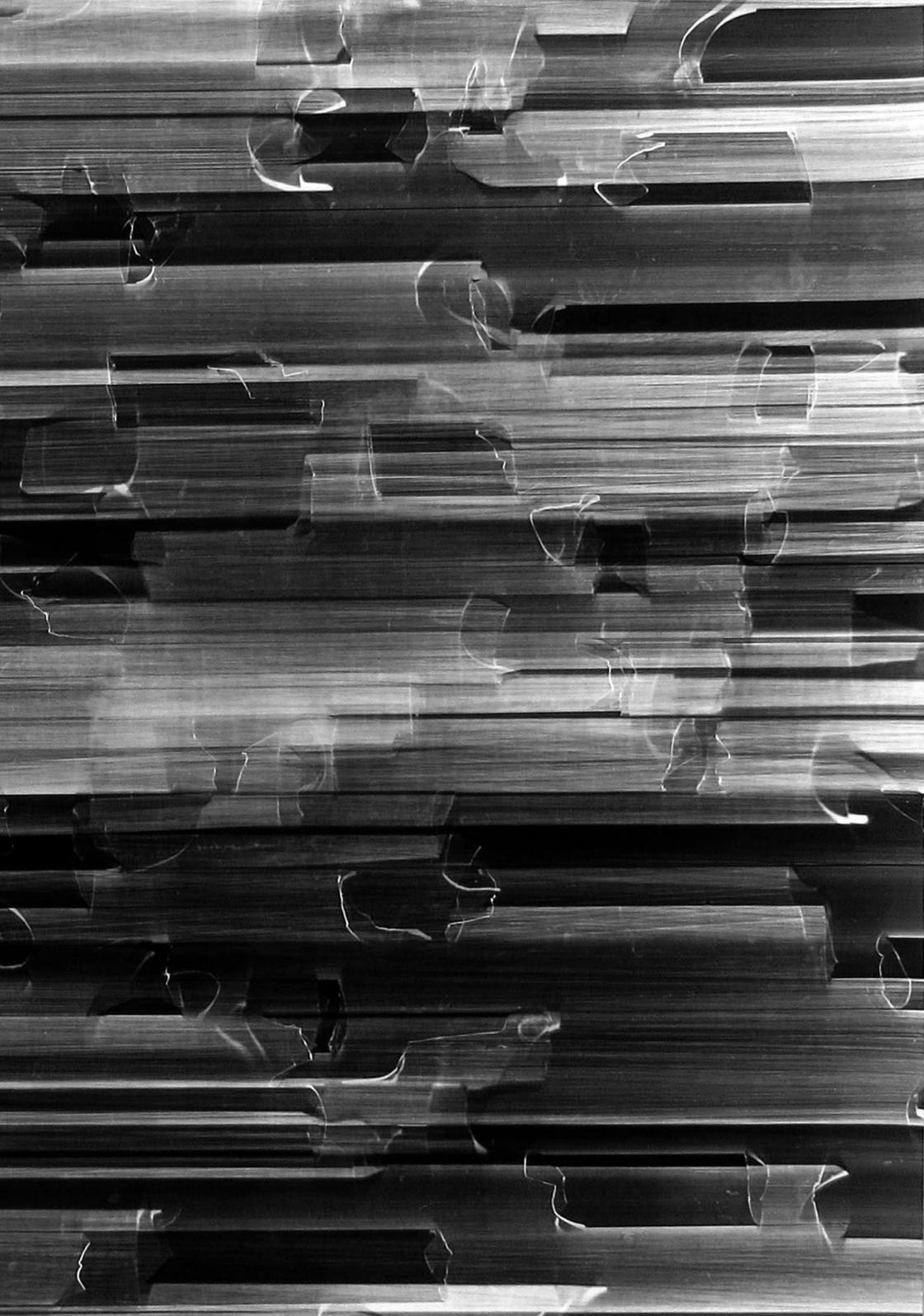


DARK ROMANTICISM

THE TWILIGHT OF THE IMAGES





The exhibition *Dark Romanticism, The Twilight of Images* presents the works of Yasmina Benabderrahmane and Vincent Lemaire. Both of them studied at the Beaux-Arts in Paris. They share a propensity to experiment with the corporeity of the image, its sculptural edification as well as the photographic material as a means of expressing singularity. They construct, one by projecting a bundle of elements from the community of sciences, the other by building myths of light and bodies, aesthetic propositions close to the dark romanticism of Mario Praz : incarnated ghosts, landscapes of desolation, esoteric minerals, chemical resurrection of photographic matter.

