

CURATORS' SERIES #5

BOUVARD  
AND PÉCUCHE'S  
COMPENDIOUS QUEST  
FOR BEAUTY



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### BOUVARD AND PÉCUCHET COMPENDIOUS QUEST FOR BEAUTY

05.04.12 – 09.06.12

Simone Menegoi and Chris Sharp are the fifth guest curators invited by DRAF to be part of the Curators' Series.

The title for the exhibition is taken from Gustave Flaubert's last, unfinished novel where two Parisian copyists Bouvard and Pécuchet meet, become dear friends, and stoke each other's curiosity to know the world and its rational, post-Enlightenment ways better. They become autodidacts of a dozen different orders, teaching themselves everything from agriculture to medicine. However, despite their best intellectual intentions, any application of the often contradictory knowledge they recklessly accumulate almost always results in confusion, failure or disaster. Yet success is not entirely elusive. One moment a given principle works, whereas in the next it doesn't. This in turn leads them to continually cry in vain, *Où est la règle?* (Where is the rule?), as if the clarity and understanding of the supposedly knowable world promised by the Age of Reason was but a farce. In a time when any one individual can access and amass vast and even arcane stores of information, Flaubert's hapless antiheroes seem to be both prescient harbingers and symbols of our era.

Their headlong approach can also be said to implicitly describe a good portion of what takes place in contemporary art today, in which we are faced with an obscure and at times questionable expertise on a bewildering multiplicity of subjects. Seeking to render this implicit tendency explicit and examine its implications, Bouvard and Pécuchet's *Compendious Quest for Beauty* sees the hasty methodology of the perplexed copyists applied to the field of curating. By effectively becoming Bouvard and Pécuchet, the curators liberally allow themselves to engage in the foredoomed hubris of trying to define one of the most protean and subjective qualities of all: beauty. They do so by using a format that is a byproduct of the Enlightenment itself: the exhibition.

The selection of works in the exhibition was deliberately limited to DRAF's vast and variegated collection of more than 1800 works. The curators outlined

ten categories of beauty with the intention of disobeying and scrambling the traditional history of aesthetics. Indeed, the art works presented in the show are arranged within unwieldy and contradictory criteria, which range from egregious misreading to mutual contradiction and from poetic fancy to traditionally acceptable interpretation. Categories of beauty include: Classic; Expressive; Female Nude; Memento Mori; Realism; Landscape; Moral; Outsider art; Abstraction; and the Sublime.

Artists: Caroline Achaintre, Phyllida Barlow, Yto Barrada, Morton Bartlett, Bram Bogart, Boyle Family, Sir Frank Brangwyn, Peter Buggenhout, Gerard Byrne, Carter, Susan Collis, George Condo, John Currin, Jules Dalou, Thomas Demand, VALIE EXPORT, Graham Hudson, Tamara De Lempicka, Roy Lichtenstein, Mark Manders, Susan Meiselas, Marlo Pascual, Grayson Perry, Seth Pick, Man Ray, Santiago Sierra, David Shrigley, Jamie Shovlin, Andreas Slominski, Oscar Tuazon, Gavin Turk, and Douglas White.





## **Intro**

Bouvard: Before anything, dear Pécuchet, we need to ask ourselves what beauty is. For Schelling it is the infinite that manifests itself in the finite; for Reid, an occult quality; for Jouffroi something that cannot be analyzed; for De Maistre that which appeals to virtue; for André that which appeals to reason. According to Loos beauty must rid itself of all ornament, while Venturi believes that it must indulge in detail. Greenberg perceived beauty in the perfect correspondence between the work and its medium, but the post modernists rejected this idea. What are we supposed to make of all this?

## **Classic VS Expression**

Pécuchet: My dear Bouvard, let's not get confused. Beauty must be sought within a rule, or a group of rules; and although it might be difficult, we'll find a way to define it. We need to search for a canon, which can be found in ancient Greece. Their canon offers perfect examples...

