

Claude Mongrain Sculptures Situations

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Number 67, Spring 2004

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9025ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Grande, J. K. (2004). Review of [Claude Mongrain: Sculptures Situations]. *Espace Sculpture*, (67), 42–43.

Claude Mongrain

JOHN K. GRANDE

SCULPTURES SITUATIONS

poetic that marks his best art. *Mise en scène* begins with fourteen children's size molded plastic chairs stacked together and wrapped in a tight cocoon of polyethylene sheet. Inside this columnar package burns a fluorescent light discernible through the wrap. Now, Jungen has done truly interesting work using plastic chairs before — *Cetology* or *Shapeshifter*, two pieces in which he brilliantly used them to construct large-scale sculptural renditions of whale skeletons, come immediately to mind. But *Mise en scène* is representationally indifferent, and insufficient as any kind of evocation —



BRIAN JUNGEN, *Mise en scène*, 2000. Plastic, polyethylene, fluorescent lights. 128.3 x 37.5 x 34.3 cm. Photo: Barr Gilmore

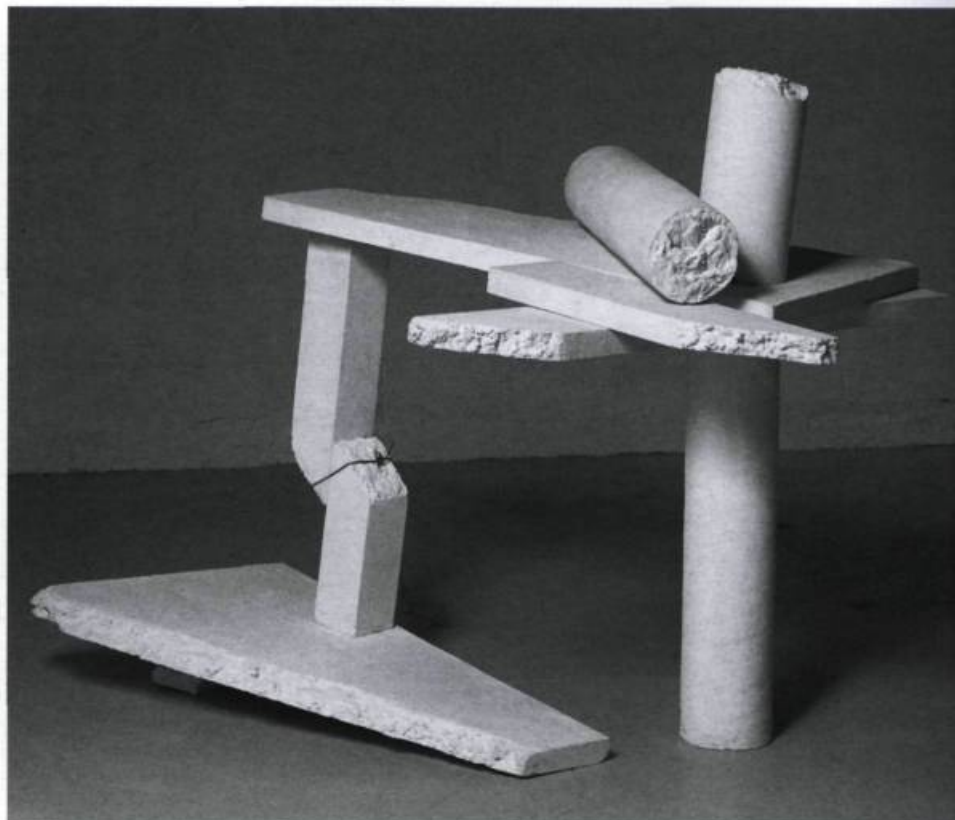
poetic or otherwise — of a stage setting or arrangement to which the work's title alludes. A stack of chairs and a lighting fixture alone do not a *mise en scène* make, no matter the contextual frame that an art gallery environment might provide. ←

