

Interview with Colette Barbier

It is almost fifteen years now that the annual Ricard Foundation Prize has been awarded during the FIAC week to someone regarded as an emerging artist in the French art scene. The winners are not necessarily French, but they are in one way or another closely connected to France. Brought together every year by a guest curator, the artists forming the selection are exhibited at the Foundation before their works are examined by a jury made up of fifteen curators and a hundred collectors. But with an annual budget of more than 1 million, the Ricard Foundation also works in many other ways at what its director, Colette Barbier, calls “day-to-day support for young artists who have links with France”. We talked with her on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the prize, celebrated this summer by a retrospective show at the Centre de la Vieille Charité in Marseille.

Aude Launay—How did the idea for this prize come about?

Colette Barbier—We set up the prize in 1999, shortly after the Foundation was created. At that time, to my knowledge, there were no other contemporary art prizes in France. The Duchamp prize came a year later, in 2000, brainchild of the Association for the International Diffusion of French Art [ADIAF]. In this respect, this year, two of the artists nominated for this prize—Claire Fontaine and Raphaël Zarka—have already been included in selections for the Foundation prize, which Raphaël Zarka in fact won in 2008. Those late 1990s where a moment when there was much talk in France about a sort of “French art scene” that was very dynamic abroad, but which we still didn’t know about in France. People talked about the “French Touch” in music and reckoned that the same thing was possibly going on in art. So it seemed to me interesting to explore this by way of exhibitions. It’s important for us, at a given moment in the year, to show a gathering of artists selected by a curator whom I invite because I’ve found out that he or she was sufficiently curious to meet this request with a particular way of looking at artists aged under forty, and often much younger. The prize is a bit like the cherry on the cake, if I can put it like that. I also find that, over the years, we have more and more real exhibitions that fit into this framework; perhaps from simple selections we’ve moved on to groupings of artists who tend to belong more to families. In any event, this is an interesting exercise for a curator.

But the prize isn’t just a financial allowance for the artist...

No, absolutely not. To begin with, the Foundation bought a work from the artist, and the work was then shown at the Centre Pompidou during the FIAC [International Contemporary Art Fair], after which the Foundation retrieved it. And in 2001, together with Alfred Pacquement—Director of the Centre Pompidou—we decided that the works of the prize winners would be offered

to the Centre Pompidou, where they would be added to its collections, with the assurance that they would be put on view during that year for two or three months in the hanging of the permanent collections. That was something decisive for the prize, and it’s what has given it its specific character: a chance for a very young artist to find his work on view in a major museum. It’s not the brief of the Foundation to create a collection, its task is to work with artists through productions and publications, and give them visibility. Being included in the collections of the national museum of modern art is the outcome of a collaboration with Emma Lavigne, who is a curator there, and a discussion with the artist, his or her gallery, if they have one, and the Foundation. This also leaves the curator totally free in his/her choice of works for the exhibition, because it is not necessarily the work that is shown that will be acquired and offered by the Foundation.

The mixed nature of the jury is also interesting...

Yes. The composition of the jury is updated every year: it includes friends of the Centre Pompidou, the Palais de Tokyo, the Museum of Modern Art, the Maison Rouge, and the Jeu de Paume, otherwise put, for each association of friends some twenty collectors with a special interest in the French art scene. Added to this hundred or so collectors are the curators of previous prize exhibitions—this was François Piron’s idea—, which means, today, between 10% and 15% of curators for a hundred people casting votes. It’s a democratic prize: the curator is nominated, he or she chooses the artists, and the jury comes and votes... The collectors are often quite young, they find out a lot about the work of the artists in question, and this also possibly influences their future purchases.

