



# Miguel Chevalier

## Roving Virtual-Image Artist, 2015

### Elisabeth Couturier

Miguel Chevalier, Roving Virtual-Image Artist Elisabeth Couturier Miguel Chevalier has long gone it alone. Today, this innovative artist is solicited by the greatest museums and foundations throughout the world to create spectacular installations, gigantic, luminous, and mobile projections that immerse the viewer in a bath of motifs and colors. He now appears as the leader of a new aesthetic, anchored as much in the language of contemporary mathematics as in art history, and marks a new chapter in the saga of art forms.

A brief flashback. When, in the 1980s, Chevalier began to use computers as a tool to create abstract, immaterial, and mobile works, no one truly understood where he wanted to go. He was not imitating the provocative performances on a background of blurry TV images organized by the Fluxus group and he did not throw in his lot with the politically committed video artists. In his first forays, he paid no attention to the metaphysical ego trips of a Bill Viola or Andy Warhol-style cinematographic narcissism. Artificially recreating nature already constituted one of his favorite centers of interest. Making digital plants and flowers shift about and grow up becomes one of his major concerns. A Moonstruck Pierrot concealing his pronounced myopia behind big round eyeglasses, he seemed to come from another planet.

In fact, Chevalier was born in Mexico in 1959 and settled in France at the age of 24 to pursue his studies at the Schools of Fine Arts and Decorative Arts. During his school years, he was enthusiastic about frameless images: Nam June Paik's electronic manipulations of the cathode-ray tube, Man Ray's experimental rayographs, revelatory of another facet of reality, and Yves Klein's blue monochromes, which considerably enlarged the canvas's dimensions, as well as Lucio Fontana's slash paintings that transgressed the sacred space of the picture. He discovered, too, the pointillism of Georges Seurat, a prefiguration of the pixels to come, and the abstract paintings of Auguste Herbin who, in the 1940s and 1950s, had perfected a compositional method based on a list of 26 colors, each one corresponding to a letter and to a geometrical form (triangle, circle, quadrilateral) as well as to a tone. He also had a chance to meet the Mexican muralists David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera, who were able to address the public directly in the street.

Fortified by these references, Chevalier found rather quickly his mode of production: from its beginnings, he thus used a graphic tablet while exploring infinite spaces and inventing a new form of writing with the aid of data-processing tools. Without the training of an engineer and for lack of courses on the subject at the time in art schools, Chevalier approached computers and programming as an artist. What fascinated him was software's capacity to furnish a fabulous catalog of shapes and colors on whose basis he is able to work on ceaselessly regenerative compositions. Here he meets up with the branch of artists who, enthusiastic

about moving images, draw their inspiration most often from science and technology. They are those who formed the first battalions of experimental cinema, then those of video art and digital art, without the boundaries between these domains always being clearly defined. For, one of the great formal schisms introduced by modern art and then accelerated by contemporary art was to animate the work. In Marcel Duchamp's work, this was an obsession: his first readymade, executed in 1913, was a bicycle wheel attached to a stool in such a way that it could turn. Not to mention his Anemic Cinema with its Rotoreliefs, animated optical disks he manufactured along with the photographer Man Ray that, since then, have appeared to be the beginnings of kinetic art. On this score, Chevalier also recognizes his indebtedness to Victor Vasarely, Bridget Riley, Jesús-Rafael Soto, Yaacov Agam, Carlos Cruz-Díez, and Julio Le Parc, among others. What he will retain from this art that moves and plays on optical illusions is its active solicitation of the viewer but also its moiré effects, the superimpositions of screens, the candid use of colors at the same time as the random appearance of shapes.

Yet while kinetic art reveals a more or less sophisticated do-it-yourself [bricolage] sensibility, the path taken by Chevalier remains closely connected to high-tech and its development. In the late 1980s, the appearance of microcomputing opened up limitless possibilities and, in the early 2000s, a new era began with the arrival of the first graphic cards capable of calculating thousands of polygons for video games. There is this commentary from the interested party himself: "This allowed me to create generative works, that is to say, ones capable of changing endlessly." Like experimental filmmakers and visual-arts photographers, Chevalier explores the many possibilities offered by the medium he has taken to heart, happily detouring its procedures. He thus adds his name to this gathering of computer scientists and electronics engineers, the better to pervert the possibilities offered by the latest software programs and to launch installations that, from ground to ceiling and from right to left, envelope the viewer and launch him into another dimension. He flies on digital carpets, is rolled up in waves of pixels, and traverses virtual gardens. Undulating arabesques, swirling spirals, geometrical figures take form and lose shape. Lines of numbers streaking through space at top speed form showers of shooting stars. Whole ranges of psychedelic colors mingle and intermingle. All this is punctuated with strange sounds, notes from elsewhere.

The artist's goal? To bring out as-yet unrecorded, living, evolving images. The machines he uses today have phenomenal calculative power and considerably augment space. Chevalier's art also gives echo to the staggering transformations going on in our world, which is governed by mathematics and by the presence of a virtual reality that is in the process of contaminating all fields. His genius? Pulling poetry out of the entrails of electronic circuits. Putting the sensorial back into algorithms. Sowing entire ranges of emotion into modeling sequences. The artist accordingly transforms himself, for example, into a digital gardener with his "Sur-Natures" and then "Trans-Natures" projections, namely, those forests of flowers and various other colored and translucent forms of vegetation that react to the comings and goings of the viewers. He also becomes a twenty-first century botanist with his "Fractal Flowers", curious, multifaceted floral matrixes all given original names by their author (Psychellis Viperine, Purple Haze Artifilis Femina, Thales' Oxalis, and Lilus Arytmeticus called Euclid's, etc.), about which he explains: "Today, one increasingly models and simulates in laboratories the conditions of life of living animals and plants. I am inspired by such research to apply these conditions to imaginary plants." Conscious of the fact that he is playing God, he adds: "When these plants die, their seeds can mutate, hybridize, and give birth randomly to new species, not all of whose characteristics I have necessarily anticipated. Finally, 3D printing allows me to give material form to a few of these mutant species and to present them as sculptures of the future." To come back to the XXL projections offered by Chevalier, what they do is invite viewers to enter into a universe where cells and microorganisms proliferate, divide, and merge together at a sometimes slow, sometimes furious pace. He creates arborescent motifs by

giving life to abstract formulae, binary codes, and myriad equations. Projected outward, onto urban edifices or into such surprising enclosed spaces as the octagonally-structured Castel del Monte (built in Italy, in Apulia, by Frederick II of the House of Hohenstaufen in the thirteenth century), the Carrières de Lumières (Light quarries) in Les Baux-de-Provence, the former 1930 Casablanca Cathedral, or the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, his various visual scores, with names like "Pixel Waves", "Fractal Cloud", "Meta-Cities", and "Liquid Pixels", draw postmodern man into a world of signs that go beyond him. But far from scaring us, Chevalier's images in perpetual gestation dazzle us. They open the doors of a world of endlessly dizzying marvels.