Rosenmeyer, Aoife, “Valentin Carron in the Studio,” *Art in America*, March 2013, pp. 132-139

VALENTIN CARRON

Valentin Carron in his studio in Martigny, Switzerland.

Interview by Aoife Rosenmeyer
Studio photography by Annik Wetter

IN THE STUDIO

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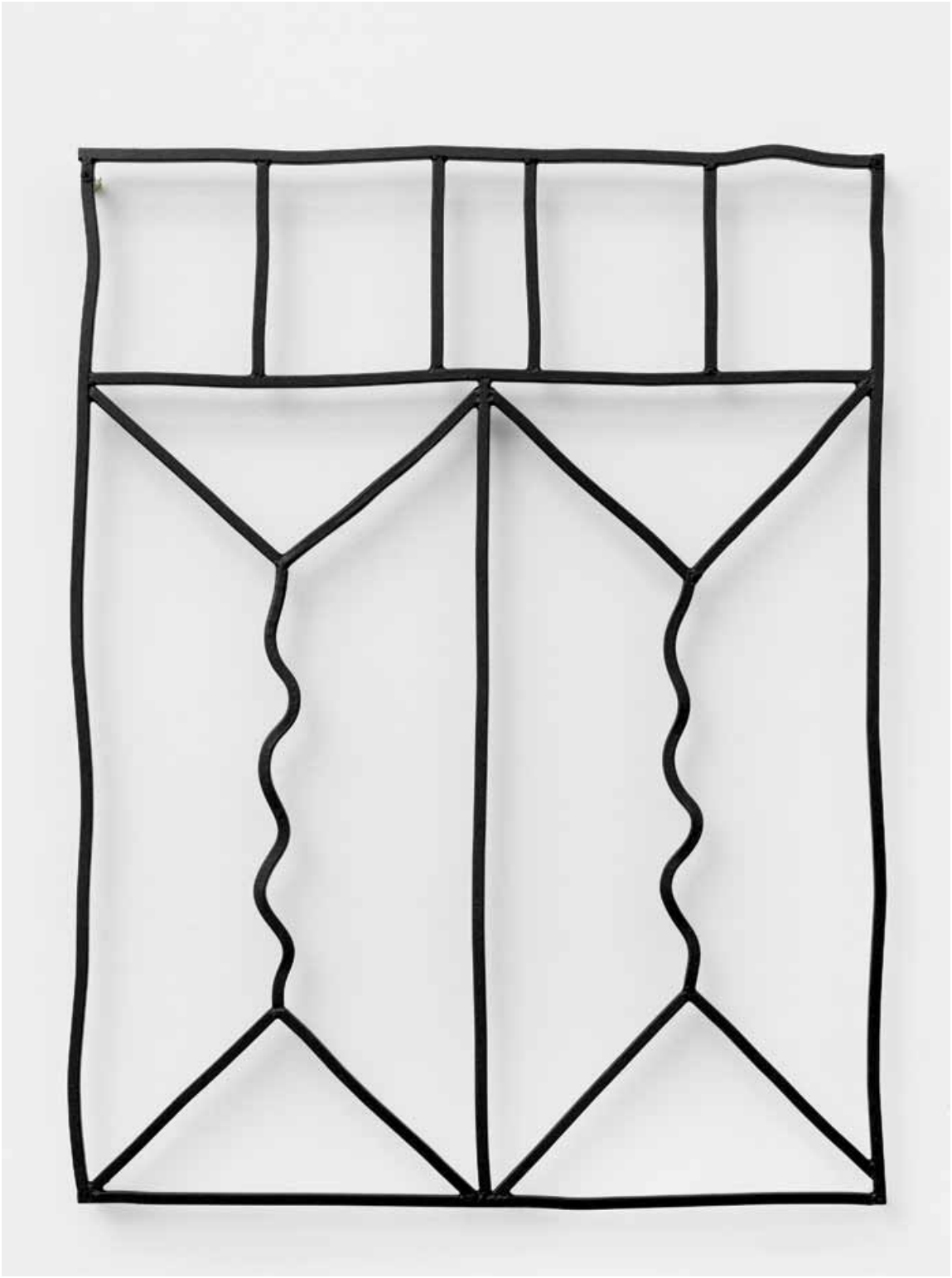

Membrane, 2009, iron, patina-effect varnish and gold-plated iron spacer, 31½ by 23⅜ by 1½ inches. Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich. Photo Stefan Altenburger.

