

Edouard Malingue Gallery

馬凌畫廊

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Road Central, Hong Kong  
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Fabien Mérelle

'Étreindre'

Opening

December 8 2016, 6-8 PM

Dates

December 9 – January 14 2016

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A figure suspended mid-flight; a mother and child, coiled beneath the tentative comfort of a wooden hut; two figures, man and woman, flung off the precipice of an island's rim: these are but flickers of the visual narratives woven by Fabien Mérelle (b. 1981, France). 'Étreindre', Mérelle's second solo exhibition in Hong Kong, develops on the notion of tight embrace: a close relationship one builds and harbours with oneself, others, nature, the known, and perhaps most crucially, the unknown. The exhibition presents a selection of recent drawings; each piece exquisitely spells with ink and watercolour on paper the innermost musings of Mérelle's mind, often casting himself and his close ones – wife and children – as prime protagonists of his mental murmurs. Amidst the drawings lays a sculpture, bringing into three dimensions the artist's fantastical visions. Individually yet collectively, each work in 'Étreindre' draws you into a universe, one that, whilst very much being Mérelle's own, touches upon sensitivities we each possess to the synthetic environment in which we live: its complex impact on relationships with the self, between humans and nature, and how we all tentatively navigate it with uncertainty, transformation, and even humour.

A graduate from the prestigious Beaux-Arts Academy in Paris, Mérelle spent five months on exchange at the Beaux-Arts Academy in Xi'an, China in 2005, a sojourn that would mould his future artistic practice: 'When he arrived in Xi'an, Mérelle was immediately invited to abandon the plume in favour of the Chinese brush, and has discovered an array of possibilities since.' [1] Taking inspiration from Chinese ink painting, Mérelle creates drawings that reflect his innermost imagination. The work of a master draughtsman, each piece is delicately detailed using Chinese brush techniques to a surgical degree of precision, borrowing elements from this teaching whilst translating each into the artist's own Western vernacular. Not shying away from the allowance for blank space, the visual insertions at times float and other times spread more widely across the page. A series of juxtapositions, each work melds anatomical accuracy with fantastical realism, a duality that creates a running paradox: at first glance his monochromatic drawings appear true to reality, yet, upon closer inspection, the viewer discovers a dreamlike realm, one akin yet removed from actuality. Indeed, Mérelle's characters are at the mercy of whatever he has in store for them, the state of their uncertain fates heightened by the blank space surrounding them.

Blurred lines between realism and myth, contradictory notions of protection and exposure; each are essential and repeated cornerstones of Mérelle's practice as well as 'Étreindre'. One such example is 'Elle m'envole' (2016), which captures Mérelle's daughter floating up into an empty sky with Mérelle himself just behind her, poised as though he too might drift off into the void. Logically impossible yet visually commanding, Mérelle's subjects are depicted to such a degree of intricacy that the viewer is helplessly drawn into his mystical landscape, fearing at once for their safety whilst challenging the scenario's fiction. 'Crocodile' (2016) further depicts Mérelle and his daughter in an ambiguous state of safety and danger: the two figures appear crouched together riding on the back of a crocodile; a curious image as the very creature that might call for Mérelle's protection over his daughter seems to provide them with a form of sanctuary. Through these repeated interactions and juxtapositions one comes to understand that beyond opening our imagination, Mérelle's fantastical world crosses the boundary into reality by

touching on ideas that relate to relationships one may experience, between family members, for example, and this notion of trying one's utmost to shy away from harm those closest to us.

Metamorphosis and affinity to nature are also important themes throughout Mérelle's work. 'Homme volant 1' (2016) and 'Homme volant 2' (2016), for example, each depict a man – Mérelle himself – wearing wings and a bird mask, displayed from three different angles. In 'Homme volant 1' (2016) the man's wings are clearly a human construction whereas in 'Homme volant 2' (2016) – perhaps a development from 'Homme volant 1' (2016) – the wings are coated in feathers suggesting a melding of man and animal, perhaps both mental and actual. Following upon this avian transcendence 'Flamant Rose' (2016) portrays Mérelle wingless, yet arms spread, in full flight, following a great bird. In a seeming state of suspension not subject to gravity, the drawing hints to a sense of freedom that can only be found in and by nature, and how we should seek to mimic rather than capture it. In contrast to the light mobility witnessed in this drawing and others across 'Étreindre', Mérelle additionally presents another angle of his practice, a sculpture. Placed on the ground and divided into several pieces 'Fragments d'une étreinte, père et fils' (2016) represents a fragmented embrace, arms and bodies contorted yet intertwined as if in a state of metamorphosis between shift and break.

These notions of protection, affinity and evolution in 'Étreindre' present Mérelle's nuanced and delicate investigation of the world as he knows it, sees it, and occasionally imagines it. By projecting himself and those close to him into his work, each piece bears at once a unique sense of person, whilst equally becoming a broader exploration of the self as well as relations. The principal actor of his work, Mérelle stands as an omniscient narrator, able to observe and convey the world that surrounds him, physically and mentally. Ultimately, Mérelle provides the viewer with an insight into his own reflections on humanity and its interaction with nature from multiple viewpoints, whilst remaining true to the panorama seen from solely his own position yet may be shared by others.