Bouvard: But you surprise me my dear friend. Everybody knows that rules are not sufficient. Something else is needed: genius. And genius comes from sentiment, manifesting in expression. It deploys the passions of the soul, even the most tempestuous, and thus manages to touch the heart.

## **Female beauty**

Pécuchet: You will nevertheless admit that some kind of rule is wanted. Maybe the mistake is to search for it in the abstract. We should seek concrete examples in what seems to us naturally beautiful— from which point we can work toward fundamental principles. For instance, the beauty of the female body has always inspired artists. Why? I believe it is because it incarnates that which rhetoricians call 'unity in variety.'

Bouvard: Nevertheless, a pair of crossed eyes are more varied than two normal eyes, but the effect is normally inferior.

Pécuchet: Indeed. To say nothing of the fact that the celebration of the female body often degenerates into indecency. Today, as far as I can tell, there are no more limits. Behold this contorted pose, that lascivious regard! This indecent

exhibitionism nauseates me, inspires dark, unwholesome thoughts, ultimately bringing to mind the transience and vanity of all pleasure.

## **Memento Mori**

Bouvard: That sentiment also has a place in art, as far as I know. Is there not a genre known as the 'memento mori,' which reminds us of our own mortality? This genre depicts those things which are most ephemeral and on the brink of disappearing, or finally already gone. Vanitas vanitatum! The works that belong to this genre are often known as beautiful. But I feel like this accounts for but one aspect or form of beauty.

## **Landscape**

It feels like there's so much more, like the landscape, for example. A green field, the blue sky, a mountain chain that sparkles in the horizon. Here are subjects that everyone likes.


Pécuchet: Not everyone, if you'll let me correct you, given that there are those who depict tempestuous seas, grey skies and dark mountains, which they find enchanting. And then, how many people actually contemplate nature today? On a map, maybe, in photos! And for those who live in cities, the panoramas they see are totally different. Should art then ignore scenes from urban life, take refuge in a phoney Arcadia?

## **Realism**

Bouvard: Indeed, you have a point there. I had forgotten about realism. But of course, art should definitely deal with the world that directly surrounds us! Even the offices where we worked as copyists could potentially provide material for a talented artist. The most banal things are liable to reveal new facets about the world. Modern life conceals within itself so much richness...

Pécuchet: Yes, but the punctilious application of truth harms beauty. On the other hand, a preoccupation with beauty necessarily diminishes the relevance of truth. Nevertheless, with an ideal, there is no truth; in this way a reality of ideal models is more consistent than a simple portrait. Art only concerns itself with verisimilitude, but verisimilitude depends on the observer, thus is it relative and ephemeral.





Bouvard: Well, we seem to have worked ourselves into a corner.

### **Moral beauty**

Pécuchet: Okay, let's start over. There are various kinds of beauty: scientific beauty, geometrical beauty, and moral beauty. It cannot be denied that the death of Socrates is beautiful. The noble ideals, which elevate the spirit, are beautiful. The revolt of the oppressed, equality among men, and justice are all beautiful.

Bouvard: And yet there it is difficult to arrive at a consensus about which oppressed people should revolt, nor exactly whose side justice is on. This being the case, how can one base the principle of beauty on such unstable things? How is it possible to exalt in ideals which are not shared?

### **Abstraction**

Pécuchet: You're right. Beauty must be beyond every such contingency. Art should concentrate exclusively on its own means and ends.

Bouvard: You mean to say that it must be an end in itself?

Pécuchet: More than that: it must be abstract, liberate itself from every obligation to represent anything. The entire history of art of the past few centuries is the story of this liberation, and abstract art is its complement, its visual incarnation. One must reduce, purify.

### **Outsider beauty**

Bouvard: Indeed, but this purity seems to me boring. Where is the life in all of this? The passion? All this seems to me so depressing that I would prefer scribbles of children, or objects made by prisoners or lunatics from whatever they happen to find. At least these objects express what those who authored them might feel.

