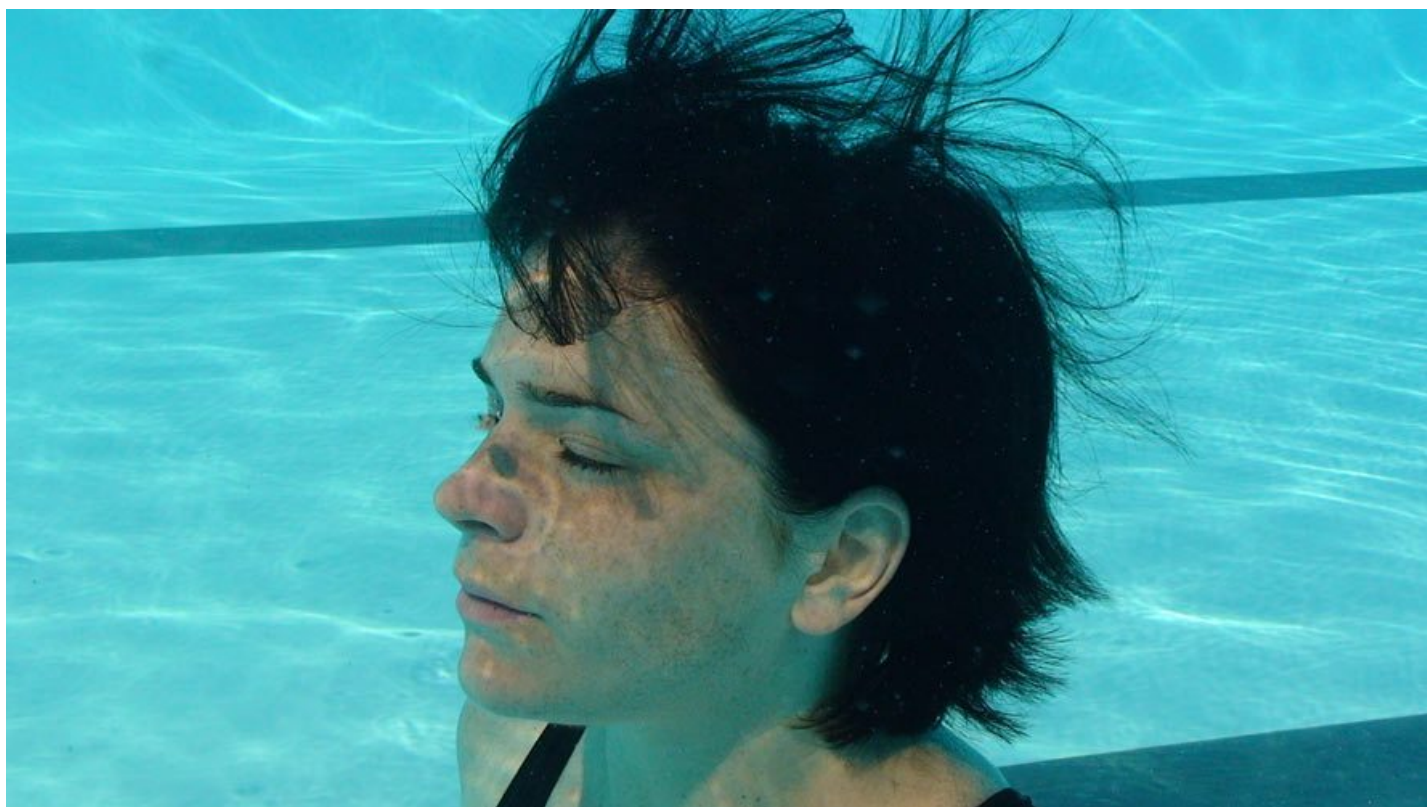


EXHIBITION REVIEW: MARCEL DINAHET, DOMOBAAL GALLERY, LONDON, 2011



Marcel Dinahet's art is quiet and ambiguous, resisting any straightforward narrative logic. At first glance, his videoworks might seem a bit presumptuous – at Domobaal's latest exhibition, we're offered three looped videos and little by way of explanation. There are no titles in the gallery, and although the exhibition literature is illuminating, it doesn't reference specific works in the show. For this reason, *Marcel Dinahet*, which is available to view until the end of January, requires patience and the desire to find meaning. Either that, or you could just give in to the extraordinary beauty of his videos, and enjoy a break from 'artspeak'.

