Frida Kahlo | Autorretrato con traje de terciopelo | oil on canvas | 78 x 61 cms. 1926 | Private Collection | Courtesy of Arvil Gallery | Mexico
Tour de France | Florida
Contemporary Artists from France in Florida’s Private Collections

by Carol Damian
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Tatiana Trouvé | Untitled | 2007 | Mixed media | 229 x 122 x 92 cm | 90 1/8 x 48 x 36 1/4 in. | Work on paper | 2007 | Untitled (from the series of Intranquility) Mixed media on paper | 76 x 113 cm
Tour de France/Florida: Contemporary Artists from France in Florida’s Private Collections

The long fascination with French Art in the United States began over one hundred years ago when Paris dominated the avant-garde and the fledgling American art scene looked across the sea for its inspiration (and to catch up). Nouveau-riche collectors and curious artists arrived in France and quickly became the patrons and the students, bringing back with them works of art that even the French at the time did not understand or appreciate new styles and ideas that would forever change the way we make and look at art. Even after World War II changed the dynamic and the art scene moved to New York, a move that included many European artists, the French among them, the influence of the many “isms” that determined the trajectory of artistic development and its art historical discourse continued, and continues into the present. The art world today is small, global, without the boundaries and barriers of the vast oceans, politics, cultural differences and language. Art fairs, biennials, internet communication, traveling exhibitions, and new art publications have brought everyone closer together with the ability to appreciate and experience what was not possible before.

This exhibition of Tour de France/Florida: Contemporary Artists from France in Florida’s Private Collections is just a glimpse into that global picture and brings together a number of interesting perspectives as it showcases artists of international renown, like Christian Boltanski and Sophie Calle; artists not well recognized in Florida, outside of the circle of well-versed collectors, like Jean-Pierre Khazem and Denise A. Aubertin, and young artists like Gyan Panchal. The collectors first became familiar with their works in a number of ways: museum exhibitions, travel to France, art fairs, auctions and galleries. The curator, Martine Bussart, worked in cooperation with the Institut Francais, the Cultural Services of the French Embassy and the French Consulate, the France Florida Foundation for the Arts (FFFA) and The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum to present this unique opportunity to view French Art in Miami. Ms. Bussart, with years of experience working in France with the artists and the art scene, found the task to be quite revealing. There were many more important French artists in Florida collections than she first imagined and with each visit, more works became available. She paid particular attention to artists who live or have lived in Florida, such as Dominique Labauvie, Johan Creten and Hervé di Rosa. Most intriguing, of course, is that such an exhibition may offer us an insight into the collecting process of the esteemed group of collectors participating, as we view a particular aspect of their acquisitions, works from France, and how, why and what they represent to their personal buying strategies. Each work has a story for the collector, another reason an exhibition from private collections is different from a curated museum show based on a singular theme or artist. These works belong to private individuals and were chosen for their own reasons, not because of a museum’s acquisition or exhibition process.

There are artists who work in a variety of media: painting, sculpture, prints and works on paper, photography and assemblages that combine materials in unique ways. Presently representing France at the Venice Biennale, Christian Boltanski has received great critical acclaim for films, photography and large-scale installations that explore consciousness and remembering, and how each individual deals with the past in the present.
His assemblages in this exhibition date from the late 1980s, the period when he began to use mixed media in installations with light as an essential concept that served as a forceful reminder of mass murder of Jews by the Nazis. Over the next 20 years, the installations continued to grow, often taking up entire spaces (like the Park Avenue Armory in 2010), and this year in Venice, he again demonstrated his ability to deal with universal themes, memory, destiny, and chance, while at the same time ensuring that everyone is free to interpret his work in their own way while interacting with the huge moving film strip apparatus.

The use of mundane objects and traditional processes used in accumulative ways is a constant throughout the exhibition. Using completely different approaches to mixed media assemblages, other artists experiment with material old and new for provocative combinations that address similar issues of memory and nostalgia. Annette Messager’s work often involves fragments and obsessive accumulations of objects with drawings, photographs, and traditionally feminine materials and techniques. This repetitive process of accumulation is practiced by Hervé Télémaque as he manipulates the photographic process into objects that take them completely away from their original two-dimensional origins. His use of collage and assemblages made from common everyday objects inform work that marks a conversion from two-dimensions into a bas-relief aesthetic. Johan Creten takes the idea of accumulation to obsession as he transforms a human torso covered with glazed stoneware, fragile but dangerous, to allude to the complexity of the universe as he imagines it.

He is fascinated by woman and her hidden powers. Claude Viallat, one of France’s most distinguished teachers and artists, initiated the group that became the “Support/Surfaces” movement in 1969, of great significance to this exhibition, where surfaces and their conditions for the application of paint and other materials are essential. His paintings on freely hanging fabrics feature repeating patterns of simple color abstractions. Undoubtedly throughout the exhibition, the boundaries that may have once existed between materials have been blurred. Artists incorporate a diversity of media in remarkable ways. Paintings take on new meanings with surfaces that range from the almost ephemeral to briskly abstract, while sculptors use materials that range from traditional metals now conceived as monumental abstractions by Bernar Venet to line drawings suspended in space by Dominique Lélaouine.

In France, there has long been this exploration of surfaces for innovative effects. Once the artists of the nineteenth century decided to rebel against the strict rules of the Academy and devise new approaches to the application of paint on canvas, the series of “isms” began and the rest is art history. This Tour de France continues the voyage across the Atlantic into Florida with a new perspective of the future.

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Jacques Halbert | Cherry Composition | 1975–1990 | Acrylic on free-floating canvas 220 x 206 cm image courtesy Jacques Halbert