



Your Breath That Passes Through (Detail), 2009.

The Silences of Still Life

Laurent Craste

Article by Pascale Beaudet

UNUSUAL APPOSITIONS GOVERN THE RECENT WORK of Laurent Craste. Ceramics serves as both physical support and signifying material in his video and much of the short sequences that make up his recent production – including a public presentation in 2009, an exhibition in 2008 and three previous ones in 2007¹ – are characterized by the self-mocking displays of a body put through its paces.

Decorative objects played a crucial role in *Les Vases Communicants*, his most recent gallery exhibition. Reconstructed in the small exhibition hall was part of a well-to-do living or office space. Two porcelain copies of Sevres vases stood on an Empire style secretary; above it, a white faience dish hung on a background of red wallpaper whose vine tendril motifs acted as



Your Breath That Passes Through, 2009. Video intervention held during the Montreal High Lights Festival. Porcelain plate and video projection. 40 cm/dia.

a foil. Projected onto the potbellied midsection of the vases, following the conventional pairing of decorative objects, were two video streams showing two similar though not identical representations of the artist. Projections on the dish also drew on traditional decorative themes. To gain access to these screenings, however, one had to wade through the flip side of the decor, a space crammed with wires and plugs.

Though very close to the Sevres originals, the vases were inspired by traditional models rather than directly copied from them. Imitating their general structure, Craste throws the pots himself, placing great importance on construction and on this particular technique, both for the sensuality of the materials



The Communicating Vessels (Detail). 2008. Video installation. CIRCA Gallery, Montreal. Pair of porcelain vases (99 x 40 cm.), earthenware dish (36 cm/dia.), antique Empire style secretary, wallpaper, ancient carpet, electric and electronic equipment and multiple video projections.

and for his own representation in the video work, in which he figures as the main character. While likenesses may vary, both the vases and the video are self-portraits.

Thus, the artist features nude in his one-man show. In a first video sequence, he appears in a mock-classical and increasingly ridiculous pose; in the following one, he gives way to paroxysms of anger, in the last, he labours in the cold. Viewers are presented a nearly 40-year-old body, with its attendant signs of excess weight and incipient baldness. Unforgiving in the presentation of his physical accoutrements, the artist piles still more hardship onto his body.

The installation would seem to be a videographic reformulation of still life, itself a discourse on the ephemeral nature of objects and beings. Still life, however, is here deflected through its use in the decorative arts, especially porcelain painting. Concurrent with the projections on the vases, where the neo-classical and statuesque poses become increasingly untenable, another subject is dealt with on the plate: an animated still life, in typical decorative ceramics style, where flowers wilt and petals drop one by one. While, in the second 'tableau', the artist screams himself hoarse (though we can't hear him) and the image grinds to a numbingly slow pace, the plate presents us with two fat round pears that are gradually covered over by big flies. And during the third sequence, where we see the artist digging the frozen earth with pick and shovel and where the tension created by opposing tones of self-mockery and the dramatic neutralizes extreme emotion, on the plate, a country house with a two-gabled metal roof gradually fades as an intense light saturates the scene. In the three videos, spectators are exposed to emotions of changing intensity – melancholy, anger, then sadness – that keep and hold one's attention.

