

## ARTFORUM

### Jimmy Robert

CENTRE RÉGIONAL D'ART CONTEMPORAIN OCCITANIE/PYRÉNÉES-MÉDITERRANÉE



Jimmy Robert, *Untitled (Plié V)*, 2020, ink-jet print on paper, birch pedestal. Installation view.

In an essay first published in 2002, critic and curator Jörg Heiser noted certain Romantic tendencies in 1960s and '70s Conceptual art. Among the key figures of this so-called Romantic Conceptualism was Bas Jan Ader, who came to stand for an artmaking whose stripped-down, barely there form belied a vested concern with bodily politics and the construction and representation of subjectivity. Similar qualities can be found in Jimmy Robert's solo exhibition "*Appui, tendu, renversé*"—the title literally translates to "Support, Tense, Reversed" but, minus the commas, simply refers to a handstand—where these concerns support a reflection on the politics of spectatorship and on the place and visibility of bodies, especially Black male ones, within modernist art-historical narratives.

Curated by Marie Cozette, the exhibition surveys twenty years of Robert's practice across twenty-eight photographs, videos, sculptures, texts, and works on paper, which often put the artist's body and voice in dialogue with existing historical artworks through appropriation, collage, and citation. The video *L'éducation sentimentale*, 2005, for instance, revisits a number of Ader's performances, while *Untitled (brown)*, 2015, consists of a letter to Stanley Broun that was never answered. By underscoring his affinity to these Conceptual art predecessors, figures for whom acts of self-erasure were means of artistic creation in their own right, Robert

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# Tanya Leighton

inserts himself into a lineage in which the body is paramount—as trace, as gesture, as memory, as affect. It may manifest itself as a smell, as in *Untitled*, 2005, a square of brown leather pinned to the wall and carrying the scent of the perfume that Robert habitually wears. *You are only aware of a new neutrality that starts from the hip*, 2015, is a text-based work installed on the wall at the same height as the artist’s hip. *Untitled (Plié II)* and *Untitled (Plié V)*, both 2020, are rolled-up or crumpled photos of the artist in a dancing pose. Though concise, these works are imbued with sensuality. They balance precariously on the cusp of illegibility, as if wary of the capacity of the gaze for categorization and erasure.

For the installation *Descendances du nu* (Descendances of the Nude), 2016, Robert scrambles Duchamp’s seminal 1912 *Nude Descending a Staircase* by transposing it as a kaleidoscopic pattern onto a curtain that hangs from the gallery’s ceiling. Next to it, the artist displays images that combine references to the painting by other artists. Here, he invokes a lineage of female figures—Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, and Elaine Sturtevant—all of whom had previously made Duchamp’s work their own through unapologetic copying and appropriation. For example, Robert applies the procedure Levine used in her *Meltdown* portfolio of 1989: She scanned photos of canonical paintings before reducing each digital file to twelve pixels. When applied to *Nude*, as Robert demonstrates, the brown tones hiding in plain sight reveal themselves (the reference to skin tone is not accidental). In an accompanying text, Élisabeth Lebovici points out that, phonetically, “*descendance* is not far from *dissidence*” and that, crucially, “descending the staircase also means taking the nude [Duchamp’s ‘original’] off its pedestal.” For Robert, the act of descending, falling, or toppling is yet another strategy for dismantling the framework of a heteropatriarchal supremacy whose visual equivalent is verticality. In *Untitled (Ompdrailles)*, 2013, a large black-and-white photograph resting on a wooden bar fixed to the wall depicts a public monument in Brussels, Charles Van der Stappen’s *La mort d’Ompdrailles* (The Death of Ompdrailles), 1897, inspired by a novel of the same name about a Roman gladiator. The subject’s limp body, carried by his trainer, retains its heroic muscularity. But on the other side of the print, the artist deflates the statue’s epic pretensions with a pose that mirrors the sinuous lines of the bronze sculpture but does so by falling and sliding along the statue’s base.

— Anya Harrison