



UNDERWORLD

INTERVIEW WITH THÉO MERCIER

***Underworld* is in keeping with your previous works, which brought together different temporalities, materials, and memories, but its scale is unprecedented. It encourages a unique form of immersion...**

Théo Mercier: At the Collection Lambert, I chose at once to use the basement rooms to turn them into the first character of a fiction. I'm particularly interested in spaces that are different, like underground spaces for instance. I like to work with the underworld, like I did with a car park for *Radio Vinci Park* with François Chaignaud. Is such a space the underside of the world? Approaching architecture as if it hid a secret allowed me to create a first location-character. Right away, I liked the perspectives the place offered, the bright tiled ceiling, the very codified geography of the museum. I tried to turn this geometry into a sort of spaceship, a survivalist's bunker, or a behavioural studies office, to turn this *white cube* into a space of pure mental projection. *Underworld* is a clash of landscapes, the encounter between the architecture of a museum and a landscape of sand, one that can be peopled through the body and imagination.

How did you proceed for this new creation?

What does this place want me to write, to produce? I first answered that question, by giving form to the vision the space inspired me, an arid and symbolist landscape moved between four white walls. As the first visitor, the first spectator, I then asked myself how to welcome and choreograph the audience, even more so how to sculpt and reframe the gaze of the audience, when they aren't sitting. I thought of a dramaturgy through space, and tried to imagine how two choreographies—that of the audience and that of the show, or that of the world and that of the Underworld—could meet. I see the audience more as observers than as spectators, as they would be on a trip, visiting a foreign country.

Did you not try to create a massive sensory experience, a modern form of an invitation to travel?

In my work as a sculptor, I use objects synonymous with collapse. I'm interested in the precarious balance between objects, in stacking and in impossible relationships of power; they often invite us to imagine fictional ghost falls. The feeling of catastrophe comes from the audience. It is through their gaze that they create this impression of collapse; by imagining it, they sort of make it real. *Underworld* is a world of sand. It's a space whose topography is made up as much of sculpted matter as of raw, unformed matter, it's a landscape full of possibilities. The presence of the audience might well have an incidence on the landscape, change or damage it. I like the idea that the spectators may have an impact on the work, it brings us back to the ideas of danger and accident I'm interested in. Before, those threats were but invisible relationships. The watcher stayed far away; if there was a projection, it was a fantasy. He or she could think at any time "It could all fall down!" This time, it *can* all fall down, collapse, and sink into the ground. That this desire for proximity with things came this year isn't a surprise to me. It was high time to do away with this distance, to feel the happiness of touching, to allow us to do just that in a museum.

***Underworld* presents itself to the spectator/watcher as a guided fiction: a child comes to a small group of people and offers to guide them into a post-apocalyptic world of sand which seems to be his creation...**

It's a narrative with an underlying architecture, a dramaturgy dictated by the architecture. I decided to set up the existing lighting system of the museum, without adding any additional source. And from there, I created the time-light of *Underworld*. Like a cursor, visitors will be attracted by light, and driven away by shadows. The child is like the last child in a place that looks like an atomic shelter, a secret museum... or an observation lab! In any case, this landscape of dunes is under the surface of the world. And sand is present in many science fiction films. The child leads us to four characters one after the other, a sort of reconstituted family, who we don't know if they really exist. There's the grandmother, the mother, and the father, hanging upside-down by a foot.

Is the child the creator of this *Underworld*, of this sort of family-prosthesis? He speaks through them; his voice is broadcast through their costumes. I see this child as a sort of mediator, who would move like the spaceship in *2001* through a world located at the crossroads of times... I don't want people to forget they are watching an exhibition in a museum, but to experience a journey that questions their senses and perceptions.

To perceive things differently is at the heart of your work. With the desire to awaken our gaze to a new relationship to objects, a different reading of reality...

The question of the quality of the gaze, of the multiplicity of gazes, fascinates me. That may be why I moved from white rooms to dark rooms. I often hear people say that I'm looking for a sort of "grey magic", with the desire to create new ways of looking at things, especially opposite the temples to the gaze that are cinema and theatre. With *Underworld*, I also want to bring in other points of view, like that from a watchtower, like a safari, a diorama, or a trek through this museum-stage, in order to change the way the watcher feels in his or her own body, to turn him or her into a six-eyed monster. For the Festival d'Avignon at the Collection Lambert, *Underworld* is a response to this desire for invention. Its main point is to unsettle, to create new sensations and new meanings: I hope to be able to blur our habits, to break a few codes. And by entering an unknown biotope, I hope the spectators will come to question their own part in this fiction, what they're experiencing, what they're seeing, what they can or cannot do. *Underworld* is an addition of perturbations, of metamorphoses, of traps, all necessary to create a new world.

This concept of Art, this vision of a journey through a space that blurs our perceptions, is as much part of your plastic work as of your relationship to the audience...

I'm a firm believer in the spectator's attention—even if I do what I have to to direct it! I think artistic work is always a collaborative effort, and the last word always goes to the spectator. I trust my imagination as well as that of others'. It's a necessary condition if you want to create a living thing. *Underworld* comes in two variations: there's the "exhibition" version, that is, the arid, ghost-like landscape, and then there's the "show" version, which is the inhabited landscape. Right from the start, I pictured this project as a speculative narrative in a perpetual state of mutation: the version of the story that will be presented at the Festival d'Avignon could well be a possible version of the enigma this landscape of sand poses. But it's not any more valid than the version spectators will imagine, or than the versions that will appear later, when the project moves to other locations.

In my work as a sculptor, what I'm most interested in are the different ways in which it will be perceived. I work on contrasts a lot. I'm interested in what oppositions create. By putting two things face to face, we create a third one: it's like coming up with a magic formula. I move through those questions, that is, how things are tied by and to their opposites, by creating contradictions. Because my sculptures are constellations of objects floating through time and space, my work is close to the fantastic. I'm an artist in the time of the internet, of globalisation. It's not so much objects I'm interested in than their aura, the ramifications around objects, what they mean in our collective imagination, their reason for being, the way they are produced. What do objects say of our humanity? And for *Underworld*, the question might be: of what kind of sand is this world made up when I create a drape made of an incalculable number of tiny grains? That's the matter things are made of: an infinity of tiny, invisible tentacles all tied together.

***Underworld* also brings to mind your unique work as a scenographer along with many performers. Objects, sculptures, and bodies all exist on the same level and are invited to share the world in a way reminiscent of dance...**

I do have this link to some performers, a faithfulness to some performing artists when it comes to creation. Actress Lucie Debay comes from cinema. Young dancer Melvil Fichou, the child in *Underworld*, is also a great storyteller. Grégoire Schaller performs in apnea or upside-down, all those extreme practices of deprivation. Marie De Corte comes from dance, from the ever-surprising Belgium of the '80s and '90s. Those are the years in which RBK Warrior finds inspiration as a singer and composer, too. Her work is like time travel. Each of those performers is a world in and of him—or herself. I invite them to work inevitably with what they are, with the why of their presence, their work, and of course the truth of their bodies: is it an amusement park, a battlefield? A museum? A temple? This leads to an essential connection to dance, and not only because I'm an avid spectator! Some of my shows are even called "choreographic". Many of the objects I create contain within them a *phantom movement*. There is a phantom dance in the things I build. A ghost of movement, of production. I work on ghosts.

Interview conducted by Marc Blanchet in February 2021
and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cleach

75th
EDITION

All the Festival on festival-avignon.com

f t i l n #FDA21