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View of Carron's 40-foot-tall painted wood and steel cross at Art Basel, 2009. Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber. Photo Stefan Altenburger.

AT ART BASEL IN 2009, a black wooden cross nearly 40 feet tall stood outside the main exhibition venue confronting thousands of visitors streaming into the fair who might have found the towering sculpture somewhat puzzling. Was it a public monument that had long been there? Perhaps it was a newly commissioned artwork meant to symbolize the transnational cultural faith that the fair represents or, alternately, to serve as a double-sided critique of Christianity and commerce. Seen from a different angle, it might have appeared more minimalist than religious in nature. As it turned out, the provocative work was a new sculpture by Valentin Carron and was based on the crosses one frequently encounters in the Swiss countryside. The piece exemplified the artist's practice, which centers on sculptural reproduction and often shows how context can affect the perception or meaning of an object.

Carron was born in 1977 and grew up in Fully, a village in the Swiss canton of Valais. He studied at the École cantonale des beaux-arts in Sion, and then at the École cantonale d'art de Lausanne (where he is now a visiting tutor). Since 2000, he has had regular solo exhibitions, primarily in Europe. Carron first became known for works that, like the cross sculpture, reproduce vernacular items from rural Switzerland, including iron shop signs, rustic architectural details and a roughly carved wooden bear. The artist renders these items full-size or larger, in industrial materials like polystyrene, fiberglass and acrylic resin, and then brings them into the exhibition spaces of so-called high culture. His aim, however, is not to legitimize objects that are generally overlooked. Rather, his reproductions often direct a level of criticism toward their source material. The traditional Swiss esthetic—evoking images of women clad in elaborate dirndls, gentlemen playing long Alpenhorns and wood-beamed farmhouses—is not as historically entrenched as some might think. In the 19th century, internecine conflict shook the then-young confederation of Switzerland prompting a political push for a common identity. Thus, Switzerland developed the pastoral idyll as its self-image, and, as Carron has put it, "people started making pseudo-authentic objects and formulating rules for the proper design of chalets." When Carron re-creates hyper-"Swiss" objects in synthetic materials and displays them in the proverbial white cube, he intends to highlight their essential artifice.

Carron has also engaged with fine-art source material. In 2006, for instance, he made his infamous work *L'Homme*, which renders one of Giacometti's walking men with his arm raised in an "up yours" gesture. This was complemented by two other 2006 works aping the master's style: *La Main* (The Hand), consisting of an extended skeletal arm "flipping the bird," and *Les Chiens* (The Dogs), which brings together two emaciated canines.

In recent years, Carron's range of subjects and materials has gradually broadened, though reproduction remains key

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Brass and woodwind instruments in Carron's studio.

to his practice. He currently shows with major galleries in the United States and Europe, including 303 Gallery in New York, David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles and Galerie Eva Presenhuber in Zurich. This summer he will represent Switzerland at the Venice Biennale. His presentation there will draw from several ongoing series: bronze casts of crushed musical instruments that he began in 2012; reconditioned mopeds, also started last year; and mural pieces, begun in 2011, based on windows made in *dalle de verre*, a process by which thick pieces of colored glass are embedded in resin or concrete as an inexpensive alternative to stained-glass. In addition, a wrought-iron snake by the artist will wend its way through the pavilion. We met last December at his studio in Martigny, a chilly valley town in the Swiss Alps close to his hometown, to talk about his works past and present.

AOIFE ROSENMEYER It doesn't seem like you use this studio all that much. It's more of a storehouse than a working space.

