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How Artist Cyprien Gaillard Brought an Under-Recognized Sculpture Near Paris's Centre Pompidou Back to Life



Installation view of "Cyprien Gaillard: HUMPTY \ DUMPTY," 2022 at Lafayette Anticipations, Paris.
PHOTO TIMO OHLER/COURTESY THE ARTIST

On a street not far from Paris's Centre Pompidou, there once was a sculpture that moved. It had a muscular man formed from gold leaf and bronze who, at various points of the day, would appear to fight a dragon, a crab, and a rooster,

clanging as his arms and body swayed around. A clock nearby him announced the time.

Since 2003, the year that funding to maintain the piece dried up, its clock has been stopped, and the man has remained static. A quiet hush has since fallen over this sculpture by Jacques Monestier, titled *Le Défenseur du temps* (The Defender of Time).

All that has changed, however, thanks to artist **Cyprien Gaillard**.

For the past few years, Gaillard has been working to breathe new life into Monestier's sculpture, which he has transported to **Lafayette Anticipations** for a moving show that also extends to the **Palais de Tokyo**. Once his exhibition ends, Gaillard will return *Le Défenseur du temps* to its former home, where it will once again creak and clang for unsuspecting passersby.

The curator of both shows, Lafayette Anticipations director **Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel**, said in an interview with *ARTnews*, "When I invited him, he said, 'Okay, I will basically make my work be material that's consistent with the revival of an artwork by someone else. And I will dedicate all my budget to an outsider to public art that's not loved anymore.'"



Cyprien Gaillard.
PHOTO ALBRECHT FUCHS

Those who have been following Gaillard's work over the past decade will hardly be surprised to see him taking up a decaying structure and imbuing with new life. Past films by him have focused on Soviet-era apartment buildings and a stadium built for the Nazis in Berlin, mining them for

whatever living history they may contain. It's especially poignant given the restorations and refurbishments taking place at breakneck pace across Paris to buildings and other infrastructure ahead of the 2024 Olympic Games.

Yet his latest shows, which are together titled "HUMPTY \ DUMPTY," push his interests in new and even more ambitious directions. They also bring Gaillard's material closer to home.

Gaillard, who was born in Paris in 1980, used to encounter *Le Défenseur du temps* on visits to the Centre Pompidou. "He was always much more fascinated by this automaton than by what he would see at the museum," Lamarche-Vadel said. "It was always of important figure for him, emotionally, in the place of his memory."

A friend named Gaël Foucher used to accompany Gaillard on his visits to the Pompidou. Foucher died in an accident in 2013, and so the exhibition became a way to say goodbye to him for Gaillard, who dedicated the Lafayette Anticipations portion to his late friend. Lamarche-Vadel said doing so was in line with Gaillard's ongoing interest in "immaterial memory."

Much of *Le Défenseur* has been transported to Lafayette Anticipations, where it now hangs above viewers' heads in the chilly, pristine building designed by star architect Rem Koolhaas that has just opened in time of Art Basel's new Paris+ fair. The setting could not be more different from Paris's Beaubourg district, but it's lent new warmth by the fact that, for the first time in years, the sculpture is set in motion, which contrasts with the mechanics that make it so that Gaillard has purposefully revealed in a floor cut-out and nearby sculptural vitrine.



For a work at the Palais de Tokyo, Cyprien Gaillard filled sacks with lovers' locks removed from Parisian bridges.
PHOTO MAX PAUL/©CYPRIEN GAILLARD

A much different kind of Parisian detritus can be found at the Palais de Tokyo, where Gaillard is showing an installation called *Love Locks* (2022). The work features locks that appeared on bridges such as the Pont des Arts; lovers have historically marked up cheap locks with their initials, affixed them to the bridge, and thrown away the key in the Seine as a symbol of their enduring

love. That has caused structural concerns for these bridges, one of which collapsed due to this weight several years ago; some of them have since been placed under Plexiglas to prevent lovers undertaking a timeworn tradition. Gaillard has acquired these locks on loan from the City of Paris and placed them in sacks that weigh tons. He's also showing two videos, one of which is *Formation* (2022), featuring footage of German parakeets in flight that's projected at a massive scale on a curved screen.

These works appear alongside pieces by other artists. Among them are 15 drawings by Robert Smithson that look nothing like the Land art for which he's known. Instead, they are closer to Surrealist paintings, with cyborgian arms that fly out in a circle and a bacchanal of figures circling around a person in a cage.

Lamarche-Vadel said the inclusion of these works by Smithson, Giorgio de Chirico, and Kathe Kollwitz was part of Gaillard's larger project of exhuming unknown history: he specifically went for works that weren't known by artists who are canonized. In doing so, he's hoping to reshape how viewers understand these artists' work, much as he's also trying to reshape how viewers understand *Le Défenseur*.



Gaillard's Palais de Tokyo show includes others' artworks dealing with history and memory. Pictured here is Giorgio de Chirico's *Les Archeologues* (ca. 1927).

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Gaillard is also presenting, as found objects, two gargoyles dating from the late 19th century that once adorned the Notre-Dame de Reims cathedral. Shelling

during World War II caused the building's lead frame to liquefy, and it poured out the gargoyles' mouths (intended as the cathedral's rain drainage system) and then harden mid-air.

“When you see a public artwork like *Le Défenseur du Temps*, you can really build your own emotional relationship with it that you can't have in a museum,” Lamarche-Vadel said. “He's trying to reflect on that with these artists.”

That dynamic runs both ways, since Gaillard's show will also involve the Pompidou recognizing *Le Défenseur* as an artwork for the first time ever. According to Lamarche-Vadel, although the sculpture has always been sited near the Pompidou, there's never been any mention of it in the museum's materials. That will change once Gaillard's show closes in January, after which the work will be reinstalled and officially entrusted to the Pompidou for any further maintenance.

Lamarche-Vadel characterized this a “healing relationship” in which the Monestier sculpture is rendered anew.

The gesture also means that, though Gaillard's exhibitions will eventually close, the artist has left a permanent, if largely invisible, mark on the Parisian urban landscape. “This is really proposing the idea that restoration can be an act of creation,” Lamarche-Vadel said.