



A Few Pixels of History, Serge Fauchereau, 2010

The artist has always wanted his work to seem as truly alive as the person who will view it. Yet for a long time, he had to be content with artifices that would give the illusion of movement: swirling mandalas that fascinate the viewer, anamorphoses and optical tricks that elicit surprise as the eye moves, shadow plays and magic lanterns, and so on. Later, the work would move on its own, from the “colored rhythms” of Léopold Survage and cartoons to Jean Tinguely’s machines and the animated sculptures of Pol Bury. The spectator was on the move or else the work itself was. From then on, movement concerned both the viewer and the work viewed, quite simply so with the penetrable sculptures of Jesus Soto and in much more sophisticated fashion with the architectural kaleidoscopes of Olafur Eliasson. With a gesture, the visitor brings about a change in the work, creating or changing a color, even if he is unable to foresee or to control the full reaction for which he is responsible. The artists of today can create a work that presents itself as a randomly programmed autonomous entity, and thus one they do not desire to master in its entirety. Surely, one of the most inventive of these artists today is Miguel Chevalier, who has been astonishing us with his works for more than two decades.

Chevalier arouses our interest and excites our imagination, not by having recourse to the most widely used springboards of present-day art--humor, pornography, and simplistic provocation--but by taking up again, in his own way, the great topics of the art of all times: the human body, human activity in its movements, its industry, its communications, living things, urban, rural, or desert landscapes as well as seascapes, and all possible and impossible sites, like the forbidden planets of the dreamers of yesteryear. And quite recently, we have his *fractal flowers* and *binary waves*, where pure geometry and the most erratic forms of biomorphic agitation mingle together. Everything moves, everything changes, even the background. Polyhedrons gather into at once fragile and firm floral structures that grow, thrive, blossom, become flush with color, and then perish and vanish. Binary columns turn liquid, become watery or streaked with bright colors, and ebb before the viewer’s eyes, almost coming to life as he gestures, moves, or dances, and, even without his participation, the numerals appear, disappear, overlap, intertwine, tangle together, and continue their own unforeseeable, perpetually changing, and ephemeral movement, for never are the same figures repeated.

These works created by Chevalier allow us finally to follow, to see, to SEE what but fueled some very old visionary daydreams. We will not hark back to the animated objects and statues of mythologies and other old tales, as T. S. Eliot has insisted that no great work comes into existence outside of some tradition. But it will be recalled that Rimbaud sought “at the heart of black seams/Nigh-on stone-like flowers.”¹ After him, others have described, better than I could do, what they might have truly gazed upon, had they known Chevalier’s *fractal flowers* and *binary waves*. Thus we have, for example, J.-H. Rosny and his *Xipéhuz* (1887),

1 “What One Says to the Poet on the Subject of Flowers,” trans. A. S. Kline.

object-like beings made of an inconceivable material:

All of a sudden, their stars trembling and flickering, the cones became elongated, while the cylinders and the planes made a noise like the hiss of water thrown on a fire, and they all came toward the nomads, their velocity accelerating. . . . The metamorphosis extended to the shapes of the phantasmagorical Entities, the cones tending to broaden out into cylinders and the cylinders to spread out, while the planes had become slightly curved.²

Or else, following Rosny, we have a Maurice Renard, whose “magic talent” Guillaume Apollinaire admired, where “trees move about and everything is transformed,” down to the infinitesimal level:

This pompon, this sort of dahlia or chrysanthemum, began to sway sinuously at the end of its short and strong stalk. . . . With a flourish, this extraordinary pompon rose up and began to move, waving all its tentacles, or rather its beautifully tinted antennae. . . . And, like the sea anemone, this curious actinia at times went back into its tube with a gracious gyration, disappearing like an eye when it winks, coming out again to spiral open and shine forth more radiantly.

