



Variable Nature, Pierre-Yves Desaiive, 2008

Published in *Fractal Flowers 2009*, catalog of the exhibition « Fractal Flowers », Centre d'art Imal, Brussels (BE)

"Everything in Nature takes its form from the sphere, the cone and the cylinder. One must learn to paint from these simple figures; then one can make whatever one would like." This famous quote from Paul Cézanne (in a letter to Emile Bernard, 1904) lends itself to a double-edged interpretation: while the artist aims to reduce his subject to geometric volumes, he at the same time must avow humility in face of the enormity and complexity of his task as landscape painter. He would be incapable of achieving his goal without reliance on Nature itself, a natural world that offers him a limited repertoire of forms with which to re-transcribe the infinity of the visible.

With his digital works, Miguel Chevalier places himself in a similar process. But where Cézanne had recourse to observation, to his palette and his brushes, Chevalier uses computer programming to elaborate the elements of his own pictorial vocabulary. In doing so he nonetheless freely draws upon painterly references: Monet, for his examination of the notions of temporality and variation, Jackson Pollock, whose canvases personify gestural abstraction and speed of execution, or the muralists Alfred Sequeiros and Rufino Tamayo, who marked Chevalier during a youth spent in Mexico.

From Impressionism's founding father, Miguel Chevalier retains – aside from the theme of landscape itself – the practise of elaborating a single subject in series according to different moods of light (the Cathedral at Rouen, haystacks in a field, poplars on the banks of the river Epte, etc.). Like the tableaux of Monet, Chevalier's digital compositions also evolve in time, proceeding from an encounter between light and colour on a flat surface: "The filial relationship is clear, the one main difference being, however, that instead of having a series of canvases, here we have an oeuvre that generates itself and develops ad infinitum."¹ This kinship to abstract expressionism is found even more in the importance that Miguel Chevalier gives to movement, his interactive works taking life and form in function of viewers' motion as picked up by infrared cameras. But in contrast to Pollock's canvases, it is the spectator, and not the artist, whose gestures are determinative. As for the Mexican mural artists, their influence is perceptible in the imposing dimensions of these works, which often – though not exclusively – take the form of large-format projections. Moreover, Miguel Chevalier also turns his attention towards integrating his art in public spaces, as well as extending his investigations into architectural contexts.

The work *Fractal Flowers* presented today at Imal counts as part of a process begun at the start of this decade under the title *Other Natures*, encompassing a great variety of realizations.

1 Miguel Chevalier: Interview with Henri-François Debailleux, in *Miguel Chevalier : Seconde Nature 2007*, catalogue d'exposition, Anciennes Ecuries des Ardoisières, Trélazé, 29 June to 2 September 2007, s.p.

As starting point, they all take observation of the plant kingdom, and its transposition within a digital universe. The titles of the first works in this series, *Sur-Nature* (2004), *Ultra-Nature* (2005) and *Supra-Nature* (2006), evoke a surpassing of natural borders. The process of developing computer-created coloured plant forms is in fact directed by software conceived specifically for the artist. Miguel Chevalier and his team have here created eighteen "virtual seeds", allowing them to grow, come to fruition, die, and be reborn – so giving birth to an infinite variety of forms. And although partially following certain parameters, the growth of these digital flowers essentially relies on a random component, generated by the computer program. *Fractal Flowers* extends and develops this characteristic: the program that invests them with life is connected to "libraries" of forms, forms that associate with each other according to chance. Here the artist's role is no longer to create a "digital plant" and to let it grow, but rather to isolate, starting from an infinite repertory, the virtual plant prototypes that he might then re-use. Aesthetically, *Fractal Flowers* differs from *Other Natures* by its conquest of the third dimension: the result are flowers caught mid-way between the organic and the mechanic-robotic, whose strange (even menacing) aspect is tempered by the interactive control exercised upon them by the spectator.

As Lev Manovich has underscored, the distinctive characteristic of the digital oeuvre is that it is based on a code, susceptible to differing interpretations according to the given program. The *Fractal Flowers* exhibition at Imal amply illustrates this principle of *variability*: the same data are used to produce animated interactive images, printed images, or even three-dimensional forms, veritable "digital sculptures" obtained by stereo-lithography.

Beyond their aesthetic and playful qualities, *Fractal Flowers* questions both the status of the work of art in the digital era and, on a more poetical and metaphorical plane, the stakes involved with genetic manipulation. Nothing can predict what these "fractal flowers" might produce, free as they are to infinitely cross and reproduce. "It's not because I use a computer that I'm modern," states Miguel Chevalier. "I've always preferred using the tools of today because I feel they offer such great potential in opening new, as yet unexplored, fields in the world of the visual arts." With *Fractal Flowers*, he demonstrates that his artistic intent is firmly anchored in our technological age.