

Olivier Catté

MUTATION(S)

Hangar 107, from March 9, 2023 to May 7, 2023

Born in 1957, Olivier Catté graduated from the Institut d'Arts Visuels in 1981. He lives and works in Rouen, and it is in this city that he presents the exhibition *Mutation(s)*, a retrospective of his research since 2007 on his favorite theme: the city.

A huge view of the New York skyline greets us at Hangar 107. Painted in 2007, *NYC #732* presents a frontal view of the Empire State building district. The buildings are painted in a cameo of gray, reflecting the darkness of the East River painted in shadow. Olivier Catté's singular approach is immediately apparent in the stencilling of ventilation grilles as windows for buildings that break through a blue sky marked by scratched stripes. The large canvas is reminiscent of its year-later neighbor, painted from the same point of view, but with different color choices and treatments.

NYC #877 takes up the rectangular towers and skyscrapers of the past, choosing as its horizon a white wash on a black background, this time flayed by brushstrokes. As the only openings, the large buildings are adorned with the repeated trace of the word "Fragile".

The view is tirelessly the same in *NYC #8030*, the third piece in the room, but the canvas has disappeared in favor of cardboard, which becomes the support for all the other works in the exhibition. The original shape of the cardboard can be discerned from the traces of folds that persist beneath the white acrylic. The cardboard has been used. Its ridges are crumbling, as if scratched by time. The recurring horizontal traces of the sky cross each other this time with large cuts. Shadows are drawn, leaving the beige cardboard bare and marking the depth of the scene. Some of the details are sketched in pencil and felt-tip pen, while others are dug into the cardboard as if a fingernail had pressed into its surface.

We enter the second room of the exhibition with a triptych featuring a new view of the city. In *NYC #8052*, the Brooklyn Bridge

crosses a black water that poorly conceals an old adhesive tape with red writing on a white background. After covering the cardboard entirely in black, Olivier Catté cuts away the surface to reveal the sunlit face of New York architecture. He scratches the surface to reveal ribs that form the sensation of currents in the water and the movement of clouds in the sky.

Next to it, the *Trump Tower*, painted from a low angle, makes you dizzy, with its large obliques accentuated by the median fold of the support, pushing the building upwards.

In *Interface #1115*, the painter has opted for a less figurative version, tending towards an assemblage of geometric shapes in volume. On the cardboard, we can still make out the city, betrayed by the artist's obsession with the urban theme and the presence of neighboring canvases, but the subject wouldn't be so obvious taken out of context. Beneath the layer of black, we can make out spray-painted graffiti. Olivier Catté has taken to the air, as if straddling a mid-rise building, half leaning over to peer down at the activity on the ground. The lack of nuance between the cardboard color and the black pigment makes it difficult to understand the maze of labyrinthine streets of a city that is no longer determined by its title, nor by the presence of iconic symbols, as it might have been in the *NYC* series.

Further on, the multitude of polygons in *Cityscape #14200*, flayed in the material and set against an inky-black background with a few blue streaks, suggest a view from the sky, like a ground plan or satellite snapshot. The point of view is so high up that it allows us to understand the architecture of a city made up of blocks pierced by major traffic arteries, symbolized by the black obliques that split the work.

The rest of the tour takes the viewer into the heart of *Cityscape #15500*, a work of considerable size, made up of the combination of two unfolded packages. The large format offers an oblique aerial view that catches anyone contemplating it in a grayness accentuated by a complex perspective. The cast shadow blends with the wall sections in a black and beige zigzag. A late-day sun bathes the roof tops and a few sidewalks to shade another part of the neighborhood.

Opposite, like a negative, is *Cityscape #14999*. Here, too, an accumulation of rectangles hints at urban peaks. Ranging from beige to faded white, they guide the viewer's gaze, unperturbed by the absence of painted verticals. The viewer's brain plays along, using the cardboard strips torn off at varying depths to imagine building facades. He then constructs the towers and buildings of a city that this time seems to be waking up.

At this point in the visit, *Interface #1234* is perceived as the result of a dive into the city. Closer to home, architecture presents itself to us in a jumbled web. Futuristic city or complex texture of the skeleton of urban monuments, the cubic volumes, similar to the atoms making up this strange structure, are pierced by beams in a dense mesh.

