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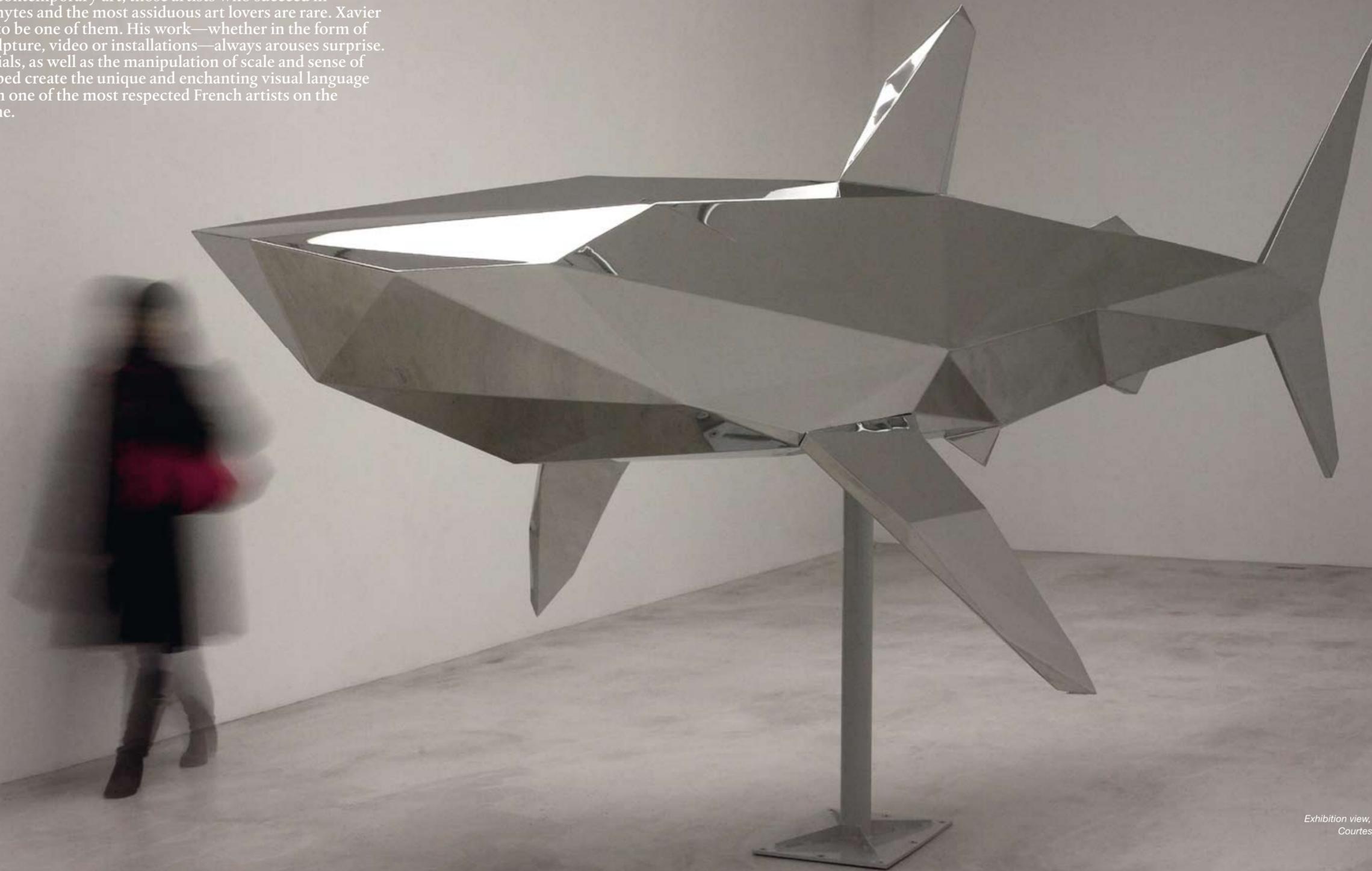
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BRUCE WEBER AND MORE...



# A very contemporary Artist

by Justin Morin

In the domain of contemporary art, those artists who succeed in reconciling neophytes and the most assiduous art lovers are rare. Xavier Veilhan happens to be one of them. His work—whether in the form of photography, sculpture, video or installations—always arouses surprise. Colors and materials, as well as the manipulation of scale and sense of rhythm, have helped create the unique and enchanting visual language that has made him one of the most respected French artists on the international scene.



