

GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

PARIS - BRUXELLES

Gillet et Compagnie

February 8 - April 26, 2025

3, rue du Cloître Saint-Merri, Paris 4^e



Roger Edgar-Gillet, *Apôtre*, 1996
Oil on canvas, 83 x 67,5 cm (32^{5/8} x 26^{3/16} in.)
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels

Galerie Nathalie Obadia is pleased to present *Gillet et Compagnie*, a group exhibition featuring the oeuvres of Roger-Edgar Gillet alongside those of other major artists of the contemporary scene. The works of Ronan Barrot, Valérie Belin, Nina Childress, Philippe Cognée, Sophie Kuijken, Eugène Leroy, Caroline Mesquita, Roméo Mivekannin, Yan Pei-Ming, Sarkis, Andres Serrano, Claire Tabouret, Joris Van de Moortel, Wang Keping, and Jérôme Zonder, are brought together in a series of dialogues around the subject of the portrait. Although portraiture has its early roots in Antiquity and has undergone numerous transformations in response to the prevalent artistic codes of various historical periods, it nevertheless remains a thriving genre and retains its position at the heart of artistic expression. The artists presented within this show are an integral part of this ongoing tradition, exploring their subjects from both artistic and philosophical points of view. In this way, *Gillet et Compagnie* puts forward a fresh reading of a timeless genre, seen through the prism of our own era.

As an iconic figure of the Second School of Paris, Roger-Edgar Gillet (1924-2004) occupies a central position in the exhibition. Fourteen of his works are on show. They do not however appear as identifiable faces but rather as heads - or even bare bones - sometimes reduced to their most basic structural forms. These representations have been reshaped and even deformed by a vigorous technique and the use of dense material that the artist has worked to the limit of exhaustion. It is this matter, due to its texture, that transforms and distorts the works, blurring, erasing and reinventing their contours to the rhythm of the artist's brushstrokes.

Following on from the works of Roger-Edgar Gillet, *Homme Nu* (1965-1982) by Eugène Leroy, as well as the works of Joris Van de Moortel, share the same intensity: their paintings could certainly be considered as the embodiment of raw flesh. The bodies appear to stretch and tear themselves apart, as if they might have been involved in some kind of accident. These transformations seem to be in keeping with the notion of "sensation" as defined by Gilles Deleuze, who declares that "What is painted on the canvas is the body, not insofar as it is represented as an object, but insofar as it is experienced as undergoing a given sensation."¹

The viewer might well experience a similar impression in the works of Jérôme Zonder and Sarkis, who, in their corporeal approach, involve their own bodies in their creative process. Their work with fingerprints, establishes a play on the interaction between human cells and the subjects depicted. Jérôme Zonder's *Les Blessés* series, created in the wake of the Nice terrorist truck attack, and Sarkis' watercolours, referring to the events of September 11, 2001, both transform acts of violence into physical artefacts. A new kind of perception emerges through these portraits: fragmented, odd and disturbing, the disfigured faces bring forth what was buried, thus jolting the eye's habitual gaze.

¹Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon, Logique de la sensation*, Éditions du Seuil, 1981. Translated by Daniel W. Smith as *Francis Bacon; The Logic of Sensation*, Continuum, London, 2003.

Ronan Barrot and Philippe Cognée also belong to this line of artists, who explore the body as a raw material to be worked with. However, rather than removing its skin, they work on it with great delicacy, in order to reveal certain invisible aspects. In Philippe Cognée's *Autoportrait* (2021-2022), he employs a process that combines melted wax, dyes and resins, inherited from the techniques used in the creation of Egyptian funerary portraits. Applying heat to the materials with an iron, he distorts the image, producing visual "accidents" and material slippage. His smooth and refined work on the epidermis, transforms the initial photographs into enigmatic and disconcerting visions.

As with Philippe Cognée, a number of other artists have married ancient techniques with modern tools to reinvent the art of portraiture. Nina Childress, Sophie Kuijken, and Yan Pei-Ming, in contrast, draw inspiration from photographs of both celebrities or complete strangers, all sourced from the Internet. These images are then reimagined through processes such as cutting-out, re-composition or even complete transformation, in order to give birth to entirely fictitious characters. Sophie Kuijken's anonymous faces, entirely made-up from scratch, form a highly original counterpoint to traditional portraits that are, more often than not, associated with live models.

In a distinct approach, Roméo Mivekannin, through his series *Amazones*, reinterprets the portraits of the female soldiers of the Kingdom of Dahomey (present-day Benin), imbuing them with new individuality while critically engaging with historical and colonial representations. By recontextualizing these figures in the present, he forges a connection between their heroic past and a broader reflection on memory and heritage.

Based on historical archives or contemporary photographs, these artists transform each era into a visual bridge that redefines the genre of portraiture. Whether in close-ups or full-length portraits, utilizing a vibrant chromatic palette, shades of black and white, or nodding to the hues and tones preferred by the Flemish masters, these figures, through their misappropriation or reinvention of traditional conventions, are timeless. The subjects are at times bathed in dark, impenetrable monochromes, at others in iridescent hues, defying any attempt to fix them either spatially or temporally. With their origins lost in the digital flux, they have now been crystallised on canvas, lending them a semblance of eternal existence. In a similar manner, Claire Tabouret – recently chosen to create contemporary stained-glass windows for the chapels on the south side of Notre-Dame Cathedral – sets her figures in a neutral space, the children portrayed seem suspended in an ambiguous temporality. In a fusion of past and present codes, all these artists have transformed portraiture into a fresh visual experience.

Photography, traditionally considered as a faithful mirror of reality, has become a realm of exploration of the boundaries that separate reality and fiction. Andres Serrano and Valérie Belin have hijacked this notion to take a critical look at the representation of identity. In his *Nomads* series, the American artist blurred these boundaries by setting up his studio directly in the New York subway, thereby merging social documentation with artistic mise-en-scene. In her portrait of a clown, who appears to be wearing a mask, Valérie Belin pushes this ambiguity even further. This depiction obscures the frontier between the animate and the inanimate, thus transforming photography into a space for questioning both identity and representation.

The motif of the mask, whether from Andres Serrano's *Torture* series (2016), or from Caroline Mesquita's sculpture *Roger* (2021), embodies a dual dynamic at the heart of the exhibition: it conceals yet at the same time reveals, informed by the expression embedded in the work's material. Conversely, the sculpture *Tête* (2000) by Wang Keping, with its rounded, smooth form, erases any suggestion of facial features, suggesting a sensuality that seems to extend beyond the limits of its constituent material.

Gillet et Compagnie thus showcases a wide range of works exploring the portraiture genre in the 21st century. Through the deconstruction of the traditional codes of representation, previously characterised by powerful symbolism, contemporary artists' research takes them way beyond simple appearances. They disfigure both faces and bodies to better delve into the human soul, revealing it in all its complexity.

Paris Saint-Honoré

Viswanadhan

January 17 - March 8, 2025

Sarkis

March 22 - May 2025

Paris Cloître Saint-Merri

Roger-Edgar Gillet

Gillet et Compagnie

February 8 - April 26, 2025

Paris Cloître Saint-Merri - Espace II

Guillaume Lebon

AH BON!

January 11 - February 28, 2025

Brussels

Collective photography exhibition

La représentation et son double

January 16 - March 1, 2025

Victoria Palacios

March 21 - May 17, 2025

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