

# —Bruno Pélassy

From 16 January  
to 22 March 2015

## Foreword

**“Let’s not forget that esthetics is first an ethics of feeling.”**

Bruno Pélassy

An art center is not a museum but occasionally it has to become one. Thus, today, for the first time, Crédac has mounted a retrospective exhibition devoted to the living work of a deceased artist, Bruno Pélassy. A beautiful and fruitful collaboration played out around his oeuvre, with the unfailing support of the Pélassy family, the artist’s friends (Natacha Lesueur, Brice Dellsperger, Frieda Schumann), art critics and experts of Pélassy’s body of work (Didier Bisson, Florence Bonnefous, Marie Canet), generous collectors, and the art centers Passerelle in Brest, CRAC in Sète and MAMCO in Geneva. Between 2015 and 2016, these institutions will feature in turn exhibitions and events devoted to the artist. The main aim of the Crédac show is to return to the spotlight the work of this singular French artist, who is etched in the memory of the artistic community but has yet to be discovered by the public at large.

Pélassy produced his work in the context of the 1990s, a time of economic hardship and individual and collective traumatism having to do with the AIDS virus, but the decade was also one of artistic ferment in Nice, where he was close to the art school and art center of Villa Arson, then under the direction of Christian Bernard. His friends were the artists Jean-Luc Blanc, Brice Dellsperger, Natacha Lesueur, Marie-Ève Mestre, Jean-Luc Verna and “guardian” artists like Ben. He had his first exhi-

bition in 1993 in Nice at Art:Concept.

Pélassy did not attend art school. Rather, he studied textiles and jewelry, which eventually led to his working for the jeweler Swarovski, while from fashion design he was to borrow his processes, materials, and the techniques for shaping them. A do-it-yourself approach joined forces with painstaking work that employed glass and crystal, and the creation of jewelry went on right alongside his construction of cheap little mechanical creatures.

The works featured in the show were all created over a period of ten years. What is striking from the very outset is the diversity of the experiments, both esthetic and technical, which the young artist seemed driven to give form to like some irresistible impulse. There are the “Créatures,” silk and lace organisms moving about in aquariums; “Bestioles” (Bugs), a mechanical bestiary making a spectacle of itself; the portraits done in wax or pencil; his only video piece, *Sans titre, Sang titre, Cent titres* (1995), a kind of manifesto in which the magnetism of the video tape is gradually erased as it is reread over and over again, damaging the image until it disappears; and the “Reliquaires” (Reliquaries), which contain both pieces of jewelry and one of the artist’s jackets. The Crédac show refuses to stake out a position that strives to ape a display the artist himself might have devised, but neither does it adopt an overly museum-like approach to presenting the work.

Thanks to the present show, Bruno Pélassy’s output can be seen once again and now is part of what is most current and relevant in today’s art. The images to which it refers, the echo of the context in which it was created, and the use of metaphors

and figures which it puts out into the world form a vast field of experimentation that allows us to fully measure the interest of this body of work, an oeuvre that won’t go out of fashion, that is somber and luminous, sophisticated and cobbled together, heart-felt and lucid, and above all free.

Claire Le Restif  
Exhibition curator

## Gallery 1

At the center of the room, **Untitled (Casque de Méduse, 1997)**, a headdress fitted with multiple snake heads, boasts in particular Swarovski crystals, the so-called *Aurora borealis*. The brilliance of the semiprecious stones and the preciousness of the headdress assembly exercise a fascination over the viewer like the mythological figure of Medusa, one of the three Gorgons who, with her serpent hair, had the power to turn into stone anyone who dared to look her in the eye. Measured against the depiction of the Medusa mask (the *gorgoneion*), which long served to ward off the evil eye and figured notably on shields, this headdress could be seen as an accessory that would protect anyone wearing it.

The **series of pencil drawings** (1994–1995) on paper seem to come from medical manuals and hair-style models. These smiling portraits all seem to be of someone with a screw loose. The cheerful title, ***We Gonna Have a Good Time***, underscores the gap with these faces, mutilated, deformed or eaten away by some disease.

The display case features a collection of small sculptures that include pieces of jewelry from the collections that Pélassy designed for Swarovski in 1999—a touch of irony in metal and wax—a small

self-portrait case, and a surgery handbook serving as a jewel box for a crystal gun.

The result of a demanding and detailed artisanal process, *Temple* (1994–1995) comes with an accompanying poem, originally written on parchment, which gives us an idea of the symbolic scope of this object. It is entitled *Nocete ipsum*, from the ancient Greek expression “know thyself” translated into Latin (*Nosce te ipsum*), which was engraved on the Temple of Apollo in Delphi and constituted the philosophical precept of Socrates defined by Plato and later Hegel. The poem blends French, English and Latin terms, the names of materials, erotic memories, and prophetic words of wisdom. Taking the form of an altar, the temple is the result of a syncretism of multi-purpose materials and multiethnic cultural symbols. The artist’s world is here for all to see: his preferred materials and his love of souvenirs and memory (collected knickknacks raised to the status of fetish objects, and compositions of things that form vanitas still-lives).

Put up like hunting trophies, hanging from vine shoots covered in velvet that has been bleached colorless, Pélassy’s *serpents* (1997) are fashioned from glass beads and semiprecious stones. They are fantastic hybrid creatures (two-headed serpent, serpent with two tails...), symbols of Biblical temptation and danger. *Ouroboros*, the title of one of the snakes, means “tail-devouring serpent.” In different mythologies, this self-devouring animal is a symbol of self-destruction and renewal.

The **poster** represents the installation the artist mounted at Atelier Soardi in Nice in 1997. There he recreated part of his apartment, arranging a great variety of elements like a vast teeming setting, a veritable cabinet of curiosities on a grand scale in which, according to several eyewitness accounts, he even slept a few times during the

exhibition. On the evening of the show opening, the guests mingled inside the work of art while in their midst the artist played with a snake. In 2003, the poster was printed up for the exhibition *Néo-Laos* at MAMAC in Nice, offering a frozen image of this inhabited setting. The poster was shown once again for the tenth anniversary of Station in Nice at the Confort Moderne in Poitiers. Elements of the image can be seen throughout the present exhibition, including the Bestioles, the snakes, display-box, etc.

The piece of sculpture made of beads was given the title *Bye Bye Jeff* (1998) in reference to the pornographic film actor Jeff Stryker. His celebrity allowed him to market numerous spin-off products (including a dildo cast from his own genitalia), model for Thierry Mugler in a runway show, and pose for the artists Pierre and Gilles in 1991. This phallic sculpture with its simple forms also calls to mind Greek depictions of satyrs and rural spirits, brandishing permanent erections and hotly pursuing nymphs and mortals.

Among Pélassy’s emblematic series, “**Créatures**” (2000–2001) are animal-inspired organisms. Done up in silk and lace, they move around slowly and gracefully, in a way, as Eric Troncy has put it, that recalls the swimmer Esther Williams, made famous in Hollywood movies by embodying mermaids and aquatic heroines who sported diadems and glamorous costumes. The twin submerged sculptures suggest two heads, two breasts, even two testicles.

With its title taking the form of an oxymoron, the **bead curtain** (1995) installed before the large plate-glass windows is a reference to the 1971 Franco-Tunisian film directed by Fernando Arrabal called *Viva la muerte* (released as *Long Live Death* in English). “Viva la muerte” was the rallying cry of the Francoist

camp during the Spanish Civil War. Pélassy’s installation inevitably conjures up the curtains hung in doorways to keep out the heat and insects from the interior of houses, as well as a curtain of rain or tears. One can also read it as an homage to the Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres and his bead curtains. Gonzalez-Torres died prematurely of AIDS-related complications in 1996. Filled with symbols, this curtain materializes a passage to another world such as many civilizations describe when evoking death.

## Gallery 2

This **display-box** features a self-portrait of Bruno Pélassy as a small kitsch figurine, being subjected to a harnessed dildo that the artist Paul McCarthy had given him. These two reappropriated toys or accessories, worlds apart in terms of their respective scales and contexts, and displayed as in a showcase, create a funny little scene. A spontaneous assemblage originating in simple gestures, the piece is formally akin to his *Casque cougourde* (Helmet Neckgourd), the result of bringing together a colocynth and motorcycle goggles and helmet that belonged to the artist.