Pécuchet: Again this question of expression. If it is merely a question of this, you can find many artists that imitate children and lunatics, and who compete amongst themselves in the composition of scribbles that are even more informal, and sculpture with even more shabby materials. But where is the beauty in all of this? I don't even want to see it. Let us return to more elevated thoughts,

such as the sublime.

## **Sublime**

Bouvard: Great idea, but how do you define it?

Pécuchet: There are things that are in and of themselves sublime: the thunderous noise of torrential rain, the tenebrous depths of the ocean, a tree uprooted by a storm, pure, blinding light. The attitude of a man is beautiful in triumph, but sublime in struggle.

Bouvard: I see, okay, so beauty is beautiful, but the sublime is really beautiful! And yet how does distinguish one from the other?

Pécuchet: It's a question of sensibility.

Bouvard: And where does this sensibility come from?

Pécuchet: From taste!

Bouvard: And what is taste?

Pécuchet: It is.... a particular capacity for discernment, a rapid ability judge.... the superiority in the selection of certain....

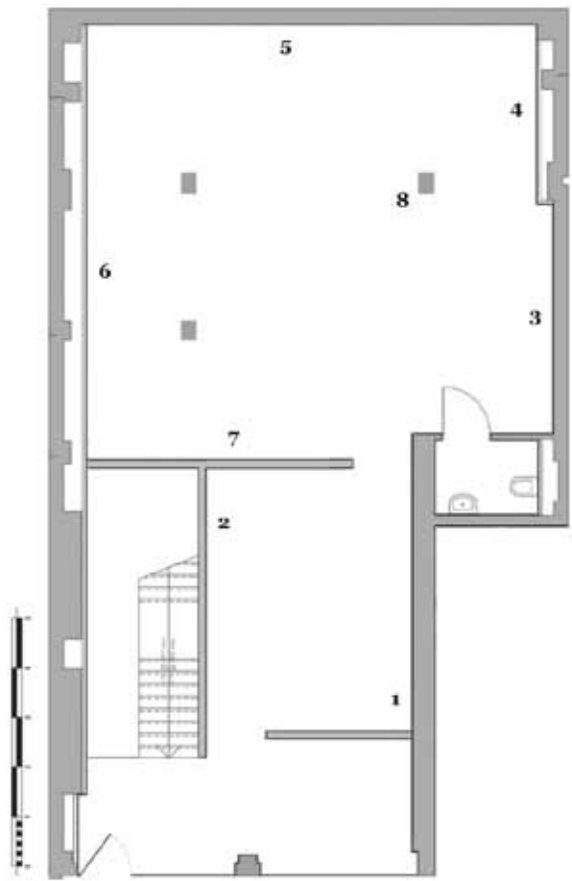
Bouvard: Ultimately, taste is taste, and yet, it is impossible to know how to have it.

Pécuchet: Indeed, there are norms, rules that must be observed, but these vary; and no matter how perfect a work of art might be, it will never be flawless.

Bouvard: But where is the rule, then? Where is the rule you spoke of, Pécuchet?

Pécuchet: I don't know Bouvard...







## **Ground Floor:**

### **Classic Beauty vs. Beauty as Expression**

1. Mark Manders, *Figure with Books and Fake Dictionaries*, 2009
2. Grayson Perry, *Attracted to Suffering*, 2005

### **Moral Beauty**

3. Grayson Perry, *This Pot Will Reduce Crime by 29%*, 2007
4. Jules Dalou, *La Boulonnaise*, 1870s
5. Sir Frank Brangwyn, *Industrial Frieze*, c. 1910
6. Santiago Sierra, *Door Plate*, 2006

### **Beauty of Memento Mori**

7. Gerard Byrne, *In The News*, 2007
8. Shrigley, *I'm Dead*, 2007

### **The Beauty of Realism**

9. Thomas Demand, *Zeichensaal (Drafting Room)*, 1996
10. Gavin Turk, *Waste*, 2006
11. Susan Collis, *Waltzer*, 2007

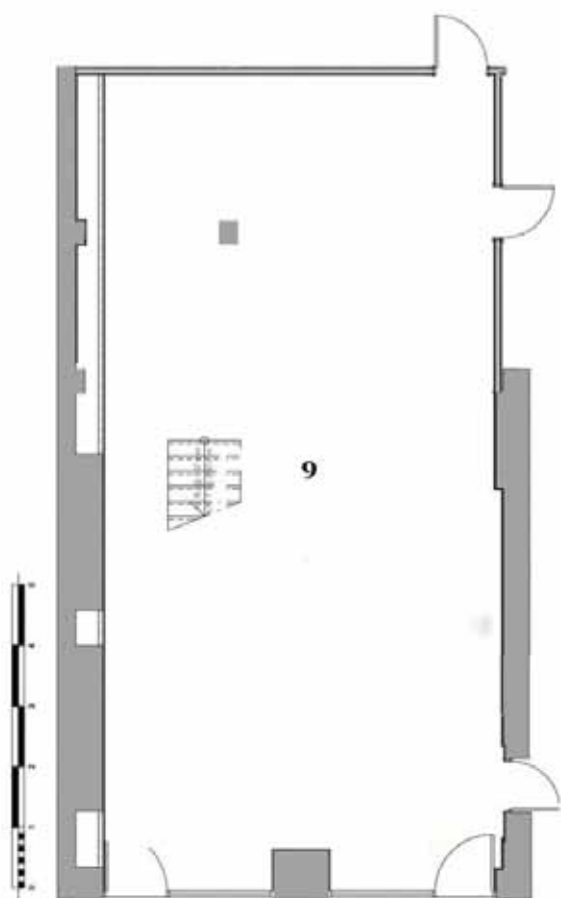
### **The Landscape as Canon of Beauty**

12. Peter Buggenhout, *The Blind Leading The Blind #4\_4*, 2004
13. Boyle Family, *Study of a Coloured Tile Path with Red, Black and White Tiles*, 1988
14. Yto Barrada, *Wallpaper– Tanger*, 2001

### **Female Nude/Figure as Canon of Beauty**

15. John Currin, *Napoli*, 2008
16. Sarah Lucas, *Grace*, 2006
17. VALIE EXPORT, *Body Sign Action 2*, 1970
18. Morton Bartlett, *Untitled (Standing Girl)*, c. 1950-60
19. Susan Meiselas, *The Spectator*, 1975
20. Man Ray, *Ady*, 1935-39
21. Marlo Pascual, *Untitled*, 2010
22. George Condo, *Couple on Matress*, 2005
23. Burt Glinn, *Prostitute and Client Outside Hotel*, 1971
24. Tamara De Lempicka, *Sur La Plage*, c.1926





## **Lower Floor:**

### **Beauty as Abstraction**

- 25.** Roy Lichtenstein, *Bulls I-VI*, 1989
- 26.** Carter, *Untitled (Obverse with Abstract Painting)*, 2008
- 27.** Jamie Showlin, *Fontana Colour Chart*, 2006
- 28.** Seth Pick, *Half Abstract*, 2011
- 29.** Phyllida Barlow, *Individual Chair (22)*, 2006
- 30.** Bram Bogart, *Blanc tombant*, 1959

### **Irregular and Outsider Beauty**

- 31.** Oscar Tuazon, *Papercrete painting*, 2008
- 32.** Andreas Slominski, *Untitled*, 2010
- 33.** Douglas White, *Mop print 1*, 2010
- 34.** Achaintre, *Flaschengeist*, 2011

### **The Beauty of Sublime**

- 35.** Graham Hudson, *Sign Odysseus*, 2005





## About DRAF

DRAF is a space dedicated to research and critical dialogue. It is directed and curated by Vincent Honoré. The David Roberts Art Foundation Limited is a registered charity in England and Wales (No. 1119738) and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (No. 6051439) at 25 Gosfield Street, London, W1W 6HQ. It is proudly supported by the Edinburgh House Estates group of companies.

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