The poetry of the building site

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Frédéric Chaume captures motifs during seconds before they disappear never to be seen again. The life span of a building site consists of these unpredictable moments witnessed by the artistic eye, situations not possible to depict before they appear. Not by the architect nor by anyone else. They demand presence. On site.

There are of course some historical examples of artistic impressions and documentation of building sites, be it as photography or artworks such as the lithography of the Sydney Opera House by Mervyn Smith from 1966. The construction of Snøhetta's Opera and Ballet house in Oslo was also depicted by four art photographers and an author in the book "Site seeing" curated and designed by Guri Dahl in 2008.

The selected works in this book show that Frédéric Chaume's work is less about documentation and more about the fascination of the aesthetics and poetry of this building site in progress. The unfinished, building parts, concrete slabs, glass, cranes, semi structural elements, steel beams, bolts and workers body language settling directly on to paper sheets by the hand of the artist. They become images locked in time, witnessing the different moods of Paris, the times of day and seasons of the year. Some impressions correlate with my own experiences on site, reminding me of the challenges that had to be solved structurally and aesthetically.

The charcoal drawings with Piranesian density, the tinted drawings or watercolors are all originals and not intended for reproduction. The moments captured in his sketchbooks are sometimes changing scales and becoming larger artworks in his studio. The transition of scale is another method to deep dive into the motif, recapturing the moments once more, bringing the spectators eye closer to the details. Still, each drawn line, each painted surface is an immediate reaction to an observation which becomes part of a full story about the construction of the Le Monde headquarters, from the very beginning until the very end.

All the hundreds of sketches, drawings and watercolors have become an inherent part of the building, as important as any part of the building itself. Somehow, they belong together. Yet, the drawings are independent works of art portraying the importance of analogue methods in a time of overwhelming digital presence.

Le Monde was foresighted when asking Frédéric Chaume to be the on-site artist and to introduce the concept of capturing their own building during construction for future artistic experiences. The close follow up by Louis Dreyfus and the fact that Le Monde were building their own headquarters, gave even more relevance to the historic artistic interpretations as part of Le Monde's legacy.

The poems by Lamiya Shirvanzada give another layer of perception, also of moments in time as the artworks, but for the inner eye. The combination of poems and artworks locks the reader of this book in a state of multiple sensory experiences.

The texts by Jean Louis Cohen, to my knowledge unfortunately one of his last pieces, and Kristin Feireiss bring perspectives of Frédéric Chaume's artistic project beyond their creation.

We have tried to create a book that emphasizes the directness of the pictures and the poems to the reader. To be as direct in its communication as the works themselves.

I have never seen such insightful, so many, so rich artworks from a building site before. I hope it could set a trend, developing in parallel with documentational media.

Enjoy.