

**Antoine Leperlier: *tralucentes novi liquores fluxisse***

*I think perhaps ideas are permanent. You know, the way they get handed down...*

**Richard Long**<sup>1</sup>

*Le tableau est fini quand il a effacé l'idée.*

**Georges Braque**<sup>2</sup>

At face value, the very welcome invitation<sup>3</sup> to write on the recent work of my friend Antoine Leperlier posed an acute dilemma: what could I possibly add to the existing record of published (if untimely!) positions<sup>4</sup>, by this most thoughtful and articulate of contemporary glass artists, that would neither tamely rehearse an open narrative already rich in ideas and preoccupations, nor quickly prove a tedious distraction from the work itself?

For even the most glancing engagement with the work of Antoine Leperlier soon finds itself involved in a paradox – namely that the more you try to pin down this disciplined, highly crafted body of glass sculpture with ‘ulterior *motifs*’ (in the form of ideas, biography or anecdote) the more resistant it seems to become. The more these works seem to insist upon their material presence and their careful articulation of technical qualities. So, as the twinned epigraphs to this brief essay might suggest: as a writer working in the medium of language, I would like here to explore what can, and cannot, be said of the relationship between *work* and *idea* in the glass *œuvre* of Antoine Leperlier.

The words of Richard Long that comprise our first epigraph came as a risposte to a question from the audience, following a public lecture he shared with fellow ‘land artist’ Chris Drury at Dartington in October 2005. The question had been something like: “what, if anything, would you say is *permanent* in art?” and Long’s sudden, concise, almost lapidary answer seemed to cut through Drury’s more laboured response in mid-flow.

I wanted to ask whether, given his long-standing engagement with geometric phenomena such as circles and lines, Long had meant ‘ideas’ in the philosophical sense of platonic ‘forms’, or something quite different. I wanted to hold onto that moment – go further into the thought – but the instant had already passed and the stream of questioning had moved on.

My purpose in invoking Richard Long is that this anecdote neatly prefaces, or gives rise to, a number of identifiable themes or antitheses in the work of Antoine Leperlier: ideas of permanence versus flux; of the nature of the temporal moment, and its passing, in the flow of time; of structural artistic form, and the significance or authenticity of marks or gestures made in resistant material; of the resonance of ideas, of memory; and – finally – of the human condition of mortality, the persistence of form, and the mute desperation of irrevocable loss.

Manifestly so, as this exhibition makes clear – these sculptural artefacts do not appear as the mere consequence of ideas. Their purpose is very far from illustrative. Their relationship to the universe of ideas is complex, and – paradoxically for an artist so preoccupied with the material trace of language in its historical, printed form – highly resistant to verbal or theoretical reduction. These are works that so occupy their own unique and fluid *moment*, that they preclude any possibility of repetition (of replication in any medium: whether glass, language or idea) in time.

*We step and we do not step into the same rivers; we are and we are not.*<sup>5</sup>

This pre-Socratic notion of universal flux, and of the nature of our being in time, surfaces on three occasions in the philosophical *Fragments* of the philosopher Heraclitus.

Fragment 91a? [91b] reads:

*[For, according to Heraclitus, it is not possible to step twice into the same river, nor is it possible to touch a mortal substance twice in so far as its state (hexis) is concerned. But, thanks to <the> swiftness and speed of change,] it scatters <things?> and brings <them?> together again, [(or, rather, it brings together and lets go neither 'again' nor 'later' but simultaneously)], <it> forms and <it> dissolves, and <it> approaches and departs.<sup>6</sup>*

So how might it be that ideas as such, and ideas such as *this one*, find their way into the work of Antoine Leperlier? Or, more accurately – because making always comes *before* knowing – how does the artist's material intelligence and making method (or *poetics*) operate as a distinctive mode of perception and as a way of thinking about the world? And what is it that can, and cannot be said, in language, in these terms?

