

Jean-Luc Moulène

Paris

by LUKE NAESSENS

FOAM, VERDIGRIS BURNISHED bronze, concrete, donkey skull, sintered powder, epoxy resin, metamorphic rock, magnets, biscuit, lapis lazuli, jesmonite, plastic, coloured wax, steel: the experience of reading the materials found in the 'retrospective' of *Jean-Luc Moulène* at the **Centre Pompidou, Paris** (to 20th February), is almost as engaging as encountering the work itself.¹ As a text it is informative, pointing to the promiscuous diversity of media, genres and styles on display. At the same time this list of materials does not quite account for the work's materiality – it tells us what the objects are made from, but does little to suggest either the complex ways in which they are constructed or their evasive, ambiguous visual character. They are strange things: slick, inscrutable and immaculate. Even when the techniques used are ancient (bronze casting, stone carving), the results have the smooth and self-contained appearance of something produced by a 3-D printer. They are all surfaces, like a Möbius strip, with no real exterior or interior to speak of. For the visitor who likes to know something of the processes by which the work of art is made, they are frustrating, even confounding.

The inability of text to account for materiality is central to Moulène's work, which is often concerned with the rift between language and object. He proposes the non-linguistic character of objects and materials as a tool with which to investigate the funda-

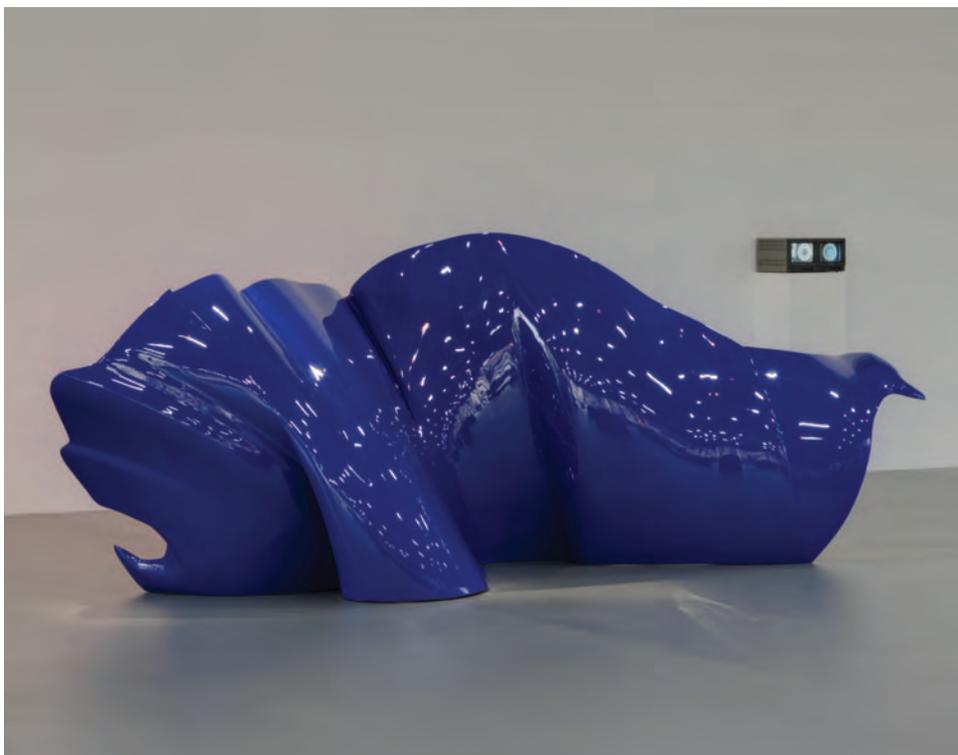


63. *La fille de l'Os* (The daughter of bone), by Jean-Luc Moulène. 2016. Foam, plastic, coloured resins, PVC straps and vinyl, 58 by 33 by 30 cm. (Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; exh. Centre Pompidou, Paris).

mentally linguistic nature of experience. The confusion with which we encounter the work, then, is no bad thing; it insists, as all

good art should, that we approach the object in a state of questioning uncertainty, forcing us onto uneven conceptual ground. Of course the risk is that the work might go too far and end up as an incomprehensible object, dazzling the viewer with an array of surface effects and technological marvels.

When an artist as slippery and thoughtful as Moulène is asked to produce a retrospective, it is not surprising that he takes an equivocal approach to the very definition of the concept. A retrospective's basic premise – artistic development is structured into a narrative using an array of representative past works – is rejected here. Moulène instead offers thirty-two new works, presented in a flat and non-descript way on low grey plinths scattered around a room, with no apparent thematic or chronological structure (Fig. 64). His entire photographic career (for which he is perhaps best known) is summarily represented by artist's books shown near the entrance. The bulk of the exhibition is a display of sculptural works, all dated 2016. They were made using a set of what the artist calls 'protocols' – experiments and strategies that have previously informed his work, now applied to new materials. A retrospective, then, not of objects but of ideas and working methods. Utilising the act of looking back as a catalyst for action, for the production of new work, this strategy attempts to resist the fossilisation of artists' work by museums. Retrospectives often



62. *Bi-Face*, by Jean-Luc Moulène. 2016. Coated and painted hard foam, 165 by 480 by 174 cm. (Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; exh. Centre Pompidou, Paris).