For *Cityscape #1529*, the author offers a wider range of hues. Yet he adds only black ink to the material. His meticulous work on the successive layers of glued paper that make up the cardboard reveals a cameo of beige. On surfaces left in their natural state, snatches of a word appear, with only the sound of "stain" to be read, resonating with the splashes of ink here and there on the cardboard. The pointed ridges of triangles, trapezoids and other convoluted geometries increasingly allow us to appreciate an abstraction held back by a few reliefs still reminiscent of buildings.

In the last room of the gallery, geometric forms lose their superbness and become more discreet, giving the advantage to meanders and curved lines. The *Harmonious Society* series takes up the formula of pigments and ink on cardboard. However, the artist no longer tackles the structure as before, taking a frontal approach to his subjects. The strokes and hollows in the cardboard have all but disappeared, replaced by an irregular, random surface peeling that is not guided by pre-cutting. In *#1738*, the artist paints washes in semicircles marked by the bristles of a broad brush. Slender, high-rise-like rectangles alternate in more or less distant plateaus. They are set amid white serpentine shapes gathered in bouquets. Higher up, the black background stretches into sharp mounts.

In *#1750*, the polygons form a mass that seems to float, without relief. They stand out against wisps of black smoke absorbing an already misty background. Footprints, as if stamped on the dark cardboard surfaces, remind us that the painter works on the floor in his cardboard-felted studio.

In *#1751*, the violence of the gesture and the variety of the brushstrokes drown out the bands that tirelessly depict dwellings. They are painted in an environment as tormented as the rolling of the waves. The inscription "6+4". Transparent, washed-out halos stand next to deeper, more opaque stains. Splatters and drips rub shoulders with brush-scratched textures, from which the words "This Side up" and a few arrows seem to emerge, reminding us where to find the surface in this turmoil.

Finally, ten small formats form a colorful whole. They are painted on small cardboard packages marked with sinograms, barcodes and pictograms. Original yellow background, *Landscape with Hygienic Registration Code*

admits to a blue landscape stained with jets of black ink that appear to have been blown over. *Landscape with Hot Chicken* suggests another, sprayed in pink and cyan, with the caricatured logotype of a soup-eating bird. *Siu Loong Buns Landscape* plays with the cardboard's original "left-aligned" typography to create the relief of a mountain.

Olivier Catté began working with recycled cardboard in 2008. Based in New York, he was in the midst of the American *subprime* crisis, the precursor of a major global banking and financial crisis, which he translated in *NYC #877* by stenciling the fragility of the megalopolis against the antinomy of its gigantism. The painter then encountered some financial difficulties following "a mishap with a gallery" ¹ that forced him to rethink his consumption habits, starting by stopping using expensive canvases to paint his representations of the city. It was a powerful act in the turmoil he was going through with his host country. He turned this flaw into an artistic asset, transforming this waste product of consumer society - and a free one at that - into a noble material for an artist's work. He draws the city with and on a part of itself. Paradoxically, he who paints the grandiosity of New York dwellings, does so with the minimalist material that serves as his "canvas".

In the midst of this great recession, cardboard is becoming a "habitat of fortunes for the most destitute" ². A material in excess in the city, cardboard represents both packaging, the symbol of mass production, and the waste of over-consumption, for which humans can be held responsible, running to their economic and ecological ruin. Its recovery is reminiscent of the motivations of Arman and César, who salvage used goods to depict the society in which they live. The use of simple cardboard as a backdrop is reminiscent of *Arte Povera*, whose followers advocate the selection and use of raw materials far from sophistication.

Tearing off the cardboard, peeling it back, scratching its surface to reveal its veins, reads like a metaphor for the hidden face of New York discovered by the artist. Beneath the flattering veneer of a smooth, opulent, majestic world, a symbol of the American dream, the city is in reality made up of invisible rough edges, made up of sometimes destitute individualities. Irreversibly damaging the surface of the work illustrates this possible accident, which is part of the creative process and lends its singularity to the artistic piece, just as it has been part of Olivier Catté's life, prompting him to adapt his creative tools.