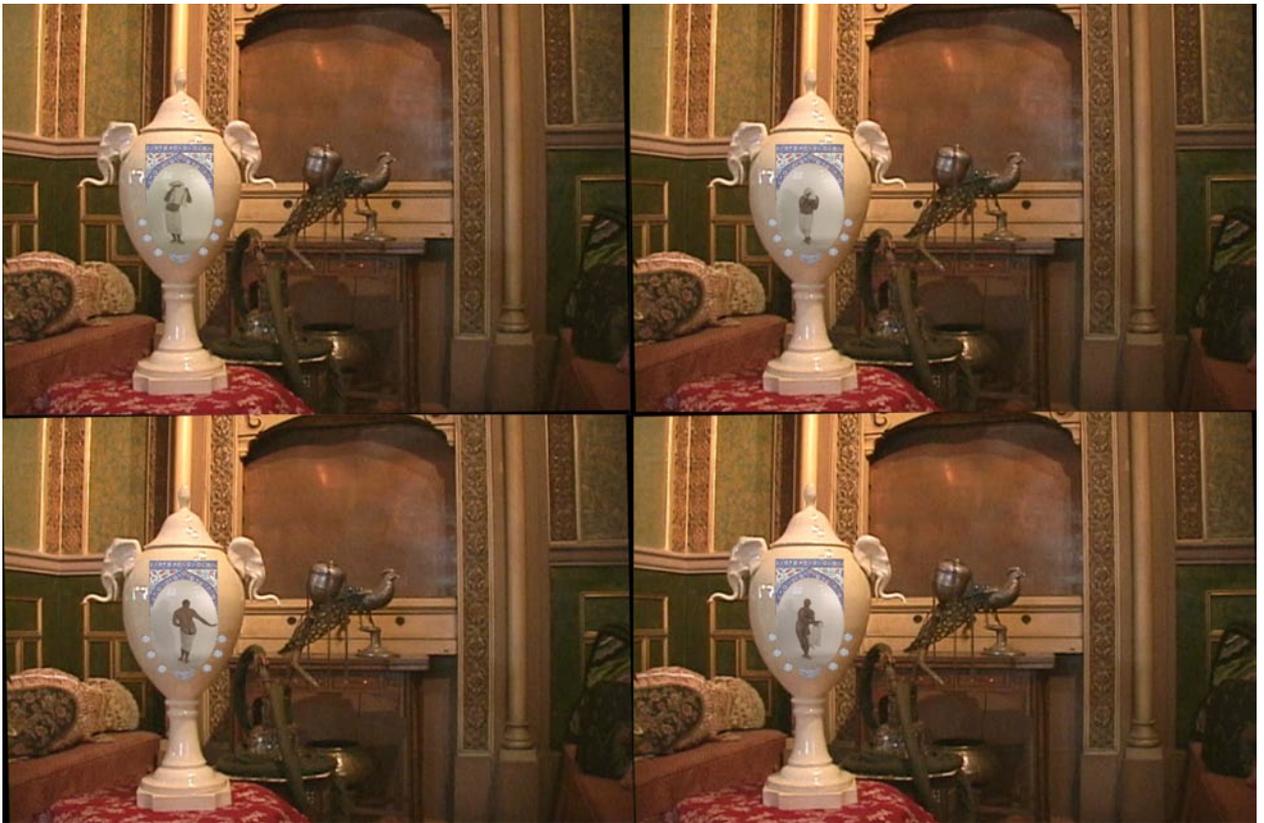
The presence of the house as a third sequence breaks with the content of the other two; one might have expected a variation on the theme of decomposition



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(hanging aged meat, for instance). Instead, we have this house that disappears. In the decorative sphere, peasants and shepherd maids often figure prominently, along with country houses. Since the body is the main concern here, the artist chose to replace it, metaphorically, with this dwelling. The house, in psychological terms, is also childhood, a regression to an often idyllic experience (or construction), just as the decorative cliché is a nostalgia for better times, an improbable golden age.

Still life, considered a minor genre in the beginning (the 16th century), is still relevant today, whether in painting or in other media. In Barbara Bloom's *Half-Full, Half-Empty*, for instance, recently put online by the Dia Art Foundation, we see a typical still life tabletop, but in contemporary style, with objects appearing and disappearing to the accompaniment of an off-screen voice. Many other artists might be included in this old but on-going tradition – one thinks of Tony Cragg,



I Would Have Loved to be a Moorish Woman. 2007. Site-specific video intervention in the Turkish lounge of the Château Dufresne Museum in Montreal. Earthenware vase (68.5 x 38.5 x 23 cm.) and video projection.

Christian Boltanski, Ilya Kabakov.

Craste used the porcelain dish projection technique for a presentation during the *All-Nighter* at the *Montreal High Lights Festival*, on 28 February, 2009. With himself on display once again, set in profile, his face is gradually covered by flowers that form the plate decoration; a troublesome fly then begins to annoy him, until he shakes it off and, in so doing, throws all the flowers back where they came from. The flowers could have formed a crown, had the artist braided himself one but he preferred to continue in his amusing vein.

A ceramist by training, Craste was first influenced by the forms of Grecian vases, which he personalized by equipping them with organic fragments, male or female genitals, sometimes arranged into secular altars. He now draws on the traditional repertoire of the decorative arts, like bouquet of flowers or the garlands surrounding medallions. In the sphere of still life, paintings of flowers derive from scenes of the Annunciation and, therefore, have a female connotation. Hence the sense of incongruity elicited by the juxtaposition of the flowered frame, evoking tenderness and happiness, with the scene of male anger and frustration.