The film *Sans titre, Sang titre, Cent titres* (1995) is made up of pirated copies of films and TV show excerpts recorded on VHS cassette tapes. Destined by its very nature to wear down with each viewing since the support for the recording also serves as the support for its diffusion, the work carries its own programmed destruction within it. The artist’s interest in collecting and film is materialized here as the halting juxtaposition of shots and sequences from fiction films, documentaries, ads, and animation, like a filmic patchwork edited according to an apparent absence of plot. Adhering to the principle of found footage (the

film practice that takes as its starting point the reuse of preexisting sound or film materials), the tense, aggressive montage is nevertheless a subtle construction, like a long piece of music with leitmotifs. A spout of blood, an explosion, and Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) pop up again and again. The movie excerpts include Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salo or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1976), and Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932). The recurring shot from the opening credits of Stanley Kubrick's *Shining* (1980), whose overhead images follow the car driven by Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson), introduces a tense atmosphere and nightmarish vision throughout the video.

Connected with an over-the-top, banged-together, "baroque" esthetic, the "**reliquaries**" (1992-1993) offer a marked contrast with what they enclose and protect, i.e., impressive pieces of jewelry made of gems posed on red velvet cushions. Pélassy turns his attention here to the religious object in its votive and cultural functions, and its erotic-symbolic esthetic. Full of hidden details, these ceremonial pieces suggest the extravagant jewelry spilling from church treasuries and royal collections. One of the reliquaries stands out. It contains the denim jacket made by the artist, faded from bleaching and decorated with a heart formed from red beads. It is encased like a precious symbol of bygone youth and conjures up both the style that sprang from grunge and the iconic looks that Madonna sported in the 1980s.

A display case features a **series of portraits and a landscape** (1996) done in color pencil and covered in wax. Once cooled, the poured candle wax gives the paper material heft and translucency, lending the drawings something

of the aspect of an icon. The portraits notably include the American actor Brad Davis, the protagonist of *Midnight Express* (Alan Parker, 1978) and *Querelle* (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1982), who also appears in one of the film excerpts in Pélassy's film *Sans titre, Sang titre, Cent titres*; and the English singer Kathleen Ferrier, known for her interpretation of Kindertotenlieder (or *Songs on the Death of Children*, from several of Friedrich Rückert's group of poems on the theme which Gustav Mahler set to music). To immortalize his idols, Pélassy didn't choose wax dummies but rather created an original form, the wax drawing.

### Gallery 3

A work left unfinished, ***Aux pédés fils du doute*** (1996) takes the form of a marble monument displaying an engraved epitaph. The preliminary sketches of the pedestal feature the phrase "Aux pédés fils du doute morts pour la patrie," Pélassy's cleverly punning pastiche of the usual dedication "to those who died for their country" found on war monuments. It works in "tags," "sons of" and "the benefit of the doubt," indeed casting doubt on how one should interpret the saying.

In the **display cases**, the greater part of the sculptures done by Pélassy, in a baroque or surrealist vein, are the result of odd, ill-matched assemblages. The head of a stuffed teal is placed together with a Baccarat crystal candlestick, leather gloves stand like brandished fists or erect male members, another one strategically covering a statue like the carved draping on Florentine sculptures from the Renaissance. They recall the eye of the artist and the collector, bargain hunter and hoarder that he embodied.

The restless counterparts of Pélassy's silent "Créatures", his "**Bestioles**" (Bugs, 1994 for the wigs; 2001-2002 for the other works)

squeal and sing. Fashioned from cheap toys, these works raised the question of their durability from the moment they were put together. In May 2001, Pélassy wrote, "Since 1993, part of my work has taken shape around the creation of an animated bestiary, which I am building from mechanical toys. Once they've been dismembered, these automata are 'dressed' with a range of materials that vary greatly and are sometimes costly. This material is always combined with recycled materials or other less noble elements, in search of a certain 'impropriety'. The use of precious materials and other less common ones enables me to play on broad registers, from derision to seduction to the tragic, from magic to ridicule, from the noble to the trivial... The basic structure is also important. That is, the 'automata' conjure up the modes that brought them to life (characters from films and animated cartoons, types of music) in a kind of snapshot of Western 'culture' as viewed through the filter of Asia (made in China, Taiwan, etc.). My transformation work aims to magnify, occasionally with humor, these toys whose economy of production is a token of an exclusively mercantile process."

The exhibition concludes with ***Gracias a la vida*** (Thanks to Life, 1996), like the fall of the curtain at the end of a show. The title refers to the song of the same name performed in 1971 by the Argentine singer Mercedes Sosa. The little bead picture, painstakingly assembled, echoes the bead curtain ***Viva la muerte*** on display at the start of the show. The two pieces resonate like two slogans, hymns to life and death at one and the same time.

# Biography

Bruno Pélassy was born in Vientiane, Laos, in 1966, he died in Nice, in 2002. His work is represented by Air de Paris, Paris.

