

DISORDER IN THE COSMOS

By Isabelle Limousin

“The painter has put his painting in the painting, and the collector seated in his cabinet sees on the back wall, in the axis of his gaze, the painting that represents him looking at his collection of paintings, and all these paintings again reproduced, and so on without losing any of their precision in the first, second and third reflection, until they are no more on the canvas than tiny brushstrokes: *Un cabinet d'amateur* is not just the anecdotal representation of a private museum; through the interplay of these successive reflections, through the almost magical charm of these increasingly minute repetitions, it is a work that tilts into a properly dreamlike universe, where its seductive power is amplified to infinity, and where the exacerbated precision of pictorial matter, far from being its own end, leads in turn to the vertiginous Spirituality of the Eternal Return.”

Georges Perec, *An Amateur Cabinet, the story of a painting*

“There is no art that is not the liberation of a power of life.”
Gilles Deleuze, Interviews with Claire Parnet

At the center of Gilles Barbier's space and art is the *Mega Model*. Considered the matrix of his production, it condenses the motives and driving forces of his creation into a precipitate. Whereas Marcel Duchamp had assembled most of his works in a personal, portable and multiplied museum, *La Boîte-en-valise* (1936-1941), Gilles Barbier has created a voluminous model.

The eloquent title of *Mega Model*, which combines the ancient Greek prefix *megas*¹ with the Latin etymology of the word “maquette”, refers to a project stretched between extremes, since it is literally a large-scale scale model. The artist, concerned with words as well as their use, is no doubt amused by this paradox, which sums up the project of this complex piece.

*

It all started with copying the dictionary. Right from the start, in 1992, Gilles Barbier embarked on a project that *was* modest in its creative ambition but titanic in its scope: copying the pages of the *Petit Larousse illustré* published in 1966. The scrupulous reproduction of texts and illustrations in ink and gouache on sheets of paper of identical format (215 x 215 cm), a somewhat obsessive asceticism, seems to free him from the need to work while devoting himself to the execution of an infinite project. Creation and its corollary, invention, seem to have become obsolete. The artist becomes a contemporary monk.

Given the difficulty of presenting this work, the artist decided to create his own exhibition space, *The Mega Model*. “If I'm going to show all these pages, how can I do it?”

¹ According to the Ancient French Greek dictionary by Anatole Bailly, *megas* literally means large, high, lofty, long, fat, wide, spacious; figuratively, strong, important, grave, lofty, haughty.

How can we do it in such a way that the visitor's body is caught up in a logic akin to the hand leafing through the dictionary page? ². The science-fiction literature of Dan Simmons offers an answer in the *Hyperion space opera Cantos*, where space-time doors allow us to move from one room to another while traveling through the vastness of hyperspace³.

The Mega Model underwent three phases of development. The first was for the exhibition *Copywork. The Dictionary Pages and Other Diversions by Gilles Barbier* (1999) at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. The dictionary pages were hung on the wall, while the installation was placed in the center of the exhibition room. It consists of a model that materializes and architects the artist's project in a space reminiscent of a museum organized into departments with very personal names ("stupid, social, futuristic departments", etc.), hybridized with a shuttle reminiscent of the International Space Station, but also of Philip K. Dick's novel *The Clans of the Alphane Moon* (1964). On the subject of his cockpit, the artist explains: "It's occupied by three pilots. For a trip like this, I needed three mental pathologies. Each pilot has his own. There's the schizophrenic, who's constantly splitting up scenarios; the manic-depressive, with his little arms constantly rearranging the cargo; and the eidetic, unable to sort out what he sees, but endowed with a phenomenal memory"⁴.

Inside the model, on the walls of this miniature museum, the pages of the dictionary are exhibited a second time, but reduced, with other projects. Beneath the model, a small band of superheroes demonstrate. The first militant figure, who was certainly not heard until it was too late, holds a "Boycott this exhibition" sign. Above, a graceful construction rises up, evoking Buckminster Fuller's projects.