Rebecca Belmore, Michael Belmore and Brian Jungen, *Light Conditions* Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario September 14 — October 12, 2003

Claude Mongrain deconstructs and reconstructs with totally contemporary materials — plastic, stone, cement, steel... He sets them in situations that make us aware their fabrication is arranged. We become very aware that these are models of an idea, projections or mappings of thoughts. The strange fusion of sculpture and assemblage is intentionally aimed at provoking associations. This explains the clash of classic-looking column configurations, the fragmenting of form and subsequent re-fabrication. We become so aware these are "set ups." These tentative, so-sculptural situations tell us something about the condition of history, and of memory, but do so in a radically reconditioned present tense.

There is this visualization of an idea in Mongrain's sculpture, and it is done in physical space with three-dimensional elements. Mongrain reifies reality in a way that reminds us of the Zurich-based Peter Fischli and of David Weiss' installations, but Mongrain remains a sculptor with a more nostalgic, surreal, and assemblage-oriented situationist tones in his art. One feels that Mongrain is acutely aware of the way image-based contemporary media and new technologies have changed the way we look at and conceive of the physical world that surrounds us, but to which we have become desensitized. Mongrain conceived of his sculpture in the following terms: "My responsibility is to create a context in which imagination and perception will be directed in a given way. Sculpture is anachronistic in a society of speed. My sculpture represents an attempt to slow down the flow of complex information... Slow is beautiful."

Construction: Vésuve (1979), a sculpture that the artist has gifted to the Musée d'art de Joliette, best manifests Mongrain's tendency to work in and through notions of representation and re-fabrication — it looks like a deconstructed construction site. We see new fragments of classic-looking architectural elements made of white concrete placed at haphazard



angles.

The work from which this show derives its title, *Circuit Lapidaire (Aller-Retour)* (2002-2003), consists of a series of what look like milestones — like physical markers traditionally placed in a landscape to measure relative distances between points of arrival and departure. These raw chunky looking stones are strewn in a semi-circle on the gallery floor. There is a stack of five, vertically arranged, and a grouping of two, and others... Looking closer, we see these blocks look like old computers when they were a little less sleek and sinuous than now. The "screen" of these blocks is rough, textured stone — not at all smooth or high tech! Intricately carved into the back of one of these "markers" is a carved diagram of a human head.

Set apart from the stone "markers," we see another element of this sculpture/assemblage that is partly made of steel structure. The structure has "arms" that radiate in a circular fashion along its vertical length to form a spiral. Set onto this "structure" are elements that "look like" sections of classical drapery. Each section is

slightly removed, and at a different angle from the previous one. The piece begins to look like an allegory or legend dealing with the whole notion of contemporaneity, making a brief reference to Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Be that as it may, seeing this wholly contemporary allusion to classic culture juxtaposed alongside the sculpted markers on the floor makes us consider the way the cultural world (and our conception of art) has changed from being a physical presence to an immaterial disembodied presence on a screen, or in other new technological formats.

Claude Mongrain continues to pursue his sense of the enigmatic with a poetic abandon that is rare these days. His sculptures are not pure allegories, more like blasted synonyms made after the deconstructionists have left the scene. *Petite sculpture publique (Météorite)* (1993) is a built vertical column or chain of Zen-like stones, brought together to become a material illusion. All these stones stand vertically. They look very fragile and miraculously do not fall. They stand, stone above stone, on a larger demi-

