

thomas liu le lann

17

March 13 - May 29, 2021

Opening on Saturday March 13, from 10 am to 6 pm



Thomas Liu Le Lann, Last Song (Axis), 2021.
Bois, vinyle, velours, mousse et ouate, 50 x 56 x 6 cm.
Courtesy de l'artiste et Xippas. Photo : Julien Gremaud

For his first exhibition at Xippas Paris, Thomas Liu Le Lann presents a new set of sculptures and paintings using a wide spectrum of techniques. Entitled *17*, the exhibition features velvet paintings adorned with sick vinyl hearts, oversized glass lollipops, a pair of shoes, a replica of the pharmacy cabinet in his apartment, a poem intended for a lover, and a soft hero sculpture, both guardian and actor of this installation. The exhibition is accompanied by an essay by Olga Rozenblum.

Thomas Liu Le Lann is a multidisciplinary artist who creates installations in different media including sculptures in fabric, glass or wood, paintings, poetry and found objects and generates environments that reference the art history and popular culture, but also the most ordinary events of everyday life. The artist plays with hierarchies and questions themes of identities, gender, appropriation and social relations.

In 2018, the artist introduced a figure of «soft heroes» which seeks to deconstruct the dominant heroic model and its cumbersome representations. True protagonists of his work, these sculptures are endowed with human manners, they lasciviously inhabit the artist's exhibitions and are identified with people dear to him.

Thomas Liu Le Lann is a French artist born in 1994, he lives and works in Geneva. In 2018, he won the HEAD - Galerie award. Xippas gallery, by awarding this prize, offered him an opportunity to present his work in an exhibition within its spaces in Geneva. The same year, he won the New Heads - Fondation BNP Art Awards, thanks to which he was invited to present a solo exhibition at the Musée des Beaux Arts in Le Locle as well as at the BNP Foundation stand at artgenève.

Among his personal exhibitions are Best Western at LUBOV (New York, US), Show Down at the Musée des Beaux Arts in Le Locle (Le Locle, Switzerland), I'm not okay at the Galerie Vin Vin (Vienna, Austria) and 07.19 at Maladie d'Amour (Grenoble, France). He participated in group exhibitions, such as Studies on Empathy at the Fondation d'Entreprise Ricard (Paris, France), Henry Darger Summer Camp designed by Extramentale (Arles, France) and Plattform # 19 at the Center d'Art Contemporain - Yverdon les Bains (Yverdon les Bains, Switzerland).

Thomas Liu Le Lann also co-founded and co-manages Cherish, an artist run space based in Geneva, in collaboration with Ser Serras, Mohamed Almussibli and James Bantone.

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“but you boy in the baths –

you turned me inside out again
and exposed myself – to myself –
and I guess that's good again”

Keith Haring, Journals, 1996¹

There were two months of respite in autumn 2020. At least that's what I remember. The summer was not like a respite, as I recall: it was too hot, still, like in the spring, and there were too many things to sort out from the months before. And Chris Korda, like a mantra: “Temperature is out of range / Our future is climate change / The weather's getting stranger / Our cities are in danger”².

We met up in Vienna, like before. For me, there is a kind of before and after October 2020 in Vienna – I think that it must be more or less the same for the others I'm talking about, Thomas, Lili, Arttu, Laurence, Philipp, Milo (who I did not meet). We made the most of it and we exhausted ourselves, because we were still allowed to: in bars, going out at night, having sex, with all of our shared privileges in October 2020 in Vienna. Since, it has been more complicated, at least, it's more conditioned. It doesn't mean that we no longer have privileges, nor that we have completely given up hope. But sometimes we are afraid of giving up. We have to tighten our belts.

“I think about what Jeanne Moreau says to her niece in an American film where she is old and extravagant. She says No, I don't think you are stupid. I think that you have lost hope. You ought to do nothing. Absolutely nothing. And wait for hope to come back. As if she was sure that it would always come back. Maybe she's right. I tried last night. Instead of going on Minitel or going to have a drink in a bar as usual, I waited. After a few minutes, hope did return, indeed. It returned through the left leg, I felt it. A muscular calming. All the fags I know do bodybuilding. Otherwise they swim. They are nearly all HIV-positive. It's crazy how they endure. They're still going out. They're still fucking. Lots of them have things, meningitis, diarrhoea, zona, kaposi, pneumocytosis. But it's going fine”.