The more Olivier Catté gets to know the city, detaching himself from his first dazzled glance as a traveler, the more he tightens his frame. The artist's eye then focuses on neighborhoods far removed from the clichés of New York and its appearances. We leave behind the Manhattan riches of the *NYC* series to discover the *Interfaces* series, which freezes the Bronx, cradle of *writing* ³ suggested by the tags in the background of *#1115*. The artist immerses us in labyrinths formed of blocks that hide the sun, and his height translates the vertiginous sensation of humans lost in the heart of concrete meanders.

Interface #1234 defies reality and logic in the manner of the Surrealists who, like Maurits Cornelis Escher, propose paradoxical architectures that lead nowhere but to themselves.

The cities depicted, figurative and illusionistic, gradually become depersonalized, flirting with abstraction. *Cityscape #14200* is reminiscent of Mondrian's work of the 1940s, in which the city of New York also merges into a grid. In *Cityscape #1529*, the rendering of dull chromatic tones and the decomposition of forms are reminiscent of the cubist paintings of Braque and Picasso in their experiments forging analytic cubism. The texturing of the cardboard and the emphasis on syllables inserted into the composition are reminiscent of Synthetic Cubism.

If the technique and approach have changed in the last room of the exhibition, which covers the years 2017 to the present day, it's because the model is no longer the same. Olivier Catté is in residence in China. The climate humidifies the cardboard he uses for his tests. It no longer reacts in the same way to the ink he drinks and spreads. The painter reproduces this unexpected effect in the first three works presented, entitled *Harmonius society*. Their title, taken from a political slogan, evokes the socio-economic model desired by Chinese communism. The painter depicts an exacerbated desire for balance demanded by the authorities, translated into hyper-control that involves the stifling of freedoms. He marks this in his works by painting oppressive black masses, and materializes it by using the subterfuges of Chinese citizens who circumvent censorship by using codes to evoke taboos. The "6+4" can be read as a reference to the Tian'anmen massacre of June 4, 1989. The trace of basket walking on the landscape is certainly not without meaning. It also bears witness to a landscape in which the Chinese countryside acts as a backdrop to an expanding city and growing industrialization. This is expressed in his work by the multiplication of small crane complexes and by the meanders that seem to express both the natural mountain backdrop and the polluting emanation of growing production. The built-up, almost floating complexes, on the other hand, are the result of the painter's own experience: during his stay, he discovered complexes designed in part to solve China's real-estate crisis, built without ever having been inhabited. They remind him of ghost towns.

The spreading ink, absorbed by the cardboard, recalls traditional Chinese landscape painting with monochrome ink and *Shui-mo* wash.

The reference is no longer solely Chinese in the final ensemble. Korean, Vietnamese and Japanese ideograms complement each other in a series of works hung together, but which the painter admits to having conceived individually. Initially perceiving a new form of abstraction, the viewer is quickly caught by the titles of the canvases, declensions of "*landscapes*" inherited from the food content of the cardboard box that the painter recovers from an Asian delicatessen in his Normandy setting. It's easy to see that the energetic gesture, though not without reference to the *Action painting* techniques of Abstract Expressionism, is controlled to form the reliefs of a landscape. The original barcodes and geometric shapes, left untouched

form living spaces. Finally, advertising logos, which American pop art would have adored, and pictograms lead inexorably back to figuration. Color has returned. It owes its presence to the painter's purely aesthetic reworking of the attributes of the already-decorated cardboard base. With the subject of landscape, the noblest subject in Asian painting, the use of parallel lines forming hatchings and sometimes verticality, Olivier Catté evokes the reference to prints painted on scrolls. This time, the painter detaches himself from the reality he has witnessed in the past to show his imagination and personal poetry.

The name given to the exhibition validates our path through all the chosen works: *Mutation(s)*. The retrospective began in 2007 with a two-by-three-meter acrylic canvas, revealing the painter's fascination with a city and its excess. From this first figurative work to today's small compositions on packing cartons, in which ink and watercolor take pride of place in an almost abstract manner, a great evolution is noticeable in the painter's work. It is forged by the artist's travels and concrete experimentation, as he understands the many facets of urban icons, but also those of the materials he loves. Testimonies and narratives, the works adapt their supports, techniques and framing to express the practical and emotional constraints experienced at a given moment by their author, who concludes the exhibition, rich in experience, with the creation of dream landscapes and a new form of travel: the inner journey.

Emanuelle Delahaye