

Cyprien Gaillard

Michael Gibbs

PROFILE >

USING EARTH MOVERS AND A TEAM OF VOLUNTEERS, Cyprien Gaillard recently excavated a concrete German bunker complex overlooking the beach at Schevingen near The Hague. Hidden for decades under the dunes, it was revealed as a readymade piece of sculpture before being unceremoniously covered with sand again. Another example of outmoded architecture being buried beneath new layers of urban development could be seen from the top of the hill on which the bunker stands: the demolition of 1930s housing blocks in the nearby village of Duindorp to make way for expensive apartments. Gaillard is opposed to urban renewal, preferring there to be more room for ruins and processes of natural decay. During the last few years he has carried out a series of acclaimed projects that address the ruined dreams of social housing projects. Last year, for example, he transported 15 tons of concrete salvaged from the remains of a Glaswegian housing project and cast it

into an obelisk bearing the title *Cenotaph to 12 Riverford Road, Pollokshaws, Glasgow, 2008*. A cenotaph, of course, is a sepulchral monument to someone whose body lies elsewhere – in this case the social body of modernist housing. A similar idea lay behind his use of recycled concrete and other building materials from the demolition of a tower block in Issy-les-Moulineaux in his native France to cover the original grande allée leading to the majestic Renaissance Château d'Oiron. On another occasion he brought a huge bronze duck from Beaugrenelle, a Parisian city of tower blocks bordering the Seine, and installed it on the terrace surrounding Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie, where it stands as an incongruous piece of public art.

Gaillard's projects are often audacious attempts at recuperating the past in the name of a devalued present, a contradiction that is encapsulated in his series 'Belief in the Age of Disbelief', 2005, in which he has inserted images of postwar housing blocks into 17th-century etchings of Dutch landscapes. These images of an imaginary urban setting are reminiscent of Piranesi's famous series of etchings 'Vedute di Roma/Views of Rome', executed between 1757 and 1778, depicting reconstituted views of Roman ruins, a set of which was displayed alongside Gaillard's work at his exhibition earlier this year in Stroom, The Hague. Scenic views of ruins in picturesque landscapes,

Cyprien Gaillard
Cenotaph to 12 Riverford Road, Pollokshaws, Glasgow 2008

Cyprien Gaillard
The Arena and the Wasteland 2008



Cyprien Gaillard
Les Deux Chemins au Palais
 from the series 'Belief
 in the Age of Disbelief' 2009



of course, was a popular 18th-century genre practised by such painters as Hubert Robert, who depicted the imaginary future ruins of the Louvre. Gaillard himself commissioned a 'classical' landscape painter, Ian MacPherson, to paint views of contemporary housing blocks in various leafy Swiss suburbs. These 'ruins of the future', however, are more akin to the 'artist's impressions' used to promote future housing developments in the friendliest light possible. In another series, 'The New Picturesque', 2009, Gaillard painted swathes of acrylic white paint onto prints of picturesque landscapes, obliterating all the narrative elements in the picture. Gaillard, it seems, needs to dismiss narrative so that he can concentrate on the economy of the image. There is no history in these non-places and non-times. Yet, under the erasures and the vandalism, an undertone of melancholy haunts these reflections on a modernism turned sour.

Gaillard's installations, videos and photographic works have been widely shown in Europe and beyond. Still only 28, he already has an impressive CV and is represented by a prestigious Parisian gallery. The iconoclastic way he questions both Romanticism and Modernism by revealing the entropic fate of both makes his work easily approachable. He is clearly more interested in destruction than in deconstruction. Perhaps his most spectacular video is the three-part *Desniansky Raion*, 2007, which uses aerial shots of the grey Soviet architecture of Belgrade, a brawl between two gangs of hooligans dressed in blue or red, and archival footage of the controlled demolition of a housing complex on the outskirts of Paris, where the mayor offered residents a sound and light show with fireworks as some sort of meagre compensation. Here, too, time and space are annulled in the moment of the spectacle and the delirium of the carnival. Gaillard loves the moment just before a building is blown up, when everything is held in suspense, before order descends into chaos.

There is something of the prankster in Gaillard (a trait he has in common with other young French artists, like Raphael Zarka – who also shares Gaillard's background as a skateboarder – and Matthieu Laurette). His series of five 35mm films and a DVD under the title 'Real Remnants of Fictive Wars', 2003-04, is in part a homage to romantic painting and partly a wanton act of vandalism. At carefully chosen locations – a railway tunnel, a forest, a jungle in Vietnam, a tower block – white smoke is seen billowing out

from concealed industrial fire extinguishers, evoking different associations according to the setting. The sixth in this series of projects was carried out in 2007 at the location of Robert Smithson's iconic *Spiral Jetty* on the Great Salt Lake in Utah. Gaillard refers to his own projects as *Land Art* and Smithson's ideas about entropy and found monuments are clearly relevant here. Forty years after Smithson wrote about the architectural chaos in his native New Jersey, Gaillard made *The Smithsons*, 2005, documenting the banks of New Jersey as filmed from Manhattan and focusing on the dozens of skyscrapers that have been built there, adding to the chaos, after Smithson's death. Yet Gaillard is clearly ambivalent towards *Land Art*. In his insolently titled book *Land Art's Not Dead*, 2007, he juxtaposes photographs of *Land Art* projects with images documenting acts of vandalism, the sort of thing Gaillard was doing before he decided to become an artist. With *The Arena and the Wasteland*, 2008, he returns to Smithson's idea of 'non-sites' by placing a series of tall light masts in a circle around a small rubble-strewn patch of open field in Berlin's Skulpturen-park. Lit up at night like a miniature sports stadium, it draws attention to itself as a barren 'oasis' in a desert of failed 1950s housing projects.

A more analytical side to Gaillard's work can be seen in the 'Geographical Analogies', 2006, a series of wooden boxes containing diamond grids of nine Polaroids taken in various locations in Europe and the US. Analogies are drawn between nature and urbanism, with the fragility of the presentation and framing emphasising the impermanence of both. Just as several layers have to be removed before an archaeological discovery can be revealed, so too Gaillard sometimes places his photographs under several layers of matte board, as though attempting to bury the image, a method that well befits the series of photographs of housing projects and graves in Glasgow before the projects were demolished and the graves restored. The title of the series, 'Working in a State of Emergency', 2007, would seem to neatly sum up the urgency of Gaillard's work of recuperation. His dream, he says, is to establish a park of ruins in which tower blocks would be laid to rest and allowed to decay naturally. ■

MICHAEL GIBBS is an artist and critic based in Amsterdam.