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Loris Gréaud Smashes the Mold for Museum Shows

Ben Davis, Friday, January 23, 2015

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Opening night of "The Unplayed Notes Museum" at Dallas Contemporary, with *To Destroy Angels* (2014)
Photo: Ben Davis

It's Saturday night in Dallas, at the debut of "[The Unplayed Notes Museum](#)," by the French art star Loris Gréaud. The cavernous, spookily lit space of Dallas Contemporary simmers with visitors. Then, this:



Loris Gréaud at the Dallas Contemporary

from [Courtney Spalten](#)

00:43



Unknown vandals appear out of nowhere, and begin to attack the art. The crowd surges forward to watch. Guards bark orders, herding the

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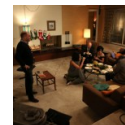
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gawkers towards the exits. Outside, later, the ejected attendees will clump around the courtyard heat lamps in the crisp Texas evening, and try to piece together what happened.

And that's it. No one is allowed back in. For the rest of the run, visitors to Dallas Contemporary will see only a wrecked version of the exhibits. In effect, the show opens with its closing.



The aftermath of the opening of "The Unplayed Notes Museum"
Photo: Loris Gréaud / Gréaudstudio.

At 35, Gréaud is something of a wunderkind. He has collaborated with Sonic Youth guitarist Lee Ranaldo, maestro of the weird David Lynch, and the team at the Antares deep sea research station (this last to stage an underwater fireworks show, stimulating phosphorescent creatures with sound). A few years ago, he was the first artist to fill the entirety of Paris's Palais de Tokyo; for his US museum debut, he is the first to score a solo show occupying all of Dallas Contemporary. Which he's chosen to desecrate.



Loris Gréaud [left] explains his work, with Dallas Contemporary curator Justine Ludwig
Photo: Ben Davis

Gréaud has called himself an "aesthetic adventurer;" I think of the



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terrain he works in as the "nerd spectacular." Like the slightly more senior French figures [Philippe Parreno](#) and [Pierre Huyghe](#) (see "[Is Pierre Huyghe the World's Most Opaque Popular Artist?](#)") he makes art by giving esoteric trivia a crowd-pleasing flourish, combing through culture until he turns up some loose nugget of intellectual excitement, then finding collaborators to help him transform it into something: scientists to help him create a perfume that captures the "smell of Mars;" architects to help him create a building whose invisible walls are made out of panels of blown air.

"Gréaud claims his favourite exhibitions are the ones he has not seen, but has only heard about," *Frieze* [wrote a few years ago](#), adding that he "has repeatedly insisted that his exhibitions should not be perceived as ends in themselves." The destruction of "The Unplayed Notes Museum" may be seen as an attempt to share this fascination with his viewers by blunt force.

This sensibility does not mean that he can't produce good single pieces, though, and "The Unplayed Notes Museum" contained at least one, the 2012 film that shares its name with the show, shown as a giant projection. For the piece, Gréaud hired two adult film stars, shooting them with an infrared camera *in flagrante delicto*. The images spin, slow down and accelerate, to an atmospheric guitar score by Lee Ranaldo; the performers' flesh is mottled with churning spots of warmth, their genitals shining like fireworks, their body heat leaving radioactive shadows on the ground as they roll around. It's grotesque and kinky, fascinating and off-putting all at once:



Loris Gréaud's *The Unplayed Notes* (2012), a nine-minute video, being played during "The Unplayed Notes Museum" at Dallas Museum
Photo: Ben Davis

As for the rest of the show, it was, to be honest, a mixed bag. Lumpy black sculptures meant to evoke failed copies of masterpieces from the Louvre are shown alongside a series of abstract canvasses, all smoky black-and-white gradients, supposedly painted using the rediscovered chemical process that Leonardo da Vinci employed to create his "sfumato" effect, liberated of any specific subject matter:



Loris Gréaud's *The Multiplication Table of Obsessions and Irresolution* (2013) and *Sfuamtos* (2014) [on the walls]

Photo: Ben Davis

There's also a circle of towering angel figures, clones of the enigmatically smirking angel of Reims cathedral. These stand guard in a circle around a pile of statue fragments, which, in a groovy Goth touch, are strewn with the wings of actual dead butterflies:



Loris Gréaud's *To Destroy Angels* (2014) in "The Unplayed Notes Museum" at Dallas Contemporary

Photo: Ben Davis

There's a dangling cluster of subtly pulsing glass lamps, supposedly blown from the sands emptied from hourglasses, shown near a pair of carved wooden trees that seem to be bearing lightbulbs for fruit:



Loris Gréaud, *Spores* (2012) and *Untitled (Trees)* (2014)
Photo: Courtesy Loris Gréaud / Gréaudstudio

And there's a room full of grey sculpsures of hands, held aloft on rods. These are the result of a collaboration with the Vietnamese workers who made them, who were told to cast their own hands, while making a gesture either of political protest or of a mindless zombie:



Detail of *[I] and [I] and [I] Riot* (2014) in "The Unplayed Notes Museum"
Photo: Ben Davis

Taken as a whole, it all feels less like an integrated exhibition and more like the product of some feverish conceptual-art ideation jam. Of course, how ultimately satisfying the works are doesn't really matter; they did not after all represent the ultimate work. Or, rather, they were here presented as prop versions of "Loris Gréaud works," intended to be sacrificed to the mayhem that marked the opening night.

Gréaud insists that his free-wheeling interdisciplinary approach is an attempt to break out of art "into another field, which is not the field of art and produces some beautiful things." And yet, the more I think about this show, the more I am convinced that its main message, when you step back, is very specific to the discipline of fine art. (Nothing against Gréaud for going on with his already formulated interest in cultural vandalism in the face of the dire events back in France—but I do

think the fact that it seems so serenely indifferent to them may indicate how hermetically sealed into the art bubble it all is.)

Glenn Lowry, head of New York's Museum of Modern Art has talked about the need for museums to "shift away from passive experiences, from art that is hanging on the wall to art that invites people to become part of it." *The Economist* recently explained that there has been a shift from valuing luxury objects to valuing exclusive experiences, worldwide. This cultural sea change raises all kinds of challenges for artists and institutions alike; with this show, Dallas Contemporary makes itself a center for thinking about them.

It is not difficult to see how Gréaud's artist-as-idea-man MO is so successful because it jibes with this underlying shift, or how the gamesmanship of "The Unplayed Notes Museum" is essentially a parable about it. If the individual works are less interesting than the theatrical scenario they are inserted into, then this is because Gréaud approaches the show more as a media event than as a stable catalogue of objects to be displayed. Which is to say that this is a show about how the traditional idea of the exhibition is under attack by inscrutable forces. Whether all that it leaves in its wake is ruin is something else to ponder.



The aftermath of the opening of "The Unplayed Notes Museum"
Photo: Loris Gréaud / Gréaudstudio.

Loris Gréaud, "The Unplayed Notes Museum" is on view at Dallas Contemporary, 161 Glass Street, Dallas, through March 21, 2015.

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