



Philippe Richard

Laumeier (38° 32' 56.45" N / 90° 24' 54.26" W)

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Philippe Richard –
Painting Outside the Lines
essay by Kim Humphries

Something viewers will notice when observing work by Paris-based artist Philippe Richard is that there is always an underlying system at work. Richard is a dedicated painter and typically approaches his work with a given set of parameters, which he uses to explore and exhaust possibilities before moving on to new challenges. His work is influenced by his interest in math, science and time. Richard is also intent on creating fine art from pedestrian materials. Typically, his larger works utilize commercial latex paint, plywood and inexpensive lumber such as fir or pine. There is no gilt or glaze to detract from the work at hand.

Early in his career, Richard had already stepped beyond the boundaries of the canvas – the magic window that has been a standard in painting for centuries. In the early 1990s, his paintings began to include structures that extended from the wall and included elements that were not directly attached to the body of the work. Many of these elements occupied less traditional spaces in the gallery – the ceiling, the floor and anywhere in between. When discussing the act of painting Richard makes references to other artists who improvise or deconstruct as they work. He refers to an artist's book, *Painting Without Worry* by Alain Buyse, in which the translucent pages are shuffled like cards before being assembled. His is not a semiotic practice – he talks about the speed and sound of colors and of baroque music and jazz. When addressing the entire scope of his projects, philosophers and mathematicians such as Descartes and Henri Poincaré enter the conversation.



In 1995, Richard applied for the prestigious Bourse Ville Medicis hors-les-murs award. His application was an unusual and brave one. He proposed a blank slate, with the promise that if he received the award, he would then develop a project. Essentially, he had submitted an anti-proposal. Richard ultimately won the prize, which allowed him to have an extraordinary experience as an artist. He chose to travel to Iceland, where he set up base in Reykjavik and began freely experiencing and exploring the new environment. Iceland is nearly devoid of trees and Richard soon discovered the historic social importance of collecting and using driftwood. According to tradition, fishermen and beachcombers would place their specific mark on pieces of wood, thus claiming ownership and allowing them to collect the wood at a later time. A conversation with an Iceland native brought him to the seemingly simple realization that if there were no trees in Iceland then, of course, the driftwood all must have floated to Iceland from other parts of the world. This spurred Richard to begin a driftwood collection of his own, which he began painting (marking) as his own. The driftwood project eventually became a complex exhibition. Part 1 of *des mois, des années* (months and years) consisted of an exhibition of Richard's painted driftwood at Credac (Centre de



recherche, d'échange et diffusion pour l'art contemporain) near Paris in 1996. The wood pieces filled a large gallery and were carefully arranged on the floor in a grid according to size. The second part of the project also had its origins in Iceland, where Richard had made 180 paintings on paper that were exhibited at the Reykjavik Municipal Art Museum. For the later project, these paintings were taken to France, where each was placed in a bottle, sealed and thrown into the sea. Richard's collection of scavenged driftwood was thus reconciled by the act of offering his own work back to the sea. The gesture of committing his own work to the whims of the oceans asks us to consider a painting project of truly formidable scale – perhaps as large as the Earth.

Following *des mois, des années*, Richard's level of experimentation in the gallery continued to rise. In 1998, at *Interface 4* in Marseilles, he exhibited a series of works for the exhibition *le bord du monde n'existe pas* (the edge of the world does not exist). Each piece in this exhibition consisted of eight panels painted on all sides that could be modularly assembled in countless variations – not eight connected individual paintings, but rather an interchange-



able polyptych puzzle. These paintings were far more temporal than earlier works. Looking at them required increased exploration and effort on the part of the viewer. Richard continued to produce new series of experimental paintings building on the notions of time, point-of-view and the required viewer interaction to take in the work. In 1999 for the exhibition *Variables atmosphériques* at Galerie Le Carré in Lille, works were as large as 36 panels, with the elements of transparency and translucency creating even more viewing potential. For the exhibition *instables* held initially in 2001 at the Galerie Municipale Edouard Manet in Gennevilliers, some works were propped on tentative stilts and others required viewers to pass through a door to enter a massive, shaped painting-environment. Richard carried his painting experiments still further by collaborating with artist Egide Viloux to create the work for the exhibition *antipersonnelle* first held at Espace d'arte Contemporain L'H du siège in Valenciennes in 2004.

Though Richard's work employs many of the trappings of sculpture, his focus is to advance the psychological and formal forces of experiencing painting. The wood panels, frames, plastic, sticks and legs are all included to extend the notion of what painting can be. They are the load-bearing mechanisms that add a distinct behind-the-scenes sense of theater to much of the work.