VALENTIN CARRON I keep this studio for smaller work. I also share it with my partner, [the artist] Latifa Echakhch. Larger works are fabricated at the Kunstbetrieb foundry in Basel. And I often work in Montreux with [the fabricator and artist] Florent Merminod—we make sculptures from polystyrene bases, which we cover with fiberglass and then with an acrylic resin. The outdoor works are a whole different story. The advantage of the polystyrene process is that I can remove the nobility of the material of my subjects, which often were made in steel, bronze or stone. After this, they can be seen as relating to Pop art.

ROSENMEYER How far along are you in your plans for the Venice presentation?

CARRON Everything has been decided. All that remains is to actually realize the works. I like to think of exhibitions well in advance. I'm too anxious to do everything last-minute, though I like teasing technicians. It's a very handsome pavilion, designed by Bruno Giacometti in the early 1950s. I'm continuing my usual work there, as if the exhibition were in a neutral location.

ROSENMEYER But the Venice Biennale and the Giardini, where the Swiss Pavilion is located, are of course imbued with history.

CARRON I don't want to make a work that has a message particular to its environment. I'm trying to escape from the weight of representing Switzerland. Of course, you can't escape from history. The physical space ultimately keeps you from doing this.

ROSENMEYER What are the *dalle de verre* pieces you'll be showing?

CARRON These are abstract murals based on windows at the Académie royale des beaux-arts de Bruxelles. From inside the building the windows are beautiful, but from the

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outside they look somber and dull. I am reproducing them to scale in polystyrene and resin, hanging them against the wall and making them opaque. These are what the public usually sees from the outside; they exclude the viewer. You need access to the building to really see them.

ROSENMEYER One has to see them with light coming through them. Your pieces will also be like an inversion of painting, in terms of how light lands on a canvas and activates it.

CARRON Yes. These cannot be activated like that. I'm interested, too, in what *dalle de verre* was used for historically. The technique was invented in the 1930s and was popular in postwar times. It was an economy of means, but completely unlike that found in painting. I'm interested in the discourse between this kind of decorative element and expressionistic or School of Paris painting. I like working with nostalgia, looking at and conserving these elements and making them visible.

ROSENMEYER Can you talk a bit about the moped series?

CARRON I've started restoring Piaggio Ciao mopeds, which are the mopeds of choice for adolescents and drunkards who have had their licenses revoked—a vehicle of marginality.

ROSENMEYER And the name suggests a certain frivolity.

CARRON Yes, "Hi! Ciao!"And also "Ciao!" [*waves goodbye*] to Italian manufacturing. I think of the history of these mopeds, which were produced from 1966 to 2006, as paralleling that of Italian industry. I restore them as if they were going to a museum tomorrow. I try to have a commitment to a historically significant object, to pay very close attention to something outdated and in danger of being forgotten, to remain as faithful as possible to the original. This raises the kind of questions faced by a museum conservator: How far should I go in the restoration? How far should I go to keep what is old? What should be changed? With the moped works, there is also, of course, the poetic idea of lost youth.

ROSENMEYER This idea is perhaps also found with the musical instruments, which are crushed, if in an incomplete manner.

CARRON I stomp on them to crush them, and then I mold them and have them cast in bronze. I am attacking the instruments, as if I were still capable of a punk gesture, but also turning all that into an image that is placed on a wall, a completely classical impulse. I want the viewer to experience ambiguity and to wonder, "What is this thing before me?" Yet it's art that could have been made, for example, by Nouveau Réalistes such as Arman and César. I like playing at being a belated member of the group. There is a charm in being a bit dated.

ROSENMEYER Is the notion of the value attached to bronze important?

CARRON Such materials do give a certain reassurance, but it also seemed logical to me to use them. I thought of doing the instruments in copper, their original material, but I would have found that redundant. With bronze, a rupture is created. I had first encountered crushed instruments as decor in a bistro. I wanted to take this decoration and bring it into the history of art—to add something extra, to bring

Universal, Alfredo, domino, 2012, cast bronze, 29⅜ by 20½ by 4½ inches. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, and Galerie Eva Presenhuber. Photo Brian Forrest.

nobility to the intervention. It's about how I communicate to the viewer all the sadness I was faced with in this café. For me, that is done by elevating the feeling in bronze. Despite the banality of the gesture and the object, it had to be aggrandized. Often in my work I exaggerate a thought that is a bit shameful—that is, for instance, reactionary, macho or traditionalist. Instead of trying to avoid it, I exacerbate it.