Guillaume Dustan, In My Room, 1996

It's true that fags give me hope. I owe them a lot for that. It's their relation to life, to sex, to family. I think it's crazy how they hold on, that they're holding on again now: it's incredible. It's been nearly two generations since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, Thomas Liu Le Lann knows it better than anyone, he has spoken to me about it, he knows what it is to inherit the virus (his father was HIV-positive), *Live Through that?!³*. He told me that the medicine cabinet⁴ in the exhibition is more about the reflection in the mirror than the treatment, but I think about the pharmaco-pornography of the work, and I see loads of pills inside, as pink as the colour he has chosen for the glass doors.

¹ Keith Haring quoted by Elisabeth Lebovici in *Ce que le sida m'a fait – Art et activisme à la fin du XXe siècle* (JRP|Ringier, 2017), and annotated by her as follows: “Which could be translated by ‘*Toi garçon des bains, tu m'as mis dans tous mes états, tu m'as révélé à moi-même, et je suppose que c'est si bon*’, highlighting the play on Diana Ross' hit, *Upside Down* (1980).”

² Chris Korda is a trans performer, techno musician and anti-natalist activist. They have been a member of the “Church of Euthanasia” since 1992, which has expressed itself through a number of actions, demonstrations, tracts, appearances on TV programmes and a mediatised, proselytising website. <https://chriskorda.com>; *Changing Climate* by Korda : <https://chriskorda.bandcamp.com/track/>

³ The expression is drawn from the title of a series of exhibitions, a book, and a record by the artist Lili Reynaud Dewar, around 2014. The music for the *Live through that?!* project was produced and edited by Stochastic Releases:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtVivGpQqNM>

⁴ *Sweet Teeth (Milo's Braces)* in the exhibition

Since Vienna, we have talked a lot with Thomas. I realized, and I find it great, that each of Thomas Liu Le Lann's exhibitions starts with a story about sex or love, an obsession. I was obsessed with him myself when I got back from Vienna. I mean, as an absence. Thomas produces this attraction (an addiction through messages, mainly), and his work goes with it. It's a bit complicated (as well): others would say he's tricking. You can also look through the way he appropriates this stigma: "When I was in Nantes, it was hell, I had a dance and performance practice and I imagined I would become a French artist who thought a lot, and then it was the guys that I met, never from that background, who had lifestyles better than mine, who I had to take out for dinner, who made me who I am, a rather unfashionable sculptor, who sells his work and lives off that: I'm very proud of it, it didn't start well, I wouldn't have lasted".

You have to go round the exhibition reading this story: Thomas and Milo met on Grindr, they went walking next to the Danube⁵. Milo is a Serbian name, like the poet and diplomat Miloš Crnjanski, Thomas said – and I learned the history between Austria and Serbia at the same time, Austria's general anti-Serbian retribution at the beginning of the First World War, during which Crnjanski was persecuted and forced to enlist in the army against Russia. Milo warns that he may not get back late to his parents' house, on the day that they met. At one point, they had to speed things up, they came, Milo got dressed, quite quickly, he got some perfume and a Chupa Chups⁶ out of his jacket, no doubt to counteract the smell of sweat and cigarettes. Thomas walked Milo to his Uber, they kissed, then he went back to the apartment, laid down, smoked a fag, and started to cry, the way that you do when you're stupidly in love. He told me: "You see?". That was the moment when he had the idea of the paintings with the slightly sick hearts, where velvet meets vinyl⁷, slid over it in quite a sensual way. He says, "That's how I worked, and that's pretty much how it always happens – what's funny is that it produces pop, seductive objects, like always, but that's also somehow due to guys and my romanticism".

When Thomas spoke to me about this exhibition, I thought of *Bijou*. Bijou is the character in the 179-page novel written by Philippe Joanny, a writer I knew because he was Guillaume Dustan's best friend⁸, and you had to go through him to work on his friend's work. That's how I met him, but since, we've become friends. *Bijou* is a text that went through hundreds of pairs of hands without ever being published: too complicated for the editors to publish THAT. The story tells of a young person whose gender is difficult to define. Who lives in a place that is also difficult to define, "one of the five towers on the hill on the edge of the city. When you're up there, you dominate the city and the other cities nearby. With their twenty-five storeys, the towers are very impressive, especially from afar: they seem to emerge from the earth like the five fingers of a hand"⁹. The character lives there with his father, whom he conscientiously looks after following his mother's death, because he is an alcoholic, and becomes sick, and dies at the end (it is Bijou who kills him). And when he is not looking after his father, at night, Bijou goes off cruising in the little wood.

