formed the genesis of *Deterrent*. When out walking one night, he 'heard this distant singing,' which he recognized as an old recording of the Neapolitan operatic tenor Enrico Caruso. Deciding to investigate further, the artist homed in on its source, which turned out to be 'a speaker that was mounted behind a cage on the side of a 7-Eleven convenience store, almost like a caged bird, blasting out music.'

The store clerk told Gaillard that this anomalous sonic intervention in the Valley's urban fabric was 'a deterrent to loitering. It was understood at a corporate level that the sound most likely to create a void or empty space outside the store is classical music,' says Gaillard. 'I began thinking about how this European cultural export arrives in California, as far as Western civilization can go, the dead end of it, and finds itself weaponized. But what interested me was also that this music was porous, open to the world. It would let in other sounds, like a helicopter, a car alarm, or the doors of the convenience store opening and closing. It made me think of my own porosity, because, with time, I've become infinitely more porous to my environment. I'm a fervent believer in psychogeography. It comes from that.'



‘When you expect flutes, it’s whistles,’ exhibition view third floor Kunsthau Bregenz, 2026. DETERRENT, 2026. Photo: Timo Ohler. © Cyprien Gaillard, Kunsthau Bregenz. Courtesy of the artist, Kunsthau Bregenz, Fondazione Prada.



Against a soundtrack of classical music, Gaillard's new film brings together footage of a variety of deterrent devices employed in the 21st-century civic landscape, from CCTV cameras to chain-link fences, from a moat of jagged rocks surrounding a fortress-like LA police precinct to an oddly heartbreaking sign warning that 'Flower theft is a crime punishable by imprisonment.' As the artist explains, 'There is a wide range of them, not only directed towards humans, but also rodents, dogs, and birds' (in one scene, the camera lingers on a taut length of pigeon wire on a building's façade). He has, he says, always been interested in 'public or shared space,' but as his film attests, 'it's ever eroding.'

Gaillard describes *Deterrent* as more 'painterly' than his earlier films, and this is most obvious in a sequence shot along the concrete canals of the Los Angeles River, focusing on passages of graffiti hastily and ineffectually whitewashed by municipal workers. For Gaillard, these urban *pentimenti* recalled works by Josef Albers, or early Philip Guston. 'I was seeing something like Abstract

Expressionism, which is usually confined to an interior, relocated outside – a collective unintended fresco, manifesting itself.'



Cyprien Gaillard, 'When you expect flutes, it's whistles,' Detail view first floor Kunsthhaus Bregenz, 2026. Geographical Analogies, 2006 – 2026. Photo: Timo Ohler. © Cyprien Gaillard, Kunsthhaus Bregenz. Courtesy of the artist, Sprüth Magers, Gladstone Gallery.

At its midpoint, *Deterrent*'s location switches from the US to Europe. 'If the first part of the film evokes questions about the preservation of self,' says the artist, 'then the second part is really about cultural preservation.' We see a comparatively chichi Swedish 7-Eleven store, embedded in a historic building like some glowing, parasitic entity, and the open-air drug culture in Hamburg's St. Georg neighborhood, shot from the window of the city's Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, accompanied by audio of a cough at a classical recital. Gaillard describes this involuntary, all-too-human sound as 'suppressed,' much like the

behaviors discouraged by the deterrent devices seen earlier in the film. Yet, as he points out, 'the acoustics of a music hall don't discriminate, they carry the cough [...]. As an artist, you have to find your "in," and it's not really for you to reinterpret, say, Mozart, but the moment with the cough, that was something for me to take, to grasp.' We might be reminded, here, of Gaillard wandering the San Fernando Valley, and hearing Caruso's tenor as the ceaseless traffic droned along its boulevards, and police helicopters beat across its skies.