64. Installation view of *Jean-Luc Moulène* at the Centre Pompidou, Paris.

recast artworks as so many dead things, relegated to their place in history. Moulène, on the other hand, insists on the artist's role as active producer. However (and there is always 'however' in Moulène's propositions), this strategy also plays into the idea of the artist as a 'creative' (in the Silicon Valley sense of the word), a relentless source of zany novelty providing a veneer of imaginative freedom to capitalism's otherwise staid forms. The objects themselves play up to this ambiguity, their glossy newness and anthropomorphic vitality sitting awkwardly with the way they lie isolated on their plinths, like archaeological fragments or specimens awaiting dissection.

Moulène's objects are deeply ambivalent. It is hard to tell if they are more than the sum of their parts. This is partly because the exhibition has no real beginning or end: its circular layout keeps the visitor perpetually moving between the objects, always aware of every other work in the room. This makes it almost impossible to reach a conclusion, because the work seems always to send us on some new diversion. *Bi-Face*, one of the largest works on show, is an undulating object utilising the techniques of automobile bodywork (Fig.62). It is technically impressive, with a hard, impenetrable surface that ripples and billows in an almost baroque manner. Its technical ingenuity is also what makes it so hard to read, because there are no visible joints or cracks, no signs of making. Its size and the way it sits directly on the floor give it a minimalist literalness and ensures that it is very much in the visitor's physical space; but nonetheless it has

the sense of being something not quite real, an object of pure design. The fact that we use the term 'bodywork' for the outer shell of a car is important, because it suggests the way that contemporary techniques of production and representation work hard to conflate the material and the imagistic, the sexual and the mechanical, the bodily and the abstract. Moulène explores this blurring of one category into another throughout the exhibition, and each object acts in some way as an 'intersection' (as he describes it) between abstraction and representation, language and material, plastic and bone.

Moulène's favourite sculptural form, the knot (Fig.63), speaks to this desire to merge, to weave and to blend. It is satisfying, even thrilling, to pick at his knots, to try and pull the thread that can loosen the whole thing and open up understanding. When we think we have untied one, however, we find ourselves wrapped up in another. These objects can sometimes seem enamoured of their own complexity, but it is a testament to Moulène that he so adamantly puts his viewers through their paces, insists on testing each aesthetic and conceptual judgment. It is a rare retrospective that leaves the visitor so unsure of his footing. The work's knottiness has the last laugh.

¹ Catalogue: *Jean-Luc Moulène*. Edited by Sophie Duplaix. 240 pp. incl. 157 col. + b. & w. ills. (Editions Dilecta, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2016), €39. ISBN 978-2-37372-016-7.

Albert Besnard

Evian and Paris

by PATRICK BADE

THE EXHIBITION *Albert Besnard. Modernités Belle Epoque* feels like a homecoming in the Belle Epoque splendour of the **Petit Palais, Paris** (to 29th January),¹ even though it is confined to the pokier lower floor of the palace (the main exhibition space is currently taken up by Oscar Wilde). The publicity for the show begins with the startling fact that Besnard was the first French artist to be honoured with a state funeral, nearly three decades before that of Georges Braque. In the final room of the exhibition we are offered a glimpse of a newsreel of Besnard's obsequies accompanied, appropriately enough, by the sumptuous melody of Gounod's *Judex* played by a brass band, as well as earlier silent film footage of the great man, clearly regarded as a national treasure, playing with his dogs. There can hardly be another artist who was as widely honoured and celebrated as Besnard but whose reputation plummeted so quickly into oblivion. In recent years the Petit Palais has specialised in the rehabilitation of neglected Belle Epoque masters. The last in the series, earlier this year, devoted to Georges Desvallières, revealed a talent of considerable power and independence. The same cannot be said of this retrospective of Albert Besnard, although it is not without interest or pleasure.

Besnard's essentially conventional *œuvre* was given a spurious air of modernity by his judicious borrowings from the more adventurous artists of his era. Degas famously commented of such artists that 'They shoot us, but they rifle our pockets'. Besnard spiced up his society portraits and town-hall ceilings with DayGlo colours and purple shadows taken from late Impressionism – a chic formula rather than anything observed from life – and with elements of photographic realism and Symbolist fantasy.

Another clue to Besnard's remarkable success may be found in the prevalence of journalists and their wives and daughters among his subjects. Perhaps, like the ambitious anti-hero of Guy de Maupassant's *Bel-Ami*, he was adept at exploiting the new medium of mass-circulation newspapers for the purpose of self-promotion. Certainly he knew the value of provocation without pushing matters too far and of a well-managed *succès de scandale*, as we see from the reactions of the press to his *Portrait of Madame Roger Jourdain* (cat. no.18; Fig. 66), which are recorded in the catalogue entry on that picture.²

In 1874, the year of the First Impressionist Exhibition and the year in which John Singer Sargent entered the studio of Carolus-Duran, Besnard won the coveted Prix de Rome. Despite this brilliant success, his previous years of study under the rigorous academic artist Alexandre Cabanel had resulted in a surprisingly weak drawing technique that could be disguised only by gaudy colour and flashy