To begin with, it was almost exclusively galleries in the Marais which were concerned by the prize, but today there are many more Belleville galleries; it’s interesting to see how we naturally move with creative places. The prize isn’t getting any older because it’s always as close as possible to young artists and their work. We can also see that professional people in the art world do not necessarily make the same wagers as collectors, even if, in 2012, there was a relative consensus about Katinka Bock. We are some-



times surprised—as in 2009, with the selection of Judicaël Lavrador in which notable figures were Oscar Tuazon, Clément Rodzielski, Mark Geffriaud, Étienne Chambaud... The prize was awarded to Ida Tursic and Wilfried Mille, who were not necessarily also on view at that particular moment; all the same, painting still has a certain attraction for collectors. Likewise, in the exhibition curated by Nicolas Bourriaud, people quite logically expected that the winner would be Cyprien Gaillard, given the keen interest he was stirring up, internationally as well, but the prize went to Raphaël Zarka...

When you look at all the artists selected for this prize, we can be proud of the choices made—these are artists who matter today. And Mathieu Mercier, who was presented in 2000 by Robert Fleck, was then the curator in his turn seven years later (the same year as his major retrospective at the City of Paris Museum of Modern Art, quite by chance). Artists make good curators, and we’ll be repeating that experience; they give lots of room to the artists they invite, and they have a different approach. Nowadays the profession of curator is in vogue, and my role is to make the right choice and invite someone who’ll respect the Foundation’s identity in its commitment to young artists who are part of the French art scene, and certainly not someone who’s got the highest profile. I don’t want us to be seen as a fashionable place, I want us to be different from others in terms of our demanding choices, and I want us to surprise people... I want the Foundation to represent all the coteries of contemporary art.

Apart from being very strongly established in the Parisian scene through partnerships with the FIAC, during which

IDA TURSIĆ & WILFRIED MILLE
The Back of the Sign, 2007.
Prix Fondation d’entreprise Ricard 2009,
collection du centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.
Photo: André Morin.

you organise *Cinéphémère* and *YCI* (Young Curators Invitational), and with *Jeune Création*, which you support with a programme of performances, and publishing the *Galleries mode d’emploi* agenda, and, needless to say, all the events which complement the Foundation’s exhibition programme, be it book and magazine launches, or lectures, you also obviously have very strong links with Marseille, where you’ve incidentally decided to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the prize. The *Mécènes du Sud*, *Art-O-Rama* and even, not far away, “*Châteaux secrets*”... Could you tell me a bit more about this?

Marseille is the cradle of Ricard. It was there, in 1932, that Paul Ricard created his company, and, today, the headquarters is still in the city. When we learnt that Marseille was going to be the European Capital of Culture, we immediately started thinking about our participation in this historic year, and we decided to be present there in several ways, just

like the image of the Foundation.

First and foremost, the fifteen works of the Ricard Foundation Prize winners are being shown, thanks to loans from the Centre Pompidou, in that historic place known as the Vieille Charité. We were really pleased to see all those pieces acquired since 1999 brought together. In addition, many artists travelled to Marseille to be with us on the opening day, and that was something we really appreciated. Furthermore, with a great deal of enthusiasm, the Ricard family accepted the project headed by Florence Parot bringing together fifteen artists in an outstanding site, Embiez Island. As a reference to Le Corbusier’s cabin, which the architect called his “secret castle”, the artists were invited, two by two, to create cabins, producing a strange set of structures halfway between an unauthorized campsite and a sculpture park.

Lastly, we are founders of *Mécènes du Sud*, an association which today encompasses more than forty businesses located in Greater Marseille, whose artistic committee I have had the good fortune to head since its creation. Nowadays there are more than 80 projects associated with the Marseille-Provence region that are financially backed by this association. In September 2013, during *Art-O-Rama*, *Mécènes du Sud* will be presenting their favourite, Moussa Sarr, a young artist represented by the Martine and Thibault de la Châtre gallery, with a totally new video installation.

And, needless to add, our attachment to Marseille won’t come to a halt with the year 2013. We’ll carry on keeping a close eye on the Marseille art scene, with which we’ll continue working.