Now in his sixties, Dinahet has been working almost exclusively in video since he

abandoned sculpture in the early 1980s. His work exploits the intimacy and transportability of the video-camera, exploring terrestrial and submarine landscapes from visual and deliberately non-political perspectives.

Broadly speaking, his videowork can be loosely distinguished by a few fundamental approaches. In many instances, Dinahet uses the techniques of documentary video to create art about the particularity of place. In these works, he carries his camera through towns, villages and coastal areas, recording at close range the faces of the people he meets. A fascination with ports and peripheral coastal areas permeates Dinahet's work, a theme that's often attributed to his birthplace Finistère in western-most Brittany (the name Finistère comes from the Latin 'finis terrae' meaning 'the end of the earth').

When it isn't traversing remote geographical areas, Dinahet's camera can often be found underwater, dragged along seabeds, submerged in rivers or skimming the surface of a high tide. Occasionally it's accompanied by a cameraman, but more often than not, his camera is literally thrown overboard. Through this technique Dinahet relinquishes control, allowing nature and chance to replace the bodily presence of the artist. The resulting videoworks combine unplanned visual footage with images of everyday interfaces, such as the borders between countries, or the limits between air, water and sky.

This technique is seen to great effect in the piece *The Sky from under the Sea – La Pointe du Grouin* (2010). Projected onto the ceiling of Domobaal's ornate Georgian stairwell, this subtle, site-specific work depicts the view from a seabed looking up to the sky. The liquescent fluidity of the water merges with a dusky sky to create a sense of dislocation and movement. Detached from any specific sense of place, *The Sky from under the Sea* has an otherworldliness that is both calming and captivating.

In Dinahet's work, borders and frontiers are evoked but never explained, creating visual art that appears strangely depoliticised. It's significant that, in most of his work, Dinahet chooses not to explore the epicentres of trade and tourism, but the world's cultural and geographical peripheries. An interest in the more marginal communities of Europe is typified by works such as *Portraits (Pontoise-Pantin)* (2010). This piece, a series of filmed close-ups, depicts a selection of randomly chosen Parisian suburbanites. One of the areas explored, Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône, is an area charged with social and cultural friction.

In its contemporary setting, the perimeter of the 13th century Abbaye de Maubuisson provides a hang-out for local gangs and idle youths – an aspect unseen in Dinahet's video. Merely disclosing the faces of anonymous individuals, *Portraits (Pontoise-Pantin)* has no discernable context or topical urgency. As Celia Cretien explains in an essay on the artist's work, Dinahet has 'no intention to comment on a social situation'.

While some may find this neutral perspective frustrating, others will appreciate references to early Structuralist films, where narrativity was abandoned in favour of exploring the inherent qualities of the moving image. In this sense, Dinahet's work reveals as much about video itself as it does about the people he portrays.

Bear in mind the proportions of a portable video camera, the claustrophobic proximity of these brief inter-human encounters – they are a test for both artist and subject. In effect, the 'face-to-face' encounter, as theorised by writers such as Emmanuel Levinas, is mediated by Dinahet's video-camera, creating a mise-en-scène full of visual and theoretical depth.

For me, Dinahet's approach is refreshing, a reprieve from overwrought curatorial concepts and press releases full of 'artspeak'. His videos are more about experience than epistemological gain; more visual than political, and the curators at Domobaal have arranged the show fittingly – with a light touch that lets the art speak for itself.

My favourite piece in the show was a diptych featuring the works *Figures (Maud LePladec)* and *Figures 2 (Maud LePladec)* (both 2008). Split between two screens (a large central screen and a smaller screen to the right hand side of a viewing bench) an unseen cameraman circles the face of a young woman submerged in a turquoise-coloured swimming pool. The floor of the pool is striped with lines of black paint, contrasting the linearity of architecture with the supple movement of water.

The fact that Dinahet casts a ballet dancer in this piece – an aspect revealed only after subsequent research – allows her poise and relaxed self-containment to create a peaceful, unexplained eloquence. The effect is one of serenity and escapism, which is very different to the intensity of *Portraits (Pontoise-Pantin)*.

Stripped of conclusion, context and conventional narrative structure, *Figures* provides a

rich visual arena from which to contemplate abstract notions such as time, space and being. More metaphorical, and even philosophical, than the other works at Domobaal, it allows for a period of peaceful suspension with no need for explanation. A welcome reprieve in the world of contemporary art.

Exhibition: *Marcel Dinahet*

Artist: Marcel Dinahet

Details: Domobaal Gallery, London, Nov 2010-Jan 2011

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