*Shark, 2008.  
Exhibition view, Furtivo, Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris.  
Courtesy Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris/Miami.  
Photo credit: André Morin.  
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We meet him in his studio in the 20th arrondissement of Paris. Veilhan, who is in the middle of a discussion with one of his assistants, speaks in a soft, poised voice, the calm of his studio scarcely disturbed by the music playing in the background. The magnificent space was designed by his architect friends Elisabeth Lemerrier and Philippe Bona. The curious will find pictures of it on the artist's website. "We've been here for a year," says Veilhan. "I had the idea that we would let the architects do what they wanted. They wished to work around the objects that I own, like this door by

Charlotte Perriand. As it turned out, this studio is a well adapted tool. The kitchen, for example, is a very important place for me. At times it becomes a small meeting room where we end up working." Is this coming from someone with a fondness for cooking or a taste for delectable dishes? "I like cooking as much as eating," he says. "Even if the idea seems simplistic, being an artist also means that you like discovering new things. The rhythm of work is completely integrated into my personal life. I live in the neighborhood as well. Every morning, after bringing my youngest kid to school, I come and

spend the day here, that is, when I'm not out for appointments or visiting exhibitions. Meals, the fact of eating with my team, represent a pleasant and relaxed moment of the day. I have two full-time people working for me but there are always more of us. The number of people revolving around the studio at any given time is close to six or seven. There are a lot of people with whom I work on specific projects. I like functioning this way because it allows me to stay relatively free. I try to keep it, if not small, at least light and mobile."

After spending part of his childhood in Normandy and the suburbs of Lyon, Veilhan moved to Paris to study art. "The environment of my adolescence was rather dull and I was anxious to find myself in a big city," he says. "When I arrived, I was caught up in a very broad creative spiral: independent radio stations, nightclubs, parties, fashion, architecture... I found a global interest in all of these forms."

"Things started to take shape when I left for Berlin for two years with the help of a scholarship, which allowed me to spend time outside of the school system. It's something that's been important to me," continues Veilhan. "When I returned to France, I started to show my work. At the time it was painting combined with performance, and it was shown in a very specific way, by imitating what happened during an auction. After that, Pierre Huyghe joined us in the small studio that I shared with Pierre Bismuth. My official CV began at this point, in particular with a group exhibition in Italy in the company of the two Pierres. It was also during this period that I met people from the French scene, like Dominique Gonzales-Foerster or Philippe Parreno. I quickly understood that the very form of the exhibition crystallized everything that interested me—it was both a visual event and a physical experience within the same space."

Among the most representative works of Veilhan's prolific output are his impressive sculptures. These statues could be defined as portraits of diverse personalities (often people who are close to him) whose portrayals have been reduced to the essential. A form, a color, a material and a first name: Yi,

Pierre, Sophie, Rico, Laurent—these figures form a mythology in which animals have an important place as well. The bestiary of lion, bear, shark, rhinoceros or dog also serves to circumvent established codes. "It's difficult for me to sum up the body of concepts which support my work, but what interests me in visual arts is the potential for synthesis," explains Veilhan. "I'm attempting to create a tool, which would allow us to better understand the real. It's a subject which remains an important source of questioning for me. I'm trying to establish connections between different networks of signs, those which are sent out and those which are received."

As such, it's not uncommon to see his statues invading public spaces to rub shoulders with the real, giving them an even more remarkable strangeness. In Lyon for example, *Man on the Phone* imposes by its gigantic size and its multiple angles rendered in bright orange, while a blue lion roars in the streets of Bordeaux. If a strong element of mystery emanates from these surprising forms, Veilhan doesn't necessarily look to maintain it. These sculptures are created in accordance with the latest technology by using 3D scanners and prototyping, techniques more often used in furniture and object design than in contemporary art. "There's this idea of modernity and of dynamism which also nurtures my work," explains the artist who famously had the emblematic Ford Model T rebuilt by hand.

