

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Mike Sullivan, 'Birmingham: Michel François, Pieces of evidence 30 April – 22 June 2014', *World Art Guide*, April 15, 2014

Ikon presents the first UK survey of work by Michel François (b.1956), a Belgian artist renowned through major outings elsewhere including Documenta 9 (1992), the Biennale of Sao Paulo (1994), the 48th Venice Biennale (1999), Centre Georges Pompidou (2002) and S.M.A.K., Ghent (2007). Comprising sculpture, film, paintings, prints and photography, it exemplifies the artist's conviction that the meanings of a work of art are determined through its combination with others in relation to an exhibition space. Visitors to Ikon will encounter an exhibition of numerous pieces to be read as a whole, integrated with the entire building.

The exhibition title, *Pieces of evidence*, refers to the artist's fascination with a netherworld, drawing comparisons between the ingenuity of artists and criminals, and more specifically an installation by him. This involves a projected film in which we see the hands of a magician skilfully examining everyday objects – drinks cans, cosmetic bottles and the like – before revealing hidden compartments and illegal substances within. The objects themselves are exhibited in vitrines nearby. Another work here, *Stumbling Block II (Wall)* (1989), is a large rectangular block of polystyrene secured to the wall with strips of brown tape, a sculptural translation of a convicted smuggler's failed attempt to conceal drugs by strapping them across their body. An art object is thus likened to contraband.

The idea of crossing international borders – illegally or otherwise – is conveyed by *Arpenteuse* (1994), a video of an inchworm walking across a map of the world. This funny creature signifies the artist's free spirit with respect to art as much as his geographical itinerancy, a kind of energy that spurs us on to keep moving, keep looking, and keep asking questions.

Likewise, *Golden Cage 1* (2008-09), problematizes the notion of frontiers. A large free-standing steel box, from which A4-sized sections have been uniformly cut, it is a structure on the verge of collapse. It is a cage with walls that resemble the gilded left-overs of a manufacturing process, with cut out shapes scattered within. It is symbolic of human migration across the Mexican/US border, the hollow dreams of finding a better place, the cage being desirable in a way that its contents are not.

Such philosophical scepticism embodied in François' work is matched by an infectious sense of wonder. *Deja-vu (hallu)* (2002) is a mesmerising split-screen film, in which we see the artist manipulating a piece of aluminium foil to resemble weird faces and other forms, playing on the symmetry that characterises almost all life as we know it. *Self-Portrait Against Nature* (2002) shows another side of the emotional coin. A video, it features the artist, seen from above, walking around on a hard concrete floor and smoking while empty wine bottles drop and smash around him. It suggests a kind of existentialist solitude and self-destructiveness that throw hints of joy into sharp relief. *Broken Neon Lights*, (2005) has a similar edginess as the artist stamps his feet through a path of neon tubes, laid widthways, resulting in lots more broken glass. The action is transgressive and the feeling one of anger.

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This exhibition is supported by Henry Moore Foundation, Bortolami Gallery, New York, Thomas Dane Gallery, London, and Galerie Xavier Hufkens, Brussels. It is accompanied by a new publication featuring a text by writer and critic Martin Herbert.

<http://worldartguide.org/2014/04/15/birmingham-michel-francois-pieces-of-evidence-30-april-22-june-2014/>