Cover

Up : Yasmina Benabderrahmane, *Toison* (detail)

Down : Vincent Lemaire, *Cosmegonie* (detail)

Left page

Vincent Lemaire, *Fossil Radiation* (detail)

The title of the exhibition *Dark Romanticism* refers to the concept developed by Italian academic, collector and decorator Mario Praz¹.

Praz was a special character, living in Rome, via Giulia, not far from the Palazzo Farnese, and then via Zanardelli on the floor of the *Palazzo* of the Primoli Foundation, in a rich decor of Empire or Biedermeier furniture, of *conversation pieces* (genre of nineteenth-century painting depicting bourgeois families or small nobility in interior scenes) and of books in many languages, showing his abundant erudition. His apartment is like a journey. Visconti was inspired by it to build his own *Conversation Pieces* (*Gruppo di Famiglia in an Interno*), his testament film. He will make Mario Praz his intellectual double. Nicknamed *iettatore*, because of his supposed evil powers, due to an infirmity, he incarnated for the European intelligentsia a truculent, brilliant character, characterized by the critical relevance and the delicacy of his taste. His work on dark romanticism has influenced literary criticism and the History of art for quite a long time. He gives a rich vision of recurring themes in the nineteenth century dealing with eroticism in literature. Some mythological figures are evoked by the textual illustrations and psychological situations are approached through masochism, decadence, sadism (Sade is of course widely studied in this book).

The exhibition shows the registry of the mysterious or disturbing body, in a desolate panorama of tragedy. This body, which can sometimes be esoteric, is transformed into stone, even in photographic matter or in a Martian landscape. It is matter. Matter of the strange.

We are buried under coarse clumps of limestone, asphalt, and clay. It is our fatal destiny. We disappear under the earth after having crushed it. We have inhabited it, exposed our bodies to excessive desires, sometimes or too often uncontrollable, overwhelmed by forces greater and more terrible than our own visions. We thought of facing our environments, of subduing our surroundings, of subjecting our congeners to our passions. But the sparkling vigor that agitates us comes from a very different world. Enigmatically impenetrable, it must become, at our death, a new refuge.

Our lives seem to dissolve in the infernal arteries of the earth's crust. The rocks, with the slowness of the centuries, open and close, devouring our remains. Mortals, in other matrices, new and regenerated, we are reborn. We return to the origin of the energy of our world, caught by the invigorating magma. The rasping growls of Vulcan take us into the labyrinths of the other world where, as the Emperor Hadrian imagined², the pale and floating soul is cold. She trembles like the flames of candles shaken by a warm breeze. She shudders from her own solitude. In these dark fertile and rocky lands, she makes her way to the core. She returns, going up the Styx³ and the years of her atmospheric exile, to the origins of herself. It is then confounded with its first matrix, those few tears of molten lava which were destined at one time to sprout, at the dawn of humanity, whole families, abandoned to nudity and injustice. It is an opera that is played before our eyes.



Vincent Lemaire, *Virtuality* (detail)

