

FABRICE SAMYN  
*Am I the same?*

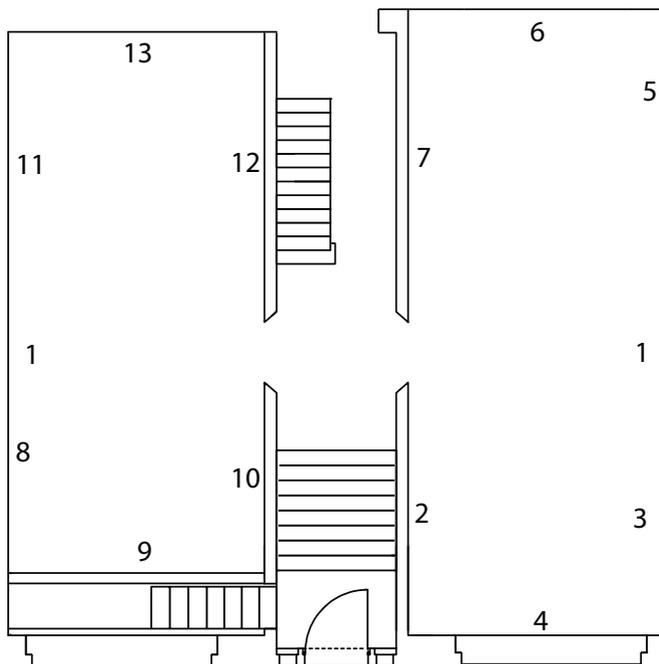
4 April – 17 May 2014

For his fourth solo exhibition at the gallery entitled *Am I the Same?*, Fabrice Samyn is occupying all the exhibition space in the building.

While deepening some topics addressed in his previous exhibition (relationship with time, the spiritual, the role of the image in our world), he opens up new avenues of reflection that explore concepts of identity and twinhood, and weaves relationships between recollection and resemblance between original place and ancestral time.

The protean work of Fabrice Samyn assumes its full stature, since the artist uses a large number of techniques to illustrate his point. Oil on canvas, works on paper, fresco, sculptures but also audio-visual works. In addition, two performances, one on the opening night and the other throughout the duration of the exhibition will emphasise the artist's desire to root his work in the power of the 'here and now'.

## GROUND FLOOR - Right-hand room



Exploration of territories of identity is visible in the work *Am I the same?* which exists in two different time-frames (1). Both visual (video on two monitors) and performative (during the opening reception), this work is based on the writing of a story recited simultaneously by two twin brothers, not actors, who move around the gallery so that the viewer can no longer identify with certainty which is which. Feeding on popular

culture and aesthetic codes of the fairy-tale, Fabrice Samyn probes the tensