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# Class

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**Baptiste  
Debombourg**

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NUMBER 140 : FALL 2015

# Rupture and Repair

The large-scale shattered-glass installations of BAPTISTE DEBOMBOURG give physical form to the violent undercurrents of our turbulent era.

BY VICTORIA JOSSLIN



*Crystal Palace, 2008. Metal structure, laminated glass, security glass, UV glue. H 8 ¾, W 16 ½, D 5 ft.*  
COURTESY: GALERIE PATRICIA DORFMANN, PARIS



*Turbo, 2007–2009. Wood installation. Dimensions variable. H 10 ½, W 24, D 9 ¾ ft.*  
COURTESY: GALERIE PATRICIA DORFMANN, PARIS



*Aérial* (site-specific installation at the Brauweiler Abbey in Germany), 2012. Two tons of laminated glass, wood, nails, white paint. H 9 ¾, W 39, D 16 ½ ft.

COURTESY: GALERIE KRUPIC KERSTING-KUK, KÖLN, GERMANY

Work in the "Social Philosophy" series, 2008. Analog photo, Diasec process. Dimensions variable.

COURTESY: GALERIE PATRICIA DORFMANN, PARIS



Who wouldn't want to smash some cheap material that nobody really wants? Most of us time-pressed, sleep-deprived, and information-saturated citizens of the new digital society probably would. Now, who wants to painstakingly put all the pieces together? That would be French conceptual artist Baptiste Debombourg, an artist concerned with violence and with its scars; with destruction but also with repair; with wreckage as information about disaster, but also as the evocation of a human response.

Debombourg, born in 1978, has long been interested in making art from modest supplies. In an email exchange with *GLASS*, he writes, "For me it is very important to work with materials from the everyday life; sometimes they are impersonal and cheap, materials that we throw away, but they become witnesses of our life." An early work, *Arc de Triomphe* (2001), a "disposable monument" in the artist's words, was made of cardboard boxes. For his "Articles Codes" (2004) and "Inception" (2010) series, he reassembled brand-new chopped-up cut-rate furniture, implying some kind of violent action and its ensuing organic and unpredictable repair.

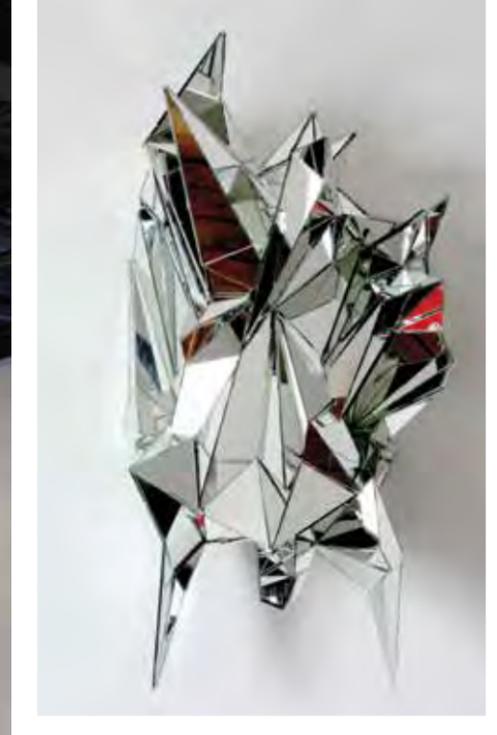
The artist implied a disaster of a greater scale in his "Turbo" series (2007–2009). Always aware of not only the site of his installations but also the site's history, Debombourg began the series during an art residency in Sarajevo, the capital city of Bosnia and Herzegovina, besieged and blockaded between 1992 and 1996. "Turbo" and the other series that followed came from Debombourg's interest in confronting what he calls "testosterone competition." You might associate the title with a man's desire for a car with a turbo-charged engine, more powerful than his neighbor's. The artist's Balkan viewers would be quick to think of "turbo-folk," a form of urbanized, "super-charged" Serbian folk music popular in the 1990's.