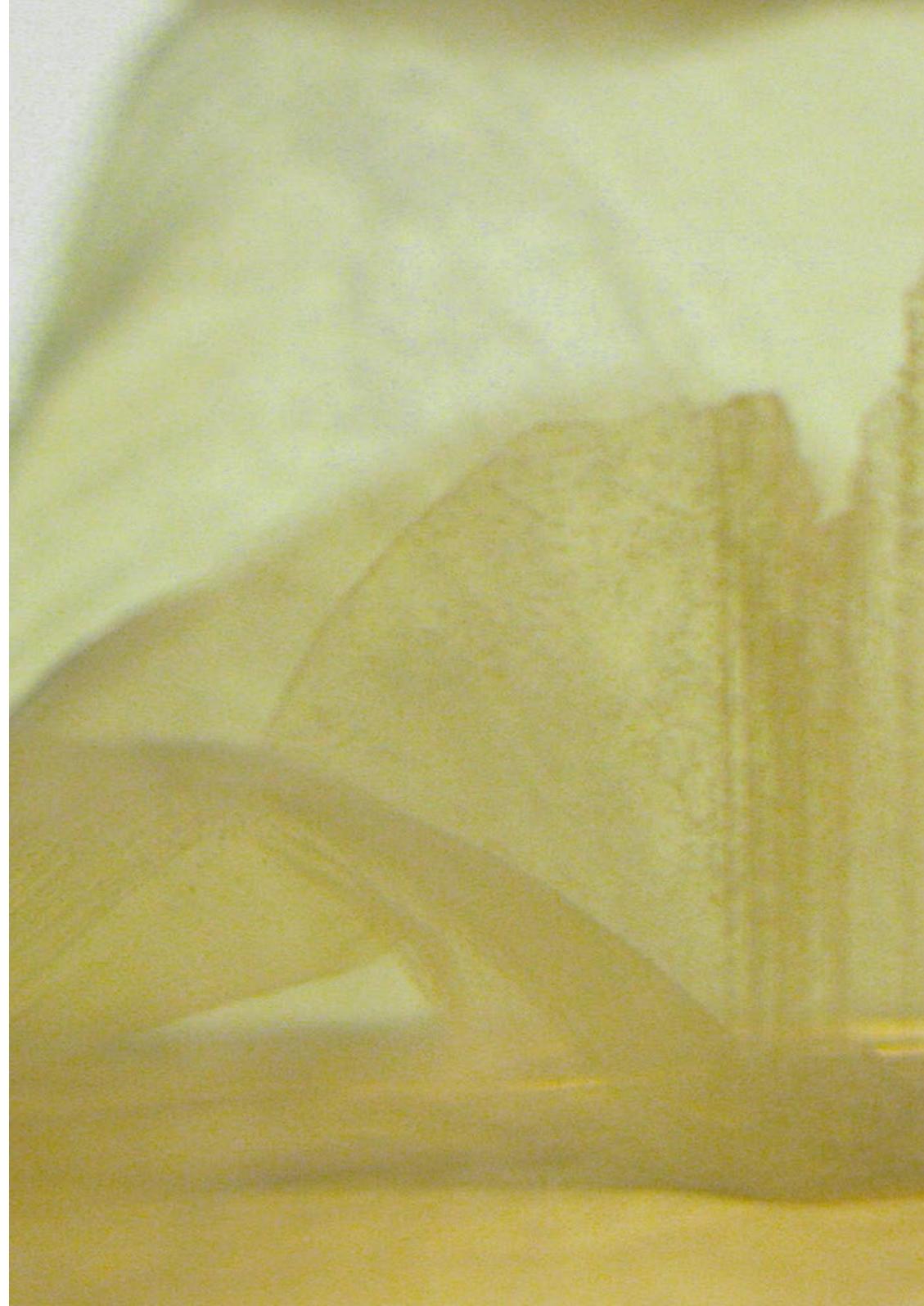
¹ Mario PRAZ, *The Romantic Agony*, Oxford University Press, 1978.
Original title : *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica* (1930).

² Anima vagula blandula, Hospes comesque corporis, Qua nunc abibis in loca, Pallidula, rigida, nudula, Nec, ut soles, dabis iocos.	'Little soul, you charming little wanderer, my body's guest and partner, Where are you off to now? Somewhere without color, savage and bare; Never again to share a joke.'
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³ Separating Hell from the terrestrial world, the Styx is with the Phlegethon, the Archeron, the Cocytus, the Lethe, one of the infernal rivers. It is on the small boat of Charon that one crosses it, although some traditions associate Charon with the Archeron and Phlegyas with the Phlegethon. Yasmina Benabderrahmane also directed a film called *Styx*.
STYX, 2012, FILM SUPER 8, MUET, TRANSFÉRÉ SUR DVD DIFFUSÉ EN BOUCLE, ÉDITION DE TROIS, 1'10".

For Vincent Lemaire, the matrix is a landscape of horizon. Whether it is $(4,54 \times 10^9) + 1$ which consists of a set of inventoried umbilical toys, the series *Distance* or *Fossil Radiation*, we are immersed in the raw material, in its asperities and its imperfect, tortured and injured shapes. At the same time, the titles evoke a distant dimension, a very distant state of life. This sedimentation of the landscapes which appear to us by strata reveals the archaism of the universe. Cryptic, it is ultimately perceptible only through images, doubles of itself.