In the case of Leperlier, this tensile counterpoint in time of forces both physical and mental – the pressure of containment and flux – is already a kind of accidental treatise on the nature of his chosen medium, the 'unknown translucent liquid' that flowed (*tralucentes novi liquores fluxisse*) in the record of whose origin we find in the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder:

*In the part of Syria adjoining Judea and Phoenicia the Candebia swamp is bounded by Mount Carmel. This is believed to be the source of the river Belus, which after five miles runs into the sea near Ptolemais. On the shores of the River Belus the sand is revealed only when the tides retreat. This sand does not glisten until it has been tossed about by the waves and had its impurities removed by the sea.... A ship belonging to traders in soda once called here, so the story goes, and they spread out along the shore to make a meal. There were no stones to support their cooking-pots, so they placed lumps of soda from their ship under them. When these became hot and fused with the sand on the beach, streams of an unknown liquid flowed, and this was the origin of glass.<sup>7</sup>*

So, in its metastable and disordered state, is glass a liquid, or a solid? And why might this ambiguous condition matter to an artist such as Antoine Leperlier?

*There is no clear answer to the question "Is glass solid or liquid?" In terms of molecular dynamics and thermodynamics it is possible to*

*justify various different views that it is a highly viscous liquid, an amorphous solid, or simply that glass is another state of matter which is neither liquid nor solid.*<sup>8</sup>

In terms of molecular physics, glass is technically distinguished from crystalline solid and from liquid states in that glass molecules configure in a disordered but rigidly bound arrangement, sharing properties of both liquid (although firmly bound) and solid (although lacking a regular lattice form). Indeed glass, Leperlier's preferred medium, is characterised by its viscosity – viscosity being defined as the degree of resistance to flow, whose unit of measurement is *poise*.

In its behaviour, as a state of physical matter, glass may be held to embody the contrasting philosophical dynamics of Heraclitus (liquid, flux) and Parmenides (solid, permanence, containment) inherent in early Greek philosophy, an enduring interest of Antoine Leperlier since his student days in Paris at the Sorbonne, where he studied Philosophy and Sculpture. The relationship between idea and material is one of open potentiality, a form of meditative substance or imaginative technology. But his material is, of course, in itself no more illustrative of pre-Socratic thought than were these philosophers concerned to describe or define the nature of glass.

Leperlier's apprenticeship in *pâte de verre* began in 1968, under the eye of his grandfather, François Décorchemont, although it was not until ten years later that he began his own technical research following a period of intensive archival work on Décorchemont's papers. He has exhibited internationally since 1982, is represented in thirty major international glass collections, and won a number of international awards. He was shortlisted for the Bombay Sapphire Prize in 2005.

Leperlier has developed a distinctive, classical vocabulary of sculptural forms or motifs, constructed three-dimensional tableaux exploring the plastic forms of box, step, arch, throne, cabinet, pyramid, book, stele, cup, frame, occupied occasionally by animal or human figures. Flayed and leaping hares; a small shoal of fish; a renaissance medical diagram of a man. Turtles, for longevity. By 'classical' I mean that Cézanne's geometric

preference for ‘the cylinder, the sphere and the cone’<sup>9</sup>, squares circles and triangles, has provided a subliminal geometry for Leperlier’s work since his very early adaptation of organic forms as an overarching schema (in, for example, [030] and [034] (1982?)). Works such as 2051109 (2005) and 2030120 (2003, shortlisted for the Bombay Sapphire Prize) appear to compress an entire cosmography – the primitive play of chaos and cosmos, marked by a language of infinite repetition – in which the ambiguity of the viewer’s condition (cosmic perhaps, chaotic most probably) is contained. Shards of fragmented material stud and embed an opaque cube from which an engraved sphere emerges into a square, ordered tile of its own element.

Leperlier thinks *with* and *through* the intrinsic properties of glass as an artistic medium – arguably the first synthetic material in human culture – exploring the raw phenomenology of its substance in ways that open or fold-in new possibilities of meaning. His method is to work primarily with complex casting techniques, that combine at various stages with a range of surface applications and finishing processes. The resulting artefact arrives at a structured equilibrium involving formal tension between the internal and external dimensions of the three-dimensional glass medium. The work articulates diverse qualities of transparency, translucence and opaqueness; suspends lucid interior veils, texts and perspectives; makes play with textured and polished surfaces; and concentrates or refracts body colour in various densities.