At this junction between two centuries, when utopians and inventors of time machines were intensifying their visions, the visual arts were suffering more than ever from exposure to time and to its inexorable flow. Artists were still dreaming of creating dynamic images of animal and plant life and of the movements of the elements. For, the extraordinary formal and chromatic diversity of flowers is as infinite as their life is brief. Yet flowered wallpaper cannot yield an idea of that, and the most beautiful floral compositions of the painters of old remain mere vanities and, in the end, but subdued *memento mori*. The skies and seas of Jacob van Ruisdael and of J. M. W. Turner, admirable Promethean challenges though they are, cannot but remain frozen, like a butterfly one kills in order to preserve it on a pin. Finally, cinema offered a magnificent illusion. Yet even when the colors are right and the film is shown in 3-D, it relies merely on a succession of images that, though they may be sped up, slowed down, put in a loop, and played over and over again, are in reality dead. Cinema is an automatic device that repeats prior gestures and past movements as often as one wishes. One believes that one is reliving something, and in reality one is reviewing something that has disappeared. Not everyone who was a contemporary of the invention of cinema believed that it offered an equivalent of life. In order to grasp life in its dynamic unfolding, Paul Cézanne was driven to geometrize the world he was painting, doggedly capturing the light and changing forms on a mountain near his home. Claude Monet, on the contrary, increasingly blurred shapes and colors in order to render the sky's fickle reflections on the rippling water of a pond. These solitary researchers did well what they did in their time. In our day, Chevalier no more practices the art of an aesthete than he does some sort of laboratory art. He wants to be in the City like the great Mexican mural painters of his childhood wanted to be immersed in the daily existence of the great majority of people and to be visible and accessible to all on walls or hanging in streets and public spaces. Those mural painters would certainly have envied an artist who can transport vast frescos of light and interactive virtual objects from one place to another across continents, so as to please and to satisfy the emotions of viewers and passers-by.

With Chevalier, time is, as Hamlet says, out of joint. The shapes and colors live a life of their own, because life presupposes a certain measure of freedom. He has therefore left them

2 J.-H. Rosny Aîné, “The Xipehuz,” in *The Navigators of Space and Other Alien Encounters*, adapted by Brian Stableford (Encino, CA: Black Coat Press, 2010), pp. 62, 64.

a true latitude of possibilities by leaving things to chance beyond the traditional control exercised by the artist and by the active spectator and even beyond the program that randomly breathes life into the work. In this connection, and whether one likes it or not, the question of technique cannot completely be avoided. The use of computer-assisted mathematics creates a bit of uncertainty among the same kinds of people who formerly had doubts about printing or about mobile sculptures, as if mathematics, and in particular geometry, had not always been in league with art. The lovers of early fifteenth-century painting who saw how the Flemish painter Hubert van Eyck had systematized the use of oil in his paints shrugged their shoulders, seeing therein but an unnecessary complication, prone to error, that in any case had no future. Perhaps one did not laugh at the prehistoric man who, in some cave, drew a bison with his red-clay-tipped finger. Next, he took up a rod, and then a series of ever more sophisticated tools, and it is probably at that point that a few reservations gradually arose, since almost every technical invention gives rise to doubts, and even suspicions. Now, art has always been with us. And whatever some might think about it, it is doing well. People draw, they paint, they sculpt with natural or industrial materials, with clay or wood, with metal or synthetic materials, with light and through many other means, some still unimaginable. Let us recall this thought from Miguel Chevalier, "It is not because I use a computer that I am modern," and highlight the fact that he does not situate himself "in a rupture, but on the contrary in continuity, with the history of art." If one is not a technical expert on the matter, will one still expound upon the digital and computing aspects of Chevalier's work? His technique is certainly of as much interest as the way in which Velázquez had ground his paints or as the various types of brushes Kandinsky used. For me as a viewer, this issue is nevertheless secondary. For, as there are self-evident truths that can never be repeated often enough, let it be noted that it is neither the brush nor the software that creates the work, but rather the artist who designs the work and handles these tools as needed. Does one speak of oil or acrylic art? In this sense, it is inaccurate to speak of digital art, since, like the preparation of paints or other materials, computers and software programs are merely techniques.

Whoever has had a childhood enchanted by tales and adventures he imagined or read about in illustrated magazines will be grateful to an artist who has rendered visible to him in a lasting way such things as fantasy jungles, flying carpets, and fireworks displays. Here and now, he places within our reach a living geode or a paradoxical greenhouse into which we can enter. And he takes us into the secret recesses of matter, at the threshold of which the incredible shrinking man of science-fiction movies had, alas, left us. And here we can follow Rimbaud's "Drunken Boat" amid "the bluenesses, deliriums/And slow rhythms under the gleams of the daylight"³ and repeat, along with him: "It's revealed once more./What? Eternity./It's the sea run off/With the sun."⁴ But for the beginning of an explanation it is ultimately to Baudelaire that in this instance one must leave the last word: "genius is only childhood clearly formulated, now possessing virile and powerful organs of expression."⁵ The viewer, too, will recapture here the fresh gaze and the enthusiasm of his childhood.

3 "Drunken Boat," trans. Oliver Bernard.

4 "Eternity," trans. Baudelaire Jones.

5 "The Painter of Modern Life," trans. Rosemary Lloyd.