In France, still life developed into the *vanitas* of the 17th century, with variations on the books and human skull that were taken from paintings of saints'

cells, especially Saint Jerome's. One may consider the scenes where Craste strikes at the earth a *vanitas* in motion, indicating an act of mourning.

The particularity of Craste's approach lies in his juxtaposition of objects that are considered decorative – objects which, according a formalist re-articulation of the hierarchy of genres, are deemed inartistic – usually relegated to passing contemplation and the moving image. The crux of the matter is the supporting medium. Vases and plates are substitutes for the screen but, contrary to the latter which is meant to be forgotten, their imposing presence plays a dual role, as contemplation shifts toward a critique of the object as indicative of social status and visual stereotypes.

On the other hand, Craste's renditions of Sevres vases and the porcelain plate are stripped of their characteristic ornamentation. They are unfinished, yet still partake in the conventional decor of an upper-class living space. The video images, then, with their expression of intense emotions or unpleasant realities, create the required divergence for the emergence of a social critique. In the purported context, the very fact of the artist's nudity is itself an incongruity.

Another marked characteristic of his videos is their strict silence. The character's silence helps temper the dramatic potency of some scenes but it also

creates a malaise. While other artists fragment the body (like Oursler, with his detached heads or disembodied eyes, or Annette Messager, who collects parts of male and female bodies), here Craste stifles hearing – one of the most essential senses for film and video. A distancing is created and reinforced by the prettiness of the garland or the strip of geometric Grecian motifs.

In the installations that marked the end of his master's degree, Craste 'sponged' off the collections of the institutions that had welcomed him, a critical gesture, of which one of the first examples was *Histoires de musées*, an exhibition that took place in 1989 at the *Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris*, which brought together around 20 artists who proceeded to invest every nook and cranny of the museum. At Montreal's *Écomusée du Fier Monde*, which presented an exhibition on sports, three videos occupied one of the bull's-eye windows; here, in *Les Dieux du Stade*, Craste awkwardly imitated the motions of Olympic athletes. In the collection of religious art at the *Musée des maîtres et artisans*, a large decorative plate emblazoned with the arms of the pope served as a projection screen for a series of identical vignettes featuring the artist with his arms crossed and in often badly held poses, sometimes making somewhat improper gestures. At the *Musée du Château Dufresne*, in the Turkish salon, Sevres vases with elephant's-head handles served to screen a video titled *J'aurais voulu être une Mauresque*, in which the artist performed a weird striptease on the theme of the dance of the seven veils.

These three installations, strongly imbued with the artist's biography, adopted an ironic and mischievous tone while maintaining a critical perspective. Discrete, though not hidden, they commented either on the current exhibition, on its context or on ideologies embodied in or trafficked through objects within it, while his critique is conveyed through intentionally awkward role-playing of multiple identities. After the worlds of sports, Roman Catholicism and colonialism, Craste turns to the decorative arts for his critical investigations. In *Les Vases Communicants*, he no longer plays characters; instead, he confronts himself. After having produced socially critical works and constructed a body-mask, at once strong and fragile, like clay hardened through fire, he now turns his gaze onto himself, peers into darker areas and attempts to 'repair' his wounds, his mourning and exile.

FOOTNOTE

1. The public presentation took place during the All-Nighter at the *Montreal High Lights Festival* on 28 February, 2009. The most recent gallery exhibition was seen at Circa, in Montreal, from 10 May to 7 June, 2008. The three previous ones, also in Montreal, were held at the *Écomusée du Fier Monde* 17–20 May, 2007 at the *Musée des maîtres et artisans*



Christ's Plate. 2007 Site-specific video intervention in the sacred art collection of the Musée des Maîtres et Artisans in Montreal. Porcelain plate (41 cm/dia.), video projection.

du Québec, 23–27 May, 2007 and at the Musée du Château Dufresne, 31 May to 3 June, 2007 (part of the requirement for the masters in visual and media arts at UQAM).



Laurent Craste working on a vase to be used as a screen for video projections

With a doctorate in art history from *Université de Rennes 2* (France), Pascale Beudet is an independent curator, author and professor of art history. She curated two international biennials of contemporary art in 2009. She has also written a number of texts on modern and contemporary art for exhibition catalogues as well as for art magazines in Canada and abroad. Photos by Laurent Craste.