



Interview by Henri-François Debailleux, 2007

Henri-François Debailleux :

"Ultra-Natures", "RGB Land" and "Weird Appealers" are three distinct series of works which you exhibit here. What is the connection established between them?

Miguel Chevalier :

Each series entertains a relationship to some specific form of nature, i.e. organic in "Ultra-Natures", mineral in "RGB Land", and pertaining of a cosmic register in "Weird Appealers". The latter, in particular, are based on a sort of gravitation which calls to mind the rotation of planets, simultaneously dependent and independent of each other. To begin with, "Ultra-Natures", illustrate some form of growth based on a randomness principle, "RGB" landscapes depend likewise on randomness due to their fractal structure, while "Weird Appealers" are, so to speak, the synthesis and acme of these different approaches. I therefore found it interesting to provide some extension to the idea of a revisited, re-imagined Nature and thus provide the three series with a common denominator, i.e. that of a Second Nature. Hence the title chosen for the installation : a Second Nature would run parallel to all we already know about nature, this knowledge being revisited through the filter of digital technology.

HF.D : Let's have a look at each of them in the order you suggest. First "Ultra-Natures"...

M.C : In the case of "Ultra-Natures", I realized an herbarium made up of fifteen virtual seeds. These could either be used in isolation or combined with the purpose of creating new forms of gardens. To boot, due to their reactions to the visitors' movements, these gardens were interactive. The spectators/actors became somehow aeolian assistants, since moving to the right or left, they had stems, leaves and flowers undulate and lean forwards as blown by the wind. Another idiosyncrasy of this creation was that it had no loop structure as is the case with videos and films. We were in the presence of a generative system which endlessly produced cycles of birth, growth, life and death with no return whatsoever to the starting point, but engendering an endless dynamical development. The environment was purely digital and the gardens being "open works" — a notion defined by Umberto Eco — they lent themselves to interactions. These endlessly generative works were constantly involved in an evolutionary process or ever-growing potentiality. The aesthetics involved was ephemeral, since a given moment was due to soon vanish and never return. Later on, of course, the visitors would see these same plants again, but in the mean time they would have grown, or moved to right or left

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HF.D : "RGB Land", now...

M.C : RGB stands for red, green and blue which are the three computer primary colors while the painting primary colors are red, yellow and blue. Red, green and blue are the colors of light

as processed by subtraction in the computer, and by addition in painting. This series deals with the notion of spatiality, of territories still unexplored and imaginary, i.e. fractal landscapes based on a map carried out on a planetary scale and meant to indefinitely generate absolutely unreal landscapes. As a matter of fact, the normal process (for geographers) consists in creating the map after considering the landscape. Here, the fractal notion is once more introduced and enables to approach new fields of investigation. The spectator enters an image which is constantly developing, as was already the case with the "Ultra-Natures". "RGB land" was created for the Pittsburgh Art Center (USA) in November 2006 and has so far never been shown in France. But I would like to add that this creation did not come out of the blue. In the early nineties, I had already created, in cooperation with Eric Wenger, a first software entitled "Artificial landscapes", prefiguring so to speak what is seen in this new series. My work is always made up of investigation fields echoing one another. The same goes for "Ultra-Natures" since in the early eighties I had already worked on botanical greenhouses, which are artificial spaces where nature is subdued, mastered and conditioned.

HF.D : What about the "Weird appealers" ?

M.C : This work, as yet undisclosed, is also interactive. The spectators' bodies and arms function here as remote control electronic brushes. Receptive to the spectators/actors movements, electronic sensors create on a screen subtle, intangible "drippings", evoking some "virtual Pollock". Each new shape thus generated is superimposed to the former ones and we consequently visualize an image in constant evolution. This is another way of acting upon the work.

HF.D : Flowers, landscapes, a rather lyrical abstraction ... In fact, you remain very close to painted motives ...

M.C : I quite agree with you. The "Ultra-Nature" series is after all some sort of digital Impressionism if you consider that Monet dealt with the notions of time, light changes and their subsequent impact on his motives. This is also what informs my approach. "Ultra-Natures" are no pseudo interpretations of Monet's work, yet they deal with the viewer/light relationship since, aided with the computer, I process light. The filiation is quite obvious although the discrepancy is wide since we are confronted not with a series of paintings on canvas, but with a single work, both self-generating and ever increasing. Landscape is likewise a recurring theme of art history. "Weird Appealers", on the contrary, may refer to "action painting" and the performances carried out in the sixties and seventies when artists were "one" with their canvasses. Yves Klein, for instance would use bodies instead of brushes, i.e. as painting instruments. With him, the human (female) body became a physical "painting" major element.

HF.D : What was initially the source of this long lived attachment to painting ?

M.C : Cultural heritage ! What matters most, though, is to avoid all pseudo schools and manage to become "a man of one's own time" with the instruments of one's own time (without necessarily doing the apology of these state-of-the-art instruments), and remaining all the while faithful to one's filiations and bonds to the past. One has to find out these earlier artist who prefigured the future, unaware as they were, that the day of cybernetics was about to come. Analyzing art history is for me a starting point ; from this analytical platform I try to elaborate a vocabulary that refers to these artists and simultaneously investigate and interpret these cognitive fields which, for lack of means, our predecessors were unable to explore.

HF.D : Why did you choose, from the onset, to work with a computer ?

M.C : I came to realize that all the artists in their times had been on the same wave length as the world they lived in. Fernand Léger, for instance, was in the early XX th Century the exponent of the machine world and industrial society.

Pop art and New Realism were the direct outcomes of this industrial society, yet mirroring essentially the new consumer society. The society we live is more industrial than ever, yet it increasingly embraces computer processed data (information) and electronic control systems. The necessity to work with instruments assisting the development of these new fields has therefore always been obvious to me. I felt urged to investigate – aided by these digital instruments – new poetical worlds linked all the way with painting, photography and video.

HF.D : In short, a new technology to delve into classical subjects...

M.C : I cannot say that I am modern because I use a computer. The question is rather to know how, aided with software, I can create an idiom expressing truthfully the world we live in. In that sense I also find it difficult today for a young artist to naively follow in the steps of traditional painting. I can't deny that I am really fond of painting, but the twentieth century was the battle field of iconoclasm, i.e. with each avant-garde generation the hiatus between contemporary creation and painting became more radical, even to the point of thoroughly annihilating painting. Seldom indeed are young creators capable of creating a new painterly idiom in this domain or territory, which has already been so thoroughly mapped out. I have always privileged these available state-of-the-art instruments because to my mind they are the keys to wide, unexplored, pristine domains with huge potentialities. I also see in them a means to regenerate the relationship with the painting process. I likewise do believe that my work partakes of a dream-like unreality, which has always been the share of painting.

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[English translation : Solange Schnall, Paris