The work *Virtuality* draws the gaze into the abyss, a sort of impossible journey in the way of Jules Verne. This installation has at the same time a whole Wagnerian dramaturgy, affixed to the central passageway, digging the space of the exhibition to a lower level, like a fantasized cave where the body is lost, in a descending movement, disappearing in search of an immaculate treasure. For Vincent Lemaire, every landscape is both original and premonitory. It announces the next extraterrestrial expeditions on other planets or other galaxies. And, at the same time, it is anchored in the first moments of the world. It is not paradise or golden age. But the transcription of equilibrium and the brutal, that is to say, of a cold, uninhabited dialectic. We come from this matrix and we travel in this matrix. What seems strange and distant to us is indeed an unknown manifestation of our own origin. The landscape dominates. It is, for Vincent Lemaire, the transfigured body.



For Yasmina Benabderrahmane, the peccaminous flesh, capable of engendering, stands for the symbol of evanescent life and the unbridled fury of fertility. The body is also a matrix ad infinitum. It can generate other bodies. But this flesh is ash. It is burnt by a toxic and incandescent atmosphere. The series of *survivals* replays this dramaturgy : *the fall, the prayer, the skirt, the appendix*. It is an exploration of the vulnerability of the body and its representation as a vanity. Appearance of the body of the image and distortion of the body to the image in decadent poses, close to the canons of the dark romanticism of Mario Praz, with its apparitions, its disturbing and emphatic sensuality.

Are the stones as alive as our dead? Without cries, they burn then freeze and finally rest in broad and tranquil valleys. They appear to us as new, almost decorative and peaceful. The Japanese offer them gardens of tranquility, without fountains. They are arranged in harmony, small and pictorial. They evoke in miniature landscapes the superb nature. Quietness is not the essential here. The stone is a talisman, a ritual object, a (human) being. It is inhabited by this energy greater than ourselves as the *mineral collection* of Yasmina Benabderrahmane where each stone, singular and characterized by its own form, surrenders to contemplation. The 'matrix' of this series is none other than the *Melencolia* of Albrecht Dürer dating from 1514. A significant anecdote, this engraving on copper representing allegorical objects (including the angel, water, the wheel, the hourglass, the sundial, the bell, the scale, and the famous polyhedron) is regularly associated with a series (*Meisterstiche*) to which belongs *The Knight, Death and the Devil* (1513) which title resonates surprisingly with the work of Mario Praz. The milky light that bathes this series of Yasmina Benabderrahmane makes these occult forms vibrate.

Pellicular Flesh is a metaphorical transposition of the myth of Frankenstein. The dead tissues, under the impulse of science (here chemistry) are set in motion. They are animated by energy, a vital flux. The pellicular flesh dances and stretches.

As in Loïe Fuller's serpentine dance, the repetition of the movement acts as an entanglement. Captives, we are on the very surface of matter, in a microscopic landscape (presence of a horizontal line) but presented as a phenomenal decoration. This promise coming from hell is not without evoking the myth of Faust; a promise to defeat the real. Photographic matter appears as a possible asset of Mephisto, capable of printing with his black lantern the fantasies and the unavowed appetites.

Double-Mummy and *Nymph #1* are also part of this long history of cursed bodies and damned souls. These bodies could be the creations of a Frankenstein, fruits of the mutilation of bodies.



Yasmina Benabderrahmane, The Fall

For Vincent Lemaire, the human age is superimposed on the age of the universe in a serial protocol where a collection of umbilical soft toys exposes itself, carefully preserved in boxes marked with an equation $(4,54 \times 10^9) \cdot 1$. The chosen calendar is terrestrial. It extracts itself from the human dimension in order to align itself with a more diffuse and archaic time, that of Space and the infinite. This work is the counterpart to another work by Vincent Lemaire *Cosmégonie*, which formally and conceptually associates the human age with the age of the universe. This portmanteau word symbolizes human vanity and the macabre irony of the claim of egos to position themselves in relation to the universe. The human knowledge of space remains limited and yet the literature of anticipation and the abundance of technological tools give the permanent illusion of a possible redemption. Imagine a Mephisto disguised as a computer or a rocket offering Faust images of the planet Mars, a kind of fantastic journey, proposed by a tour operator of a new kind. Would this same Mephisto still lose us in the multiplication of pixels thanks to a disappearance of the body? When fragments of anatomy compose the photographic installation *Virtuality*, the resolution of the image allows us to confuse the body and the space in such a way that we are no longer able, in this devouring pantheism, to recognize the human, immersed in its environment.

The exhibition *Dark Romanticism* is a decadentist manifesto: a laboratory of experimental research where the myths are reborn in the matter of bodies.

Théo-Mario Coppola

Traduction : Maxime Lachaud

Faust and Frankenstein.
They are the two black stars
of our eternal mythologies.