More immediately, though, the viewer would most likely see the work as the result of a violent force, leftover damage from the war, but the cause is not what you think about when you first see it. As the artist explains, when you see a car wrecked by the side of the highway, you don't think, "Oh, look at the wrecked car!", you think, "What happened to the people?" The wrecked car is what remains after the victims have left or been carried from the scene, the document of a disaster, the scar. When you see "Turbo," you don't imagine that the artist pieced the wall together, bit by meticulous bit; you don't think, "What happened to this big wall of medium-density fiberboard?" You just think, "What awful thing happened here?" Eventually, you might conclude that the actual product Debombourg wants to create is not the smashed wall but the gasp of the viewer, the inescapable evidence of humanity.

In addition to working with plastic bags, fiberboard, cardboard boxes, staples, mail-order catalogs, and cigarette butts, Debombourg has also worked for the last ten years with glass, exploiting its capacity to suggest both fragility and danger. One of Debombourg's early works in glass was a proposed bus stop, *Crystal Palace* (2008), which reads much like "Turbo," as wreckage after a disaster. As "Turbo" in Sarajevo would recall siege and war, *Crystal Palace* in Paris would immediately remind the viewer of the riots of 2005 and 2007. Not just the location but also Debombourg's material has a history. The artist used a kind of security glass developed after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, in which over two-thirds of the injuries outside the buildings, for a radius of more than 10 blocks, were caused by glass shards.

Constructed in one-half scale, the work was submitted to three competitions but was always rejected, with no reasons given. The photograph of the maquette has the look of a still photograph taken from a film, a captured moment in which the structure collapses from an unseen cause.

In the same year that Debombourg was working on a public scale with glass, he was working on a far more intimate scale with a much humbler medium. In his "Social Philosophy" series, the artist used thrown-away cigarette butts to spell out thrown-away comments in both French and



*Cesium no. 1 - IV* (installed in the Chapel Aniane, France), 2009–2012. Mirrors, hot glue, cyanolite. Dimensions variable.

COURTESY: GALERIE PATRICIA DORFMANN, PARIS

*Flow* (installation at the L’Oeil de Poisson arts center in Québec City), 2013. Laminated glass windshields, wood, nails, black paint. H 14, W 52, D 26 ft.

COURTESY: GALERIE PATRICIA DORFMANN, PARIS

English, overheard and collected: *Winner Takes Nothing* and *Trust Your Intuition*. Few materials are more humble than the used condoms that the artist added to *Mon ex-femme m’a piqué mon ex-pognon* (roughly, “My ex-wife swiped my ex-bucks”).

*Crystal Palace* could be the result of a small riot, perhaps a disturbance confined to a specific location and complaint. In newer works, Debombourg’s disasters have gotten bigger. In *Volte-Face* (2010), an installation in glass in Sarajevo, he skewered and nailed smashed automobile windshields onto a wooden construction. His comment reads less as a discrete artist statement and more as an element of the piece: “A. Prohibited Conduct—No person either singly or in concert with others shall: Take any action, create or participate in the creation of any situation, which recklessly or intentionally endangers the mental or physical health of anyone for the initiation into or affiliation with any organization.” An American might casually associate the statement with prohibitions against extreme fraternity hazing. In Sarajevo, the intentional endangering of other people has a far broader and deeper connotation, one of widespread public trauma.

Debombourg began his “Cesium” series in 2009, two years before the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster taught the rest of us about the highly reactive, toxic, soluble, explosive, and carcinogenic radioactive isotope, cesium-137 (although the “future-pop” electronic music group of the same name had been around since 2001).

Inspired by African patrons, Debombourg used broken mirrors to create a series of wall sculptures reminiscent of both tribal masks and, not coincidentally, Cubist portraits. While they look distorted, by either toxic radiation or simple physical force, the work, especially the smaller mask-size pieces, retains a sense of gem-like faceting, a hint of having been at one time a precious object. One larger work in the series, from 2009, stood over 11 feet tall, like a threatening alien colossus with the power of distorting not only the medieval chapel it stood in but any viewer foolish enough to come within its range.

Debombourg continued his confrontation with masculine power in his “Aggravure” series (2007–2012). The title is a triple pun, playing on the French words *gravure* (engraving), *aggraver* (to worsen), and *agrafer* (to staple). In this series he connects the writhing muscular male bodies of 16th-century Mannerist engravings to today’s emphasis on bodybuilding and the popularity of superheroes. So, in his revision of Albrecht Dürer’s *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (ca. 1497–98), Debombourg mounts Death, Famine, War, and Plague on powerful motorcycles. Astonishingly, the medium he uses in these wall-sized pieces is the common office staple. Thousands of them.