The artist continued to develop the *Méga Maquette* for his 2006 exhibition at Carré d'art - Musée d'art contemporain de Nîmes. The model is still the main, central and organizing element, but it is now surrounded by a set of satellites linked by a network of pipes and tubes that connect and direct flows of all kinds: an inhabited wheel of Emmental cheese, "Troglodytum Casein"; a portion of nature in a bubble, producing oxygen; an obese man dozing, skinned, producing epidermis; the reproducer suspended in the air, surrounded by his desires; two mountains on top of which is built a toilet-hermitage for observers of the solitary world; teleportation doors; a shiny treasure in a dark burrow; worms with made-up mouths and laughing teeth; on the ground, bananas, some squashed. Bubbles animate some of these pieces (the grinding wheel, the model) and introduce a proto-story. Vegetation has grown from a few trees to invasive mossy soil. In just a few years, the work has grown into a biological entity with a life of its own.

² Interview with the artist, 20/11/2020.

³ Read Isabelle Limousin, "Gilles Barbier and science fiction. ("and bravo again for the elasticity of your links with reality")", *ReS Futurae* [Online], 5 | 2015, Online since May 01 2015, connection on October 26 2020. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/resf/657>; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/resf.657>

⁴ Harry Bellet, "The Space Ship on a stopover" by Gilles Barbier, *Le Monde*, April 24, 2008.

Once again, we see the importance of both comics and science fiction as creative ferment. In *The Breeder* (1997), an earlier work included in this version, man is reduced to his sexual functions, not of enjoyment but of reproduction. His useless limbs are atrophied, while his genitals have been hypertrophied by their extensive use. Clearly, this character is reminiscent of Baron Harkonnen, one of the main characters in David Lynch's *Dune* (1984), who exploits his victims by regenerating himself from their fresh blood. The shift from staging to installation was achieved by transposing the forms, except that the executioner is now the victim, embodying the fantasy of a man confined to the role of progenitor.

In 2008, the third state of the *Mega Model* was presented at the inaugural exhibition of the Espace Claude-Berri in Paris, *Gilles Barbier. The Cockpit, the spaceship, what we see from the porthole*. The installation has been further extended with new satellites, such as *The Black Box*, and fifteen graphic works making up a large-format panel that is both ground plan and elevation, two-dimensional reproduction and discursive support.

The science-fiction culture still thrives. The artist has added volume to the *Cockpit*, already placed in the layout of the 1998 model. And Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* is parodied to great effect. In *The Cheese Room*, the black stele that attracts a group of fascinated monkeys has been replaced by ... a monumental slice of Emmenthal cheese.

In a macro-installation, the artist has created a personal mini-universe of teeming life. The work of copying the dictionary pages has taken complex and ramified directions far removed from the primitive work of execution, with its *errata* and branchings in particular, up to this piece, a meta-work in which the artist strongly solicits the viewer. To grasp its richness and complexity, the viewer must examine and read the multitude of elements that make it up, and enter a universe with a logic all its own. A cosmogony in action, the effect of accumulation, strangeness and even fantastical monstrosity evokes the pictorial truculence of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Breughel.

La Mega Model remains as it was in 2008. It belongs to the small corpus of works that the artist keeps close to him, along with *The Burrow* and *The Game of Life*. Open to further reworking and enrichment, this "production machine" has a very specific status. Originally created to present other works, such as the pages of dictionaries, it has also aggregated older works such as *The Breeder*, but it has also fostered and continues to foster the creation of pieces that will emancipate themselves from it, such as *The Black Box*, "in the manner of a chain of ideas, of a waking dream"⁵. *The Mega Model* is both a work in itself and what the artist calls "a conceptual piece, i.e., a production process that offers infinite possibilities of exploitation"⁶.

The reduction gives the installation a seemingly infantile aspect (adult objects are miniaturized to make children's toys). While the copying of the works introduces a

⁵ Interview with the artist, Nov. 20th 2020.

⁶ Interview with the artist, Nov. 20th 2020.

mise en scène, a digression and a mise en abyme of one's own creation, evoking Jean Potocki's novel *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse* and its multiple narrative linkages.

Gilles Barbier's work thrives on paradoxical dynamics, in an incessant back-and-forth between high and low, elitist and popular cultures, microscopic scale and cosmic grandeur, the finite and the infinite, and provokes a sense of vertigo as well as irreducible vital power. At once end and beginning, work within the work and work of the work. At once past and future, memory and project, *La Méga Maquette* is a specular work on creative dynamics, but also an exploration of space and time in their maximum dimensions. In short, an exploration of infinity.

Isabelle Limousin