

Martine Feipel & Jean Bechameil

The Moonless Night

When everything collapses around you

By Frédéric Bouglé, curator of the exposition

The sculptural *tableau* of *Nuit sans lune*, framed in refined penumbra and natural winter light, an enigmatic naturalistic staging, and a dreamscape flecked with referents to feed the individual's imagination, is set on two levels.

On the ground-floor, the installation by Martine Feipel and Jean Bechameil welcomes us through a high half-open iron gate, its bars distorted by some violent blow. From here we understand, as in song III of the first book of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, that now we are at the gate; Hell awaits us. All hope seems to dissolve into the teeming brook. There is only a constant muffled sound, that of a monumental bell imposing its brazen mass attached to the motorized axle of a huge pulley. From up high it chants, punctuating our present time. The underside of the bell's skirt—with its swinging clapper—haunts the spooky reflections in a puddle of dark stagnant water below. The solemn figure of this huge overturned sonic vase, that traditionally validates the sacred and profane, joy and tragedy, here is muted, sparing us its overpowering song. Yet it exorcises and warns of the impending danger that awaits us above. The view from the platform of the staircase leading to the first floor is astonishing.

A few steps higher the exhibition space offers a breathtaking spectacle—a room shattered by an avalanche of raw rocks. Only prayers or a twisted rope to escape ... but curiosity stirs in the face of danger, and everyone sneaks into the rocky tangle to explore. And what we discover—going from darkness to light and narrow to broad spaces—is not really a sad journey to the catacombs but a winding path amidst blocks of rock magma of beautiful anthracite gray, offering us challenging questions.

The artifice of deconstruction is a construction of artifice

Are all our spatial certainties capsized in revolution, or is it a straying, an introspective vision in process? Without even feeling the subterranean rumble under the basalt rock, the visitor of the exhibition will, like Prometheus sense “the earth swaying” under the fists of angry gods. But we will survive the experience, being Titans of great imagination. If devastation is the flipside of the dice thrown by nature, vixens, thugs and other malicious souls, then deconstruction is an analeptic concept nagging the postmodern architect as well as the contemporary sculptor and by extension every human Creator; deconstructing and evacuating the old to fill it with one's own constructions.

Sci-Fi Baroque

Beyond its accessible sci-fi/baroque formatting, through its stylistic hybridization, the installation discusses space in a crisis with a questioning of our ability to annihilate and transform. As Lovecraft wrote, each space holds another in folded dimensions, double and asymmetric, invisible and unknown, larger in volume, richer in potential and of a true nature waiting to manifest itself. It is in the clever layout of the first space that lies the passage to its entrance, half-opening the hidden door leading there. This is the way that Feipel and Bechameil symbolically designed each of their projects. Through this process the artist couple deconstructs an organized space, disorienting the visitor during its perambulation—time enough to rotate in the structural container.

A space for bends in reality

Martine Feipel and Jean Bechameil mention origami in describing their approach in the treatment of space and reality; creating a new space with a series of spatial and temporal folds. Thus a large volume can be small and a small one can be great. Yesterday's story can lead—nearly sixty years later—to today, the way the giant pulley's axle transmits its rotation to the graceful sway of a bell. This is as much a technical approach as a poetical skill, to go back and forth between yesterday's dream and present reality. The artists are not only inspired by rational space, that is to say accepted by all as such, but they instill it into a fantasy world that they alone conceive before “exhaling it”, modeled into another reality. It remains to be experienced, and becomes a clear area of truth for everyone.

In the *Moonless Night*, the artifice of deconstruction is a construction of artifice. Disarray can in turn be enchantment, if the viewer joins the sculptors in their contemplation of chance spatial transmigrations. The feeling of space—constructed and deconstructed—is empirical and cultural whether individual or collective, objective or subjective, intimate or shared. Feipel and Bechameil distort the rational grid of norms—on traditional criteria—materially and geometrically reinterpreting the whole space from a perception of truth beyond the “golden ratio;” rather black and white. After all, when everything collapses around you and chaos arrives, before Erebus is born and the night is dead, we reach the point of emptiness. Yet no disorder, on the contrary, *harmonia mundi*: on the prior point of creation everything is possible, in transition.

Technical details

This installation was prepared in advance in the artist's Luxembourg studio before being completed and assembled in situ in Thiers. Elastomer molds of mineral surfaces of rocks native to the art center were translated into plaster and then assembled and colored on site. The intention was to provoke an illusion of reality, chaotic and pregnant; the cliff that supports the building have collapsed onto the first floor and its picture rails, while on the ground-floor a giant bell is suspended from the ceiling—its clapper's silent peal banging in slow motion—next to the forboding punched-in portal, creating the impression of a disconcerting mephitic world.

In 1956 the Creux de l'Enfer building ceased as a cutlery factory to become an industrial wasteland, overrun by the wilderness. In 1988 it was restored to become a center for contemporary art. For the occasion of this exhibition, the giant pulley on the ground-floor—which had not been operational for 57 years—was brought back to life, equipped with an “eclectic” motor specially manufactured in Italy, with a timer that activates the bell every three minutes. It weighs a hundred kilograms* and is made of synthetic materials, with structured

shoulders containing a metal carrier core. It is modeled after the largest European bells, 210cm in diameter and 217cm in height—measurements similar to those of the great bell of Notre-Dame in Paris or Big Ben in London. Surfaces of black water were placed on the ground, reflecting this strange world in their rippling puddles. They serve to double the space, revealing the voluminous underskirts of the big bell, confronting the brackish water of the basins with the rushing mountain stream, sweeping away the common view of Euclidean reality.

* a bell this size made of metal alloy weighs about 13 tons