**Implying something more massive than a pileup on the interstate, six tons of smashed auto windshields flow into every corner, engulfing the gallery and the viewer.**

In 2012, Debombourg engaged with the daunting history of Brauweiler Abbey, near Cologne. The former Benedictine abbey was founded in 1024, secularized in 1803, and served afterwards as a hostel and a workhouse for the poor. From 1933 to 1945, it was used by the Gestapo as a center for the detention, torture, and murder of political prisoners. Its most famous prisoner was Konrad Adenauer, the former mayor of Cologne and later chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. After the war the abbey became a camp for displaced persons.



**Stalker** (installation at the **Maison Martin Margiela Miami, Art Basel Miami**), 2013. Laminated glass, wood, nails, painting. Dimensions variable.

COURTESY: GALERIE PATRICIA DORFMANN, PARIS

**Inception II**, 2010. Imitation wenge wood furniture, particle board, polyvinyl chloride fitted handles. H 98, W 63, D 53 in.

COURTESY: GALERIE PATRICIA DORFMANN, PARIS



The abbey today is home to the Rhine Department for the Care of Historic Monuments, which in 2012 launched “Spiritual Ground,” a series of art installations curated by Dr. Astrid Legge and Nadia Ismail, M.A., who select and invite artists to use the Column Hall of the abbey to address “the special relationship of location, history, and art.” They began with Baptiste Debombourg, noting in their press release that “in Germany, he and his works, with their brilliant craftsmanship and provocative contents, are yet to be discovered.”

He named his installation *Aérial*. If you visit the work’s page on Debombourg’s website, you find that the artist’s sole comment is a quotation from the French novelist and Nobel laureate Roger Martin du Gard: “The mind is everything. The material is the slave of the spiritual.” [*L’Esprit est tout. Le matériel est esclave du spirituel.*] In the context of 21st-century art, it’s easy to read this and think, “Well, yes, of course, the art is conceptual and the artist chooses the material that will best serve the concept.” In the context of the 11th-century abbey, though, the quotation also reaches back to the medieval distinction between body and soul, and this conceptual connection between 2012 and 1042 is almost as breathtaking as the physical work itself. [The quotation itself is somewhat fluid, since the word *esprit* can be translated as either *mind* or *spirit*.]

The project allowed Debombourg to increase the scale of his implied disaster. We may call *Aérial* a conceptual piece, but Debombourg, who says he prefers “low-tech” processes, logged 420 hours in its construction (he jokes that he’d like to be the first artist to be paid by the hour). The material he chose was glass.

In the case of *Aérial*, we see two tons of laminated glass in the service of ... what, exactly? In the service, I think, of the gasp that most of us would experience when first walking into the space, in our first questions about what catastrophe was happening here. Is it a flood? Is this what’s going to happen when global warming hits Germany, and the Rhine overflows? Is some hostile force attacking the abbey with water cannons? Is this an act of terrorism?

After gasping, one might think more about how the material works with the abbey. By choosing glass as his material, Debombourg was able to link location, history, and art in powerful ways. As glass artists remind us, glass is a liquid, a liquid that freezes at low temperatures and plausibly represents water. Glass also carries light, so it’s not only the glass that seems to crash through the windows and inundate the space, but also light. For centuries the church has used light, and light through glass, to create a spiritual space, to give the worshipper a sense of being transported into sacred ground, although in this case the viewer is transported not so much into Heaven as into some future calamity, perhaps not too far away. Finally, the transformative nature of glass mirrors the various functions of the space over time, how the abbey has been adapted over centuries for various uses.

The next year’s installation, *Flow* (2013), at the L’Oeil de Poisson arts center in Québec City, was even more intimidating than *Aérial*. Implying something more massive than a pileup on the interstate, six tons of smashed auto windshields flowed into every corner, engulfing the gallery and the viewer. With no way to go around, one had to walk on a frozen and shattered river of endless consumption if one wanted to see it, while the broken glass projected rivers of light and shadow on the walls.