In 2003-2004, MAMAC in Nice has organized a large retrospective exhibition *Néo-Laos* jointly curated by Florence Bonnefous, Didier Bisson, Brice Dellsperger, Natacha Lesueur, Maxime Matray, Marie-Ève Mestre... His work has been exhibited in the following group shows : *Un Nouveau Festival* (Centre Pompidou, 2012), *Le sort probable de l'homme qui avait avalé le fantôme* (La Conciergerie / Centre Pompidou, 2009), *Opéra Rock* (CAPC, Bordeaux, 2009), *Le Voyage intérieur* (Espace EDF / Electra, Paris, 2005).

## Rendez-vous !

### New !

Sunday, 22 February, and 22 March 2015 at 4pm

One Sunday each month, come and sharpen your eye on works of art during a guided tour of the show with Julia Leclerc.

Free admission, no reservation required.

### Taxi Tram

Saturday, 7 February

A journey between le frac île-de-france, le plateau (Paris), le château (Rentilly) and le Crédac.

Infos and booking at Tram :  
01 53 34 64 43 / taxitram@tram-idf.fr

### Art-Tea

Thursday, 5 March, 3:30pm

A guided visit of the exhibition with Crédac's docents followed by teatime.

Participation : 3€ \*

### Conference, Marie Canet

Saturday, 7 March, 4pm

Bruno Pélassy was a protean artist, draftsman, sculptor, and fashion designer. In her essay on Pélassy and his work, the art historian and creator of film programs Marie Canet looks back over the artist's connection with disease, taking as her starting point the only video he created, in 1995, which she proposes to read like a text. The piece, intimate, unstable and joyous, demon-

strates the power of artmaking when it begins to move in unison with a political, social, and scientific context in crisis.

Free admission \*

\* Booking required !

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# MARD!

## Conferences cycle

For this season, eighth in the series, Crédac and Médiathèque have invited the gallery owner, art researcher and feminist Isabelle Alfonsi to take part. Ms. Alfonsi has developed a completely fresh program following a research residency in San Francisco as part of the "extramural" program of the Institut français.

*Nothing theoretical about gender... A few attempts to talk about art looking through gender's glasses.*

Season 2014-2015

This cycle of conferences will attempt to come up with a few partial answers to some of the questions raised during recent societal debates about gender in art, based on examples drawn from the visual cultural of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Visual works of art have indeed accompanied the emergence of a visual culture founded on sexual difference. Reference to a certain number of authors and their works will help us understand how gender identities are represented in modern and contemporary art practices, and by extension, how they circulate throughout the society we live in.

*Minimalism and sex: the eccentric sculpture attack the "purity" of art*

Tuesday 10 February 2015 at 7pm

The esthetic of the pure, of "less is more," that American Minimalism represents can be seen today in many of the things proposed by contemporary art and design, notably in the display of artworks within the immaculate cube of the exhibition space. We shall look at how the theory that grew up around Minimalism ended up expurgating a little too quickly its references to the body, creating an ideology of art that is far

removed from the question of genders and sexualities. Recalling the contribution to recent art by women sculptors of Eccentric Abstraction like Lynda Benglis, we shall see that this sidelining of an abstraction linked to the formless may be read as the extension of an outlawing in society of non-standardized sexualities.

This lecture will draw notably on the art historian Anna C. Chave's text "Minimalism and Biography," published in 2000, and on the reflections of pro-sex feminism that defends pornography and prostitution as valid sex work.

>-> The *Mard!* talks are held at the Multimedia Center of Ivry - The Antonin Artaud Auditorium, 152, avenue Danielle Casanova - Ivry-sur-Seine Metro: the 7 line, Mairie d'Ivry (50 m from the station)

Talks run 90 min. Free admission.

For the *Mard!* evening events, exhibitions at Crédac remain open until 6:45 PM.

### Centre d'art

contemporain d'Ivry - le Crédac

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Open every day (except Mondays) from 2 to 6 PM, weekends from 2 to 7 PM — free admission  
Metro: line 7, Mairie d'Ivry / RER C: Ivry-sur-Seine.

Member of Tram and DCA networks, Crédac enjoys the generous support of the City of Ivry-sur-Seine, the Regional Direction of Cultural Affairs of Île-de-France (the Ministry of Culture and Communications), the General Council of Val-de-Marne and the Regional Council of Île-de-France.

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