Since most of his pieces call for specific technical know-how, Veilhan surrounds himself with collaborators. We ask him where he stands on collaboration, a practice that's been valued and developed by many French artists of his generation. "In fact, I've collaborated very little, as far as having several hands in the same project goes," he says. "It's something of a paradox, because I was sharing my studio with Pierre Huyghe while he was in the process of developing Ann Lee—a purely virtual entity put at the disposal of artists using very different forms of expression for the length of a project. I was very excited at the idea of being part of this dynamic, but at the same time, it never really



happened because I was always too busy with my own work. My collaborations focus on a project, which remains unique. I might add that in my exhibitions there's often a sort of list of credits on the wall naming all the individuals and companies who participated. I have a very precise idea of what I want, but I like the contact with my collaborators because it brings new ideas, a different point of view, even if in the end I'm the only one who decides. But it's true that I'm sometimes envious of the kinds of relationships that certain artists maintain. I would really like to work with some of those whom I admire a lot and whom I've already frequented during group exhibitions, like Julian Opie, John Armleder, John Tremblay, or the Bouroullec brothers. Anyway, I realize that there's a rather disconcerting trend towards collaboration: if I co-sign a piece with someone who is less well-known than I am, that person will no longer be cited six months later."

Certain collaborations have, nevertheless, left their mark. A great music lover, Veilhan has developed several projects with Air and Sébastien Tellier. "I listen to music every day; it's something from the domain of the physical that is capable of carrying emotions in the space surrounding you. With Jean-Benoit and Nicolas from Air, we put on a show at the Pompidou Centre called *Aérolite* with the intention

of making a complete work that mixed visual arts, performance and sound. Regular concerts are often very ugly. However, so little would be needed for that to change. As, for example, removing the various colors from the lighting! The project with Air was very meditative, but I'd already done more intense work, in particular with Sébastien Tellier at the Hôtel de Ville in Paris for a concert which lasted eight hours! Fascinated as I am by music, I love being able to cross over to the other side despite not being a musician. I become a sort of orchestrator. It's very nice."

Moving in the circles that he does, it only seems legitimate for us to wonder what ties Veilhan maintains with the fashion world. "There are people who I follow closely, like Robert Normand. I'm also surrounded by friends who are fashion designers, so it's something that I follow up close or from a distance," he replies. "But the seasonal rhythm is tiring. What I find fascinating in fashion is the manner and the subtlety with which certain people are able to communicate based on what are sometimes very complex signs. Any adolescent can begin to communicate with these signs linked to clothing, while it would certainly be more difficult for him to communicate with those signs linked to the creation of an artwork. Fashion is a natural language that we speak, unconsciously or not.

From this viewpoint, I'm rather in the strain of Warhol: I'm on the lookout for things that happen around me in society. I also like to observe collectors and the entirety with which they devote themselves to their passion, however noble. For example, several years ago, there were people who were ready to wait hours in train stations in order to retrieve abandoned telephone cards. All at once, there was the emergence of a sign. It's not really interesting in and of itself, but there may be something to explore there. In most cars in France today you'll find the famous yellow fluorescent safety jackets. There again a new sign appears. Well, we're really no longer in the realm of fashion, even if Karl Lagerfeld's promotion of them was so brilliant! I also enormously appreciate fashion's "light" side.

With art, there's something definitive, a certain continuity that weighs down every proposal."

Should we be led to understand that Veilhan has no difficulty in parting with his works once they're finished? "I don't really have a fetish-like connection to my work," he says. "What interests me is the moment when the public, whoever it may be, enters the exhibition. I also like the moment when I decide what I'm going to do, when things crystallize. It's a very nice moment. But the main one is still the encounter with the visitors. It's like a piece of machinery that's activated by the presence of others. I'm an art lover and a consumer too. I sometimes do exchanges with artists. I love art; it's a form that fills my life. It's a rather mysterious thing, even if in making it, in the transmission, it becomes less so. But there's always a moment that's magical because it's elusive, where something escapes me. If I hadn't been an artist, I think that my profession would have been related to construction—building things, or making them grow. And I couldn't work alone; the possibilities of exchange that are present in my daily life are too important in my eyes."

Next September should find Xavier Veilhan exhibiting at the Château de Versailles in what promises to be a singular project: an anachronistic encounter that's sure to set off sparks. In the meantime, his work can be seen in numerous

museum collections and in the French, Swedish and American galleries which represent him.

For more information:  
www.veilhan.net  
www.myspace.com/veilhan  
www.andrehn-schiptjenko.com  
www.galerieperrotin.com  
www.geringlopez.com

(left)  
Yi, 2005.  
Exhibition view, *People as Volume*, Andréhn—Schiptjenko, Stockholm.  
Courtesy Andréhn—Schiptjenko, Stockholm.  
Photo credit: Christer Carlson.  
Copyright: Veilhan/Adagp, Paris, 2008.

(right)  
*Air, Pocket Symphony Album*.  
Artwork: Veilhan/Adagp, 2008.