Debombourg has continued to work with glass and with other materials as he needs them. His *Stalker* (2013) involved working with the haute couture Maison Martin Margiela, whose “famously incognito” founder was known for his innovative reuse of old or humble objects, transforming them into high fashion. In an email exchange, the artist writes, “The invitation to collaborate with the Maison Martin Margiela was very exciting because I had the possibility to place the art out of a museum and gallery space. Shops are open to a different public who are not necessarily gallery goers, and it was a

Collaboration with David  
Marin, *Marx*, 2012–2013.  
Plastic bag covered in  
24-karat gold leaf.  
H 17 ¾, W 9 ¾, D 9 ¾ in.  
COURTESY: GALERIE PATRICIA DORFMANN, PARIS



Portrait of Baptiste  
Debombourg in his  
Paris studio.

PHOTO: VICTORIA JOSSLIN



big challenge to make the art safe for visitors of the shop but still create an unusual and special environment. This invitation was for me a challenge to create for the viewer the impression that something extraordinary happened in the space, an accident perhaps.”

Debombourg had done earlier installations from his “Turbo” and “Cesium” series for the Paris store. For *Stalker*, installed in the Miami store at the same time as Art Basel Miami Beach, the artist used sheets of crushed laminated glass, inspired by the new “Crystalactite” collection from Atelier Swarovski. Whereas the glass in the abbey looked like water, the glass on the clothing racks and displays looked like ice. To the unprepared shopper, it might have looked as if a sudden disaster had burst the city’s water pipes and encased the merchandise in ice. It turned out to be a particularly difficult job. In the retail setting, the art had to be safe for visitors to touch; during the installation, Debombourg says, “Everybody who helped was so tired every day—glass was everywhere, in our clothes, our hair, even on our mouths.”

*Stalker* was an installation for a luxury fashion house, apparently cloaking expensive consumer goods in ice. In the same year, Debombourg collaborated with gold-leaf expert David Marin to cover an ordinary plastic bag inside and out with 24-karat gold leaf. He calls the piece *Marx* and has described it as “question[ing] through a cynical beauty this capitalism hyperbole: attraction and rejection, jewel or detritus.”

In his 2014 series “Ultra,” Debombourg pays homage to the Russian Constructivists. By using transparent glass, he can both bow to Kasimir Malevich’s white paintings and joust with them. Unlike Debombourg’s installations, these smaller works allow the viewer to get close—to see an entire work while standing very near it. The scale also allows the artist to present a refined balance of control and accident.

Debombourg’s work remains immediate and personal, even as its scale increases. He continues, too, to take his work outside the museum and gallery world. His *Tu M’Existes (To Me You Exist)* extended his “Social Philosophy” series of overheard bits of conversation; made of Christmas lights rather than cigarette butts, it illuminated the 2014 electronic music festival Baléapop, in the Atlantic Pyrenees. In July of this year, Debombourg’s installation *Stellar* filled a public square, the Place du Bouffay, in Nantes. Giant ellipses of café chairs rose and fell, looking like an oversized carnival ride.

In October 2015, Debombourg will open three exhibitions, linked together under the title “Legends.” His *Matière Noire (Dark Matter)*, opening in Strasbourg this October in the gallery of the Haute École des Arts du Rhin, will involve six tons of black glass on a huge scale: 20 feet long, 36 feet wide, and 10 feet high. His *Champ d’Accélération (Acceleration Field)*, in the atrium-like space of La Maison Rouge (Fondation Antoine-de-Galbert), in the Bastille District of Paris, will use five tons of white glass and cover an even larger space. October will also see “Radiance,” an exhibition at Galerie Patricia Dorfmann in Paris.

Is the material in Debombourg’s work the slave of the spiritual? Is the medium subservient to the concept? Debombourg does not talk much about concept. He describes his oeuvre as “a conveyor of encounters.” The encounters are made of mind, matter, and the viewer’s response, and it’s difficult to say which element serves the others; it might be better described as situational art. Debombourg is an artist who takes his materials seriously, if in no other way than spending hundreds of hours working with them, and so it’s ironic that he continues to quote the Fluxus artist Robert Filliou, most of whose work was ephemeral: “Art is what makes life more interesting than art.” ■

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