ROSENMEYER The physical process of working with bronze must be a significant change for you.

CARRON Absolutely. I keep the older techniques—though I try to progress, to discover new properties of them—but I like discovering new materials. I don't believe that a material is intrinsically interesting. My interest comes from the historical viewpoint. I feel as if I'm going to draw on all the materials of 20th-century movements, to consider the rules the artists worked by. If an artist who is meaningful to me has used a particular material, then I feel I must also use it. Let's say I'm observing the sociology of the material. I've not yet made anything in neon, but it's an experiment I will have to do. Could something come out of it that would appeal to me and to an audience as well?

ROSENMEYER You have referred to famous artists like Giacometti in your work. But over the past five years or so, you have also reproduced public sculpture commissions by lesser-known artists for sites in Martigny, including pieces by Albert Rouiller and Ödon Koch. As with your earlier reproductions, the originals still exist, but, being fairly generic abstract works, they blend into the landscape to the point of invisibility.

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Ciao n°4 (nero), 2012, restored Piaggio Ciao moped, 51⅛ by 63 by 28⅜ inches. Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber. Photo Stefan Altenburger.

CARRON With Giacometti, I needed to do those works for myself, because *L'Homme qui marche* epitomizes existentialist sculpture. But now I'm more interested in forgotten artists, particularly those from the '60s and '70s. These works start with an image and end with an image. Again, the material does not interest me much. My materials are the artists themselves. It's a negation of creativity in a way, because I don't create, I copy.

ROSENMEYER And yet it could be seen as a generous gesture, paying homage to forgotten figures.

CARRON It plays with this generosity, maybe because I give the impression that I'm bringing something new. But in fact the piece already exists and has been largely forgotten. So it's a fresh look. At the same time, I'm not even that interested in the original work, really. But to make a copy obliges me to be interested. And at that point there's a spirit of witnessing this history as it passes. To borrow a phrase I heard on [the radio station] France Culture, I "look in the past as if it were an unknown land." This allows me to transform the exhibition spaces, to create a certain atmosphere. It's useful to take the viewer into these environments, which are effectively foreign. This is a form of modernism in the sense that it demonstrates a desire to show something new. With history you have the impression that you're on stable ground, but at the same time you can always debate it.

ROSENMEYER It seems like you had less respect for your subjects in the past.

CARRON Isn't that what maturing is? There was also a kind of provocation in my earlier work, and the Giacomettis were the last of that. I think art can be a lot bloodier and more pointed than what is provided by mere pastiche, which my Giacomettis remained. Giacometti is already popular, and I was giving him the finger, which was a rather populist, football-fan-type gesture. Now I prefer to go in less aggressively.

ROSENMEYER It also seems that being in Martigny is less important to you than it used to be.

CARRON Yes. I'm getting a bit sick of local references. Though I still like living here in the valley. It feels like being in the suburbs, being an outsider. I prefer feeling the mountains like an oppressive physical presence around me. Here I can find an atmosphere that I can pass on. There is a social landscape similar to that in books by Thomas Bernhard or Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz. It's difficult to communicate this in fixed things like sculptures. Somehow a more literary breeze blows here. I could also think of Céline.

ROSENMEYER Or the villages that Friedrich Dürrenmatt describes.

CARRON Those kinds of stories fascinate me. A painting I love is Courbet's *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet* [1854]. I have the impression that there was an aspect of revenge in this work, with the artist walking with his easel on his back, being greeted by his patron and the patron's servant. There's the question of what use the artist has, his position in society. I see the beginnings of modern art there. ○

Opposite, Untitled, 2011, polystyrene, fiberglass, acrylic resin, acrylic paint and varnish, 30⅛ by 22½ by 1⅝ inches. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York, and Galerie Eva Presenhuber.