

Manon Bellet captures “disappearance, change and alteration” in an ephemeral installation.

Interview with Marjorie Rawle, New Orleans Museum of Art curatorial intern. June 2019

Your work spans a range of mediums, such as photography, installation, sculpture, and video. Can you speak a bit about why that is, and how you go about choosing your materials and processes for each project?

It is most important for me to animate the material rather than manipulate it, and to transform it rather than produce it. I like to reveal what already exists in the chosen material and to allow it to experience a new life. Most of the time, the materials I use are found, reused, obsolete, or unsophisticated, chosen for their vulnerability and their capacity for transformation. This vulnerability gives the work a measure of impermanence. Change and motion, no matter how small, becomes a fundamental condition of creation—it is what makes the work exist. The medium changes according to each project and its context, chosen instinctively to reveal each material and work differently. I explore different techniques to have a different experience every time.

Has your practice evolved or changed at all since relocating to New Orleans? What are some of the concepts or issues your work responds to when contextualized within the city?

My work has always tried to portray the phenomena of disappearance, change, and alteration, as well as our own roles and responsibilities in relation to these processes, which indirectly links to the environment here. My work since relocating has not changed drastically, but I have adapted in some ways to the environment in which I live. Environmental issues are global problems, of course, but they are much more present in my everyday life here than they were when I lived in Germany, France, or Switzerland. For me, the city’s landscape is filled with character, and the current and historical social fabric is rich in complexity. I am interested particularly in the potential for environmental, geographic, and social rehabilitation. Drastic changes and movements create a certain instability that, for me, is a trigger for creativity. In such a volatile landscape you need, more than anything, a personal fantasy to create parallel worlds. The act of creation then becomes an act of resistance.

***Brève braises* has been installed several times in various institutions. Does anything about the work change depending on its location or context? Anything that might change in the context of this group show?**

Yes, definitely! This work resonates in different ways with each space and exhibition, and through interaction with the works around it. *Brève braises* offers an open dialogue to each new audience given that it is continuously moving and changing and adapting to every new place where it is presented. In the context of *Bodies of Knowledge*, my work will take on different echoes and resonances alongside the work of artists like Wafaa Bilal who speak about staggering cultural losses and the potential for rebirth. The work is very much alive and can be interpreted in new ways according to the country, city, and institution in which it is shown.

Can you elaborate on the significance of charred paper in the work? What drew you to paper in particular and to choose musicians as the means for activating the burned paper, over other methods?

I chose paper for its symbolic value. It points most strongly to writing and to musical scores here, but it is a material that carries multiple associations. In *Brève Braises*, the majority of the charred paper deteriorates, but the tissue remains in its original form even after it has been burnt. It is light and so is consumed rapidly. I see this not as an act of destruction but rather transformation. The destruction is never complete. The burning papers will fall down at some point, and the wall will be repainted. In their disintegration, my burnt paper works are symbols of failure, but a failure that, once again, is positive and gives birth to something new. The work is at once ephemeral and very physical. The French poet and philosopher Paul Valéry said, “To see is to forget the name of what one is seeing.”

A work like *Brève Braises* is in constant flux and makes the passage of time itself a crucial actor in the work. Can you expand on what this installation communicates about history, memory, and our modes of recording them, which are questions that frame this group show more broadly?

We live in a world of continual movement—the present sometimes seems to be already a part of the past and of history. *Brève braises* does not belong to any particular time. The work is in perpetual motion, already

disappearing while giving birth to something else. We are all part of a story that is already over and that is based on the one to come, but our connection to time and history is often obliterated through the media. This work refers to this disconnect. This makes me think of Marguerite Duras' *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, when two characters speak about previous romances and life experiences while pondering the devastation of the atomic bomb:

Nothing. Just as in love this illusion exists, this illusion of never forgetting. Likewise, I had the illusion in front of Hiroshima that I would never forget, just as in love ... Like you, I tried to fight with all my strength against forgetting ... Like you I wanted to have the inconsolable memory, a memory of shadow, of stone. I fought for myself, with all my strength, every day, against the horror of not understanding at all the reason for this memory. Like you, I forgot. Why deny the obvious need for memory?

Never forgetting. That is what I'm trying to say with my work. It carries with it a force that projects possibilities for the future even in the face of loss. One can certainly move through the world intellectualizing indefinitely, but there is also a silent, passive absorption taking place that provides a direct link to one's primary instincts and sensations. Even within the established intellectual parameters of art making and viewing, much happens within the unconscious, and for me, this is central. I would like to set a stage for my work to be read with that in mind.