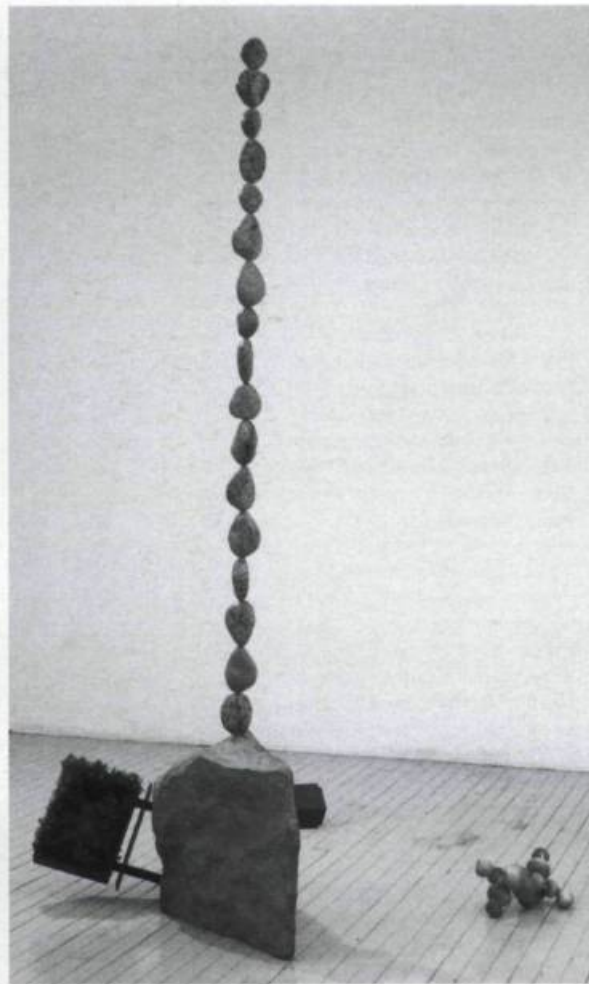
CLAUDE MONGRAIN, *Construction: Vésuve*, 1979. White concrete, metal wire. 155 x 122 x 130 cm. Collection: Musée d'art de Joliette. Photo: Paul Litherland.

→ CLAUDE MONGRAIN, *Circuit lapidaire (Aller-retour)*, 2003. Detail. Artificial stone and stainless steel. 300 x 300 x 450 cm. Collection of the artist. Photo: Paul Litherland.

CLAUDE MONGRAIN, *Blizzard*, 1992. Stone, steel, plastic. 60 x 100 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist. Photo: Helena Wilson.



CLAUDE MONGRAIN, *Petite sculpture publique (Météorite)*, 1993. Stone, steel, plastic. 226 x 147 x 81 cm. Collection of the artist. Photo: Paul Litherland.



boulder that has been cut in half. The natural exterior form of the boulder is contrasted by the straight linear cut that has been made in it. Attached to the stone at the base of the sculpture is a very architectural steel cube-like shape that is precariously placed on its side (an allusion to modernism?). There are other synthetic plastic "surreal" elements as well. The colourful synthetics add to the sense this is a salad of environmental, spiritual, and spatial disruption, an impure place that feels a lot like contemporary life, where we cling to notions of civilization and classicism amid an amazing amount of destruction of nature, environment, and cultural context. Mongrain's sublime and ludicrous plastic onion assemblage is like a molecular construction in a science lab. The vertical repetition of stones recalls Brancusi's universalist and archetypal sculpture *Endless Column*, but Mongrain's is tongue-in-cheek. Strangely incredible and imperfect, combined as it is with hybrid synthetic elements like the square plastic patch of green. This broken-phraseology of materials that Mongrain specializes in recalls the imperfection of language itself, before there was a "correct" and "incorrect" way of saying or doing things. This small public sculpture is made for a small place. It captures a feeling with a broad sense of contemporary irony. What looks real could be fake, or what looks fake could be real (or is it both?)... We begin to question the very basis of Mongrain's method of sculptural presentation. Is this reality or just an appearance thereof? It exists in reality either way. Where is a "real" context when we need it! And what is a real context when we need it! Context is probably in transit somewhere between here and there... and maybe context is on a *circuit lapidaire* not unlike Claude Mongrain's *in situ* sculptural situations! ←

Claude Mongrain: *Les circuits lapidaires*
Musée d'art de Joliette
Nov. 23, 2003–Aug. 29, 2004