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Fabien Mérelle has gained international recognition and been exhibited internationally at institutions such as Lieu Unique, Nantes; Drawing Center, New York; UQ Art Museum, Brisbane; Musée des Beaux Arts de la Rochelle, La Rochelle; Centre Pompidou, Paris. He was granted a residency at the prestigious Casa Velásquez in Madrid and has been the recipient of multiple awards including the Sanofi Prize (2014) and Canson Prize (2010). A monograph on his practice was published in 2013 with essays by Kaegan Sparks, Dr. Chia-Ling Yang and Bertrand Dumas. Moreover, Mérelle's work has appeared in various prestigious publications such as Art Actual, Beaux-Arts Magazine and Le Monde. Mérelle's work is held in several private and public collections including the Centre Pompidou, Paris and Daniel and Florence Guerlain contemporary art foundation in Paris. He currently lives and works in Tours and Paris.

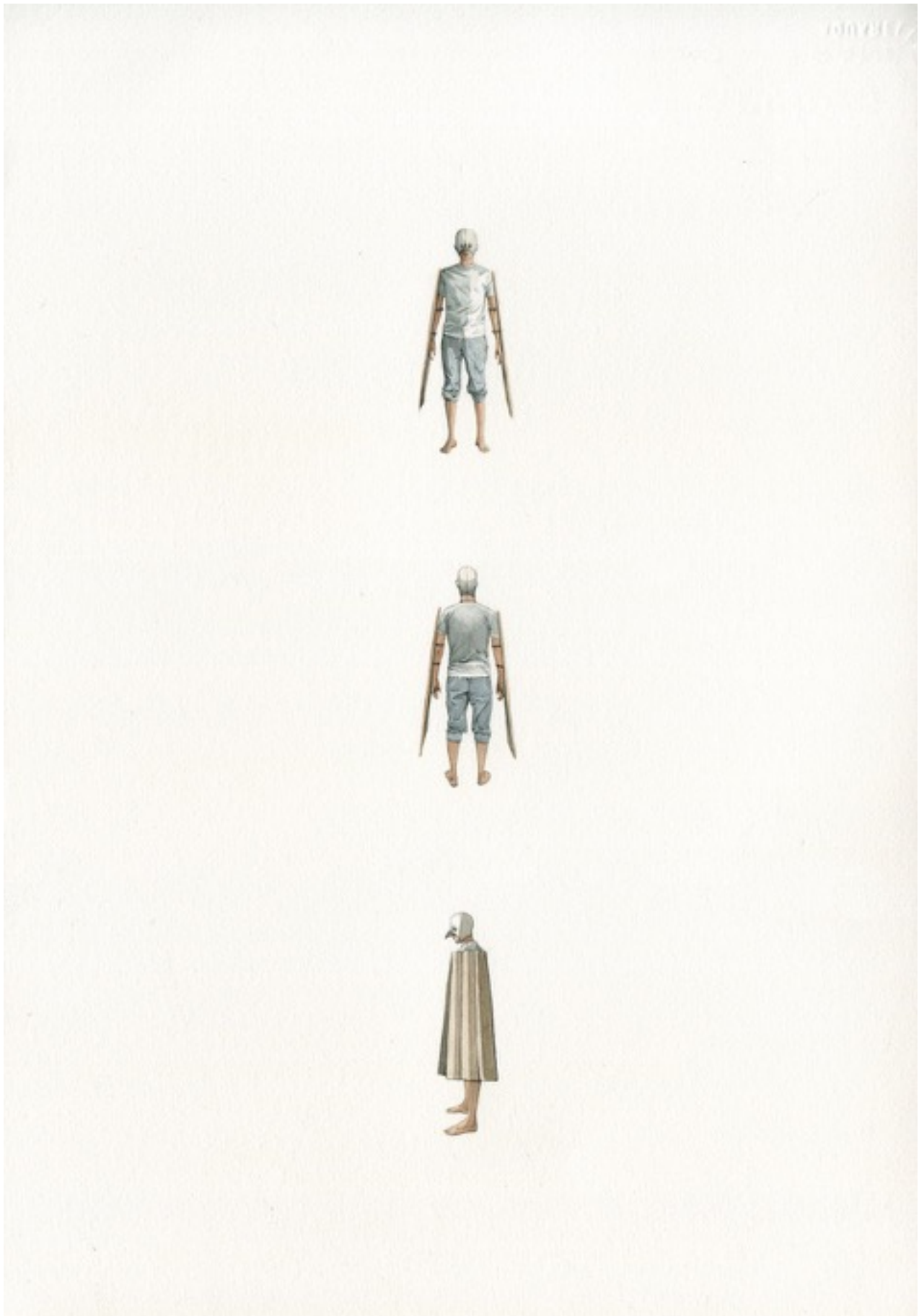
[1] Dr. Chia-Ling Yang, 'Aperture into the World – On Fabien Mérelle', 2013



'Elle m'envole', 2016  
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30 x 41.5 cm



'Crocodile', 2016  
Ink and watercolour on paper, 42 x 30 cm



'Homme Volant 1', 2016  
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30 x 28.5 cm



'Homme Volant 2', 2016  
Ink and watercolour on paper, 42.5 x 30 cm



'Flamant Rose', 2016  
Ink and watercolour on paper, 35 x 49.5 cm