

Dossier de presse : Sébastien Cliche

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Palpable Anxiety, Intangible Danger

Bernard Schütze

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The tangible benefits, material comforts and technological advances of our society have been accompanied by an intangible sense of pervasive anxiety, fear and insecurity. Daily, the mass media spew out the latest reports of the worst and most horrible accidents taking place somewhere on this planet. Within the comfort of our own homes, where we remain relatively immune from these events, we would do better to remain on the lookout for the dangers that lurk on our doorstep: slipping in the bathtub, robberies, backyard electrocution, icy sidewalks, etc. Individuals need to heed the warning signs, to take the appropriate measures to avert the small but perhaps fatal risks of daily life. Advertisers, insurance companies, the media and governments all feed off this sense of insecurity by providing some measure of control, some indication that risks can be remedied, anxiety assuaged and danger contained. In his exhibition *Accidents de la vie courante* (Accidents of Daily Life) Sébastien Cliche twists the logic of the risk and remedy mongers by deliberately aggravating our sense of insecurity through the depiction of daily situations in which the tangible sources of danger are made elusive and the intangible effects of anxiety palpable. In leaving only the bare bones of an anxiety stripped of its cause and possible resolution, Cliche dissects the strategies of a visual culture in which fear is knowingly produced and packaged in order to sell security and comfort.

The exhibition *Accidents de la vie courante* follows in the wake of Cliche's earlier installations in which he focused on airplane crashes, outdoor survival and the potential perils of the home. Whereas this past work drew on the tangible situations of fear and danger, the current exhibition is more concerned with the intangible affects triggered by exposure to danger fraught situations. The affect that is at the core of the exhibition is not so much fear, which has an identifiable cause, as it is anxiety which is a state of heightened and constant alertness to a danger that is neither identifiable nor palpable. By affect we understand the sensation that a body undergoes as it acts and is acted upon with varying degrees of force. Cliche effectively conveys the affect-sensation of anxiety through his installation which is comprised of a series of portrait clusters and several adjunct works.

Borrowing obliquely from the advertising idiom, Cliche uses photography, painting and written captions to depict three individuals who are trapped and paralyzed by anxiety. The portrait series are identified by a large colored circle that respectively identifies them as the yellow, blue and red series (the circle's color corresponds to the dominant color scheme of the photographs and paintings in each series). This particular use of color as an indicator of mood with its broad cultural range —Goethe's emotional color symbolism, mood rings, US homeland security alert chart, etc.— cleverly underscores the affective tonality associated with anxiety and fear. In the yellow series, a photograph shows a bare-chested man wearing army camouflage pants while lying on a bed fitted with army camouflage bed sheets. Here, the bed has become a battlefield where this weary warrior can take only uneasy cover. A

larger photo shows the man in three-quarter profile, gazing downwards against a yellow background—whether he is awakening or preparing for sleep one cannot say. Underneath the photo a caption reads: "Le sommeil est un état normal de l'abaissement de la conscience,"* while on the upper left another larger caption states: "Votre journée est en quelque sorte un compte en banque sur lequel vous tirez des chèques rédigés en heures et en minutes."* The military attire of the man evokes a battle ready alertness in the face of danger and the impossibility of maintaining such a high level of vigilance over a protracted period of time. Both the captions and the visual clues indicate an affective state of immobility and paralysis; the man is like a catatonic warrior on the watch for an invisible enemy that is perhaps the ultimate intangible: time itself.

What emerges here is not so much a psychological state, or interior glimpse into the mind of the portrayed, as it is a sense of the pure affect that is produced in the immediate relation to the environment. This becomes more apparent in the blue series which depicts a man apparently on the look out for some danger lurking in the surrounding green fields around his home. In one photograph he peers out his window with binoculars, in another he is shown fixing wiring in the basement. Both photographs indicate an apprehension of some danger that may be simultaneously threatening the house from within and without. A large heart painted on the wall to the left of the blue series, and an installation of a plastic roof held down by red buckets highlights the sense of palpable paranoia that permeates the scene. In this atmosphere it is not clear whether the heart is pounding because there has been a real accident; or whether it is the man's anxiety charged mind that is conjuring up the delusion of an accident. Whether or not there is a real danger matters far less than the exacerbated paranoia and frantic panic that hold this man hostage.

In the red series the indiscernibility between real or imagined danger is made even more explicit through the intermingling of painting and photography. A woman is shown in various positions of immobility: she is sitting wrapped in a blanket staring blankly to the side, or with bandaged arms resting on a table. Cartoon-style drawings are overlaid on the photographs to reveal the internal bones of a foot.—a visual effect which humorously suggests an electric jolt. The probability of electrocution is further hinted at by a painting of two red (electric?) lines intersected by a kite. Whether real or imagined the affect is clearly one of shock and ensuing paralysis. On the wall to the right of the portrait series wall a large drawing of the catatonic warrior is juxtaposed with a painting of a plastic bag containing a severed finger, ice cubes and a label with a scribbled date. This bizarre and almost comic book-like adjunct draws out the somewhat absurd character of the 'everyday accidents' of the portraits, all the while maintaining their heightened anxiety.

It is not the person that is portrayed, it is the singular sensation of being caught in an uncertain predicament and the resulting affect that is the subject of the portrait. The states of catatonic struggle, panicked paranoia, or electrified paralysis all point to reactive affects that block and impede any positive action; the real accident is perhaps this paralysis itself. Though this is certainly a serious subject, Cliche manages to avoid the trappings of a heavy-handed psychologizing by opting for a morbidly playful and ironic treatment of these 'accidents'. This ironic distance and dark humor make it possible for the artist to give a tangible form to an impalpable anxiety, all the while reminding us to what extent our imaginary is flooded with fabricated 'accidents' that maintain us in a state of consumerist vigilance. It is in this sense that one can read the exhibition's large exit caption "Anticipate

* "Sleep is a normal state of lowered consciousness. "

* "Your day is like a bank account from which you withdraw cheques written in hours and minutes."

More" as an ironic statement on how truly absurd anxiety becomes when one lays bare the visual and discursive mechanisms that produce it in a manner that is anything but accidental.

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