These complex tensions are displayed and *contained* at the object surface, at its edge limit. As Andrew Graham-Dixon remarks, on the subject of ‘frames’ in the work of the English painter Howard Hodgkin:

*Sculptors have always understood the importance of edges, which define precisely how form contains space....a painting’s edge is its most vulnerable point. It is where the work of art ends and the world begins. It is where the painting completes itself or, conversely, declares its incompleteness. It is where the painting...negotiates with its limits. The edge of the painting is where the artist makes his own entrances and exits. It is the mark of his competence and confidence, his control or lack of it. Paintings succeed or fail at their edges.*<sup>10</sup>

Leperlier's recent works such as *Still alive/Fleuve stéle I* (2005) and *Vanité au repos II/Fleuve stéle* (2006) render the figure of the 'frame' structure transparent and fluid, its physical equilibrium and presence a deliberate viscous moment poised somewhere between containment and flux. *Poise* as the balance of form and idea, and as the unit of dynamic viscosity as a degree of resistance to flow. The disordered lettering of 'fleuve' and 'stéle' as FSLTEE/ULVEE – the synthetic words streaming away with their feminine word-endings – registers a displaced and confused inscription of the opposing motifs of river and stone tablet, flux and fixture.

These pieces invoke strong classical references in the figure of the human skull (*vanitas*), and the congealed cascade of opaque, discoloured fruit, in an acid cocktail of bitter irony and technical perfection. Language, as *inscription*, is a contributing element here, with the euphemism of 'au repos' (at rest) at the same time both offering and withdrawing comfort or respite in the form of death. And the English term 'still life' is rendered ironically as 'still alive', thereby haunted by the shadowy French term 'nature mort'. As such, the works embody a kind of luminous preoccupation with mortality – the unavoidable attrition of time, the inevitability of physical decay, and the corresponding resistance of art, memory, and humour.

Recurrent engagement with the place of memory, remembrance, mortality and the unrepeatable authenticity of the moment in time, is not exactly unique to Antoine Leperlier. What is unusual is the intensity of his preoccupation with material qualities, and the distinctive way that technical execution allows a highly tactile aesthetic sensibility to take the imprint of the idea in the moment that it acquires form. As an approach to memory, this could not be more different from that of Howard Hodgkin, of whose early canvas, *Memoir*, which he painted at the age of 17, Colm Toibín wrote:

*'Memoirs' contained the elements that would interest him for more than 50 years. The overriding impulse to make the painting comes from memory and the emotion that memory can carry. The event remembered for him as a painter is more productive of serious, refined and complex emotion than the event experienced....*<sup>11</sup>

In stark contrast, for Leperlier the event remembered certainly does *not* appear to exceed the event experienced. Memory is rather a mortal condition, subject to irresistible flux and decay, the acute consciousness and despair of unrecoverable loss. His is a philosophical lament reaching deeply beyond any sense of personal loss or private memoir, having at its heart a regard for the nature of the passing moment, the authentic instant in time. In this, the *viscosity* of his plastic intelligence – its resistance to flow – shows itself as a kind of melancholy, lingering over the authentic mark or signature trace of the very moment in its passing. This involves not only a kind of memorial sensibility, but also a distinctive application of the glass casting technique – which takes the accurate transfer of every trace, mark, imprint and texture of a given surface, and renders it as fine relief on a fixed glass form, a little less subject to the depredations of time.

Two extraordinary examples of this complex transference occur in [\[2030211 Vase deux anses \(?\)\]](#) (2003) and a series of works including [\[931109A\]](#) (1993) and [\[941004B\]](#) (1994). In [\[2030211 Vase deux anses \(?\)\]](#), the figure of a lizard rests vertically against the etched relief of a textual fragment, enlarged and unreadable, and these animal and literary figures are suspended within a solid urn form equipped with non-functional ringed handles set below the centre of gravity of the vase. Under mild interrogation<sup>12</sup>, the artist reveals that this text was taken from the oldest book he knew at first hand – his grandfather François Décorchemont's copy of an old edition of [Sebastian Münster's Cosmographia](#) (first published in 1544).

This shred of text was hand-transferred by an industrial engraver, and acid-etched deep into a thick zinc plate. A rubber mould was taken from the etched plate and, from this, a plaster model taken. A definitive plaster model was then made as a composite, incorporating a second plaster positive in the form of the lizard.

This figure had a similarly complex history. Leperlier's friend and fellow artist, Bernard Dejonghe, had found the dead creature and set it in plaster, exposing the underside, which he then left in an anthill to be eaten clean. A rubber print was taken from the emptied

mould negative, and sent as a gift to Leperlier, arriving like a fully-formed component of a latent idea.

From the plaster lizard/text composite, a final rubber negative was taken, from which a wax model was finally cast in refractory plaster, for the glass to be then kiln-formed through the lost-wax technique.

It is clear that Leperlier allowed himself no short-cuts as the successive stages of this unreasonably laborious process unfolded, moving between positive and negative forms, or being and non-being<sup>13</sup>, as three-dimensional prints, from figure to mould and back again. It is as if the immediate labour-saving convenience of, for example, photographic screens and sand-engraving was disregarded in order to protect something that might recall Richard Long's sense of permanence of ideas as something that is 'handed-down', a phrase that in English implies contact. This is an intelligence that proceeds by touch.

In this case, the permanence or direct genealogy of the mark seems authenticated by immediate physical contact at each point of technical transfer: the character of the mark arises from this sequence of material impressions, and the steadiness of the hand that guides them. It is a physical trace, and not a digital record, that is so intensely to be worked-for. The sequence involves a kind of thickening of time, an increase in its viscosity, as each protracted process serves its required duration. Even so, however painstaking, every stage still incurs a barely noticeable degree of alteration, some slight loss of definition each time – as is surely the case with memory.

The little turtle figures in the series of pieces including [\[931109A\]](#) (1993) and [\[941004B\]](#) (1994) are if anything a more personal, more concentrated example of this line of thought, exemplars of a kind of 'mindful form'. The original turtles – of the tiny kind that can still be bought as dried specimens in traditional medicine shops in the far east today – had been brought from Libya by Leperlier's great-uncle, and as a boy he remembered them sitting upon his grandfather's old radio. It was this memory that drove him to make these pieces. Leperlier says that it was his sister's discovery of precisely



those figures that made this possible – the implication being that no other specimens, however similar, would have served his purpose. Once again, the little glass figures were cast from a wax model made from rubber moulds taken directly from the original figures. This meticulous detail of biography seems at least as significant to this observer as, for example, the more obvious allegorical reading of the turtle as a symbol of strength or longevity. The lizard, too, invites an allegorical reading – in this case dragging its reptilian tail over the printed scrap of human knowledge. And here we encounter a characteristic ambiguity – in this glassy *cosmographia*, does the vitreous lizard harbour a demonic purpose to steal, or to scorn, the vanity of our earthly wisdom? Or, as a mere accident of natural history, the food of ants, neither of these imaginings?

The artist invites such readings without encouraging any particular interpretation. But the technical element of memorial transfer through the scrupulous moulding and casting processes described above is, for Leperlier, a knowing or deliberate *vanitas*. For, in the very moment of its replication, the work (*travail*) also involves a cancellation of the original, its disappearance in time. What emerges is the work (*l'oeuvre*). In the words of Georges Braque's *Cahier* that supplied our second epigraph, "*Le tableau est fini, quand il a effacé l'idée*" [*"The painting is finished when it has erased the idea."*].

This act of erasure requires a creative transformation – a kind of Heraclitean moment, bringing something new into existence in the form of a work of art in the very instant of loss. The painter Howard Hodgkin reports a similar sense of an ending:

*How do you know, I ask him, that a painting is finished? ...His answer seems to me absolutely clear and obvious, but also quite metaphysical and mysterious. A painting is finished, he says, when the subject comes back, when what has caused the painting to be made comes back as an object.*<sup>14</sup>

But for Leperlier this awareness – of wholeness or completion of the idea in the object – attends not only the act of finishing, but also the original moment of inception:

*To begin with, every one of my projects arises as a kind of memory in my mind. It is as if I am already familiar with them, at the very moment*

*that they occur in my imagination. Ideas arrive unexpectedly, but with always that unmistakable sense of “déjà vu”. As objects, they are already complete within my inner vision. I can view them from all angles. If they show themselves with particular intensity, they are accompanied by the kind of feeling we have when a word that we had been struggling to remember springs suddenly to mind. And in that instant I know that I have to make the work. This feeling returns when I am finishing the piece in glass, and I recognise it immediately, the very moment it arrives.*<sup>15</sup>

Between these two occasions of intense, almost involuntary, recognition attending both the genesis and the moment of its completion in a new work, the impression of an idea proceeds by touch in and out of the positive and negative forms invoked by the moulding process, and the viscous glass medium, in time. *Work* and *world* both meet and take leave of each other at the physical limit of the resistant object in time, the locus of a continual struggle between permanence and flux, cosmos and chaos, being and nothingness.

For Antoine Leperlier, the work does not imitate, nor can it re-live or repeat the formative experience or idea from which it arose. At best, it is ‘handed-down’, strangely familiar and equally new. In its turn, the work itself cannot be repeated either – certainly not in descriptive or critical language in time.

*We step and we do not step into the same rivers; we are and we are not.*

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Long, in conversation following a public lecture given at Dartington, October 18<sup>th</sup> 2005.

<sup>2</sup> *Le tableau est fini, quand il a effacé l'idée. L'idée est le ber [berceau] du tableau.* (“The painting is finished when it has erased the idea. The idea is the cradle of the

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painting”) Georges Braque, *Cahier de Georges Braque, 1917-1947* (Maeght, Paris, 1948), translated by Stanley Applebaum as *Georges Braque Illustrated Notebooks 1917-1955* (New York, Dover, 1971) p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> An earlier version of this essay was published as *Antoine Leperlier* (Paris/Nançay, Editions Galerie Capazza, 2006) pp. 4-16. ISBN 2-915241-22-8.

<sup>4</sup> See *Antoine Leperlier* (Aubais, HD Nick Editions, 1999) – a sustained interview with Jean-Marie Lhôte; also his “Untimely Position” statement in *Antoine Leperlier* (Paris/Nançay, Editions Galerie Capazza, 2002) ISBN 2-9516344-5-5; see also Dan Klein’s timely and useful overview of the artists’s career to date, ‘Expressions of Gravitas’, in *Craft Arts International* (Issue 63, 2005) ISSN 1038-846X pp. 26-30.

<sup>5</sup> Heraclitus, *Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary by T.M. Robinson* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1987) ISBN 0-8020-6913-4. Fragment 49a, p. 35. Also: fragment 12, “As they step into the same rivers, different and [still] different waters flow upon them”; and note 6 below.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, Fragment 91a? [91b], p. 55

<sup>7</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, Book XXXVI

190 Pars Syriae, quae Phoenice vocatur, finitima Iudaeae intra montis Carmeli radices paludem habet, quae vocatur Candebia. ex ea creditur nasci Belus amnis quinque milium passuum spatio in mare perfluens iuxta Ptolemaidem coloniam. lentus hic cursu, insaluber potu, sed caerimoniis sacer, limosus, vado profundus, non nisi refuso mari harenas fatetur; fluctibus enim volutatae nitescunt detritis sordibus.

191 tunc et marino creduntur adstringi morsu, non prius utiles. quingentorum est passuum non amplius litoris spatium, idque tantum multa per saecula gignendo fuit vitro. fama est adpulsa nave mercatorum nitri, cum sparsi per litus epulas pararent nec esset cortinis attollendis lapidum occasio, glaebas nitri e nave subdidisse, quibus accensis, permixta harena litoris, tralucentes novi liquores fluxisse rivos, et hanc fuisse originem vitri.

[[http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Pliny\\_the\\_Elder/36\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Pliny_the_Elder/36*.html)]

<sup>8</sup> Philip Gibbs, *Is glass liquid or solid?*

[<http://math.ucr.edu/home/baez/physics/General/Glass/glass.html>]

<sup>9</sup> Paul Cézanne, letter to Emile Bernard, Aix, April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1904.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Graham-Dixon, *Howard Hodgkin* (Thames and Hudson, London, 1994) p.74

<sup>11</sup> Colm Toibín, ‘I Hate Painting’, in *The Guardian* (Saturday Review) May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2006, pp. 12-3.

<sup>12</sup> Antoine Leperlier, in correspondence with the author, January 2007.

<sup>13</sup> The relationship between Heidegger, Daoism and lost-wax casting is developed in BREWERTON, Andrew (2004d). ‘*Touching the Void*’, in *FORM* No. 1, inaugural issue, December 2004 (Perth, Western Australia) pp. 2-7. ISSN 1832-388X

[[www.form.net.au/form1.pdf](http://www.form.net.au/form1.pdf)].

<sup>14</sup> Toibín, *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Antoine Leperlier, in correspondence with the author, January 2007.