The opportunity to work outdoors on a large scale was initially presented to Richard for the exhibition *Hors d'oeuvres*, held in 2005 at the jardins d'Athis-Mons and organized by l'Espace d'art contemporain Camille Lambert. He was given a small area on the grounds to construct a temporary project, where he created his first outdoor linear wooden painting. Later that year he was commissioned to create a similar but more ambitious piece for the exhibition *Interventions* at the Savannah College of Art and Design in Lacoste, France. This polychrome piece consisted of one kilometer (3280.84 feet) of wood that improvised its way out of the gallery, across some under-used natural spaces and up the side of a historic building.

For the first piece of this type in the United States, Richard increased the scale of the work to 5,280 feet of wood – one mile. The work contains over 3,200 component parts, painted with an estimated 32,000 two-inch bands of color. The title *Laumeier* (38° 32' 56.45" N / 90° 24' 54.26" W) refers to the precise longitude and latitude coordinates of the center axis of the work – its location on the planet. Richard designed the piece so that it could not be viewed in total from any single vantage point. As in his experimental gallery works, this painting is intended to create a powerfully engaging art experience, something that involves



more than just a glance from the viewer. The work has four uniquely constructed radiating paths that begin (or end) at the central axis. Each path of the axis has its own color system that evolves from end to end. The individual paths fly low to the ground, they encircle tree trunks and dart in and out of the wood's edge. Richard hopes to capture viewers as they happen across a portion of the piece. If they follow it for a bit and find themselves at an end, they may choose to look for more, or turn back and experience the same portion of the work in reverse. On reaching or discovering the axis viewers will be faced with a decision— "What shall I examine next?" It is not a question often asked while viewing a painting.

With *Laumeier* (38° 32' 56.45" N / 90° 24' 54.26" W) Richard has upped the ante for his site-specific outdoor work. Consisting of 2"x2" wood pieces, primer, paint and screws, this piece is essentially the silk purse created from the sow's ear, and a visual adventure that collaborates with the landscape. No two viewers will experience the same interaction with this lanky, dancing series of gestures. That is an extraordinary thing to be able to say about a painting or, indeed, any work of art.

This essay is derived from conversations with the artist from August through October 2006 and from an artist's lecture presented to the sculpture department at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri on October 2, 2006.

artist bio

Born in 1962 in Dijon (France); works and lives in Paris. Richard is represented by the Bernard Jordan Gallery, Paris.

recent one- or two-person exhibitions

- 2006 *Laumeier (38° 32' 56.45" N / 90° 24' 54.26" W)* Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis, MO
Abstract. Galerie Municipale Frontière, Hélemmes-Lille
- 2005 *Antipersonnelle, (avec Egide Viloux)* Galerie Villa des Tourelles, Nanterre.
- 2004 *En long, en large, en travers, sur les cotés, par derrière,* Galerie de l'école + la Galeru, Fontenay-sous-Bois, France
Antipersonnelle, (avec Egide Viloux) Espace d'art contemporain Art Space L'H du Siège, Valenciennes, France
- 2003 *Instables,* Contemporary Art Center, Cesson-Sévigné. France
- 2002 *Variables atmosphériques and other projects 1997-2001,* Ancien Collège des Jésuites, Reims, France
Galerie Epreuve d'artiste, Lille, France.
- 2001 Bernard Jordan Gallery, Paris, France
Variables atmosphériques, Galerie Municipale Edouard Manet, Gennevilliers, France
- 2000 *Variable atmosphérique 4,* La Borne, Tours, France
Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tourcoing, (with Peter Soriano), Tourcoing, France
- 1999 *Le bord du monde n'existe pas,* Bernard Jordan Gallery, Paris
Variables atmosphériques, Le Carré Gallery, Lille, France
Symbiose XIII (with Arend Zwicker), KundenHalle, Erfurt (Germany)

recent group exhibitions

- 2006 *Carte blanche à Bernard Jordan,* Musée Matisse, Le cateau-Cambrésis.
Entrée libre, Maison Folie Wazemmes, Lille, France
- 2005 *La règle du jeu,* Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Quimper.
L'art du semis, Espace d'art Contemporain, Aix-en-Provence, France
Interventions, Savannah College of Art and Design, Lacoste, France
Jim Schmidt Contemporary Art, Saint-Louis, MO, United States
Hors d'oeuvres, jardins d'Athis-Mons, organisé par l'Espace d'art contemporain Camille Lambert, Juvisy/Orge
Tout le monde peut dessiner, Galerie de L'école des Beaux-Arts, Valence
- 2004 *Objectif lune,* Galeries de l'école Régionale des Beaux-arts, Rouen, France
Exercices, L'impasse, Paris, France
Tapin, Une exposition présentée par la galerie Deborah Zafman à Montreuil

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