Bijou reminds me of Chantal Akerman's character Jeanne Dielman. A hardworking sex worker and housewife. He is a child as well. Bijou is all of that, like all those men and women who suffer, and form an alliance against the patriarchy, who reappropriate their sexuality to overthrow domination. Bijou's hope lies in the practice of cruising, it is there that Bijou will succeed in freeing himself from his

⁵ *Danube* (acrylic on canvas, vinyl) in the exhibition

⁶ *Training Part 1* in the exhibition

⁷ *Last Song (Axis)*, *Last Song (Ode to Boy)*, *Last Song (Shooting in the Evening)* in the exhibition

⁸ The writer and editor Guillaume Dustan (1965-2005) also made films, which I have been working on with Julien Laugier and Pascaline Morincôme since 2017.

⁹ Extract from *Bijou*, by Philippe Joanny, an unpublished novel. Philippe Joanny (born in 1968) is a writer. He published his first book, *Le Dindon*, in 1999, in the LGBTQ collection *Le Rayon* (Balland), created by Dustan. In 2008, he founded the *Monstre* review with Tim Madesclaire, Gauthier Boche and Gilles Beaujard. In 2019, he published *Comment tout a commencé* (Grasset), a fictionalised autobiography in the third person. The book attracted the attention of critics on its release and was awarded the *Roman gay* prize in 2019.

family's grasp and leaving this non-space. Throughout the novel, he learns about his desire, his gestures, the limits of his submission, and how to speak about them: "Suddenly I noticed another man hidden behind a tree. (...) He's stroking himself. Up close, it's even longer and thicker. There's a camera hanging from his neck, is he a photographer? He looks at me with shining eyes, his mouth makes a strange grimace when he smiles, no doubt because of the big scar across his cheek. He walks forward, holding it in both hands. He's limping. If I'm not mistaken, it's his left leg, it's shorter than the right. I start to drool".

Which brings me back to the *I7* exhibition, to Milo, the *soft heroine*¹⁰ of the exhibition, amongst the *soft heroes* of Thomas Liu Le Lann, those soft sculptures of anthropomorphic sewn bodies that spill onto the floor or over pedestals; a group of clones throughout successive exhibitions, which Thomas produces since school, the HEAD in Geneva (where he studied in 2017 and 2018) – the one with claws, the one with the smiley t-shirt, the headless, well-dressed one... They are what made me think of Bijou. There are always somewhere in the exhibition, liquefied and weary, like after making love. Their lethargy makes them vulnerable. They have an affected and de-sublimated masculinity that contaminates with the hope of deconstruction, through various desacralisations, the sum of the installations. You have to think of the narrative and ultimately performative dimension of the *I7* exhibition which, like these kinds of scenographic gestures in a gallery, creates a parody of the order of things, of the patriarchy, and of the power relationships and representations carried by the pieces in the space, through the arrangement of the paintings of cheesy hearts, the almost readymade mirrors (medicine cabinets or reflections from inside a shoe), and the love poem addressed to Milo lettered on the wall¹¹.

Fragile and pretentious (in its production economy, especially), what Thomas produces takes me back to the beginning of this text: "...you turned me inside out again and exposed myself – to myself – and I guess that's good again". Without cynicism, he knows that he is exposing himself completely, that he is taking risks and taking responsibility for them. When I try to ask him about his position in the art world, he reminds me that he does not believe in the permanence of an artist's work "at all", and especially not his own, that if it all goes wrong he could do something else, open a bar with his mother or just disappear for ten years like Alberto Tadiello; and the Chris Korda Mantra returns: "Rich people are dumb / I hope they succumb / In expensive cars / Or condos on Mars / Selfies on the moon / They can't die too soon / I hope they're afraid / Of the mess they've made"¹².

Thomas Liu Le Lann met Milo in Vienna in October 2020. He fell in love with him, as he often falls in love. The story of the exhibition begins with this love story.

Olga Rozenblum is a curator and producer. She co-founded the independent space Treize in Paris, and production organisations in the field of contemporary art. She has taught at ENSAPC Paris-Cergy and at the Parsons School, and currently teaches at HEAD-Geneva. Her recent researches focus on how invisible or barely visible artists and artworks can find new means of production and distribution methods. For example, the broadcasting of Guillaume Dustan's films, and a programme based around the collection of the Centre de documentation international Grisélidis Réal in Geneva. For her research "Bottom-up. Récupérer nos histoires", she won the CNAP's 2020 Support for research in theory and art criticism.

¹⁰ *Milo (soft heroine sur une caisse rose)* in the exhibition

¹¹ I am referring to the text, "III. Liquides précieux" in *Ce que le sida m'a fait* (op.cit.), about Gilbert & George, and would like to thank Elisabeth Lebovici

¹² <https://chriskorda.bandcamp.com/track/exit-game>