

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

'Revered artist makes UK debut at the Ikon' Birmingham Post, May 9, 2014

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Michel François with Retaining Wall (2014), a concrete block outside the Ikon

The first UK show of Belgian artist Michel François has opened at Birmingham's Ikon Gallery. The exhibition title, *Pieces of evidence*, refers to François' fascination with a netherworld, drawing comparisons between the ingenuity of artists and criminals.

It comprises sculpture, film and photography with the key installation involving a projected film in which we see the hands of a magician skillfully examining everyday objects before revealing hidden compartments and illegal substances within.

"I first met him 22 years ago so he is now one of my oldest friends, but this is the first time we have worked together," says gallery director Jonathan Watkins.

"The idea is to show how you can take any object and it becomes an art work. That an object has a life of its own," adds curator Stuart Tulloch.

The exhibition begins with drilled holes in a concrete block right outside the gallery's front door.

A polystyrene box taped to the wall, *Stumbling Block II (Wall)* (1989) reflects contraband; a long pile of tobacco is like a giant cigarette waiting to be smuggled.

Of more understandable delight to children will be *Surveying* (1993), a video in which an inchworm races across a map until it comes to the edge.

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Ecosystem features five to six tonnes of asphalt rolled flat like a road. Its black surface holds a melting 40cm square block of ice (with a couple more waiting in the freezer) but is punctured by cacti corkscrewing their way through.

Brass peanut shells – items which were x-rayed by customs on their way here from Africa – have been crushed into the tar to symbolise everything from gold smuggling to contamination. A video shot from above, *Self-Portrait against Nature* (2002), shows the artist walking around while wine bottles smash next to him; *Broken Neon Lights* (2003) are a series of tubes through which a path of crushed glass has been made.

Golden Cage 1 (2008-2009) is a large, free-standing steel box, from which cut out A4 sections now litter the floor. Stuart explains how it symbolises and questions the hollow dreams of Mexicans to get into Texas.

“The works shows how the border is the most desirable thing,” he says. “But look how fragile Michel has made the steel.”

Also currently showing at Ikon is a film by Birmingham-born Oscar nominee Ian Emes, now an Ikon Icon.

His masterpiece *French Windows* (1972), dating back from his self-taught final year as a student at what is now the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, is showing again in the second floor Tower Room.

It visualises *One of These Days*, from Pink Floyd’s *Meddle* album and has been chosen to represent what Ikon’s vision was across the whole of the 1970s.

* Ikon Icons: Ian Emes and Michel François, *Pieces of Evidence* are on show until June 22. Michel and Stuart Tulloch will be touring the gallery together from 4-5pm on Saturday. Places are free but need to be booked. Details: www.ikon-gallery.org or call 0121 248 0708.

<http://www.birminghampost.co.uk/whats-on/arts-culture-news/revered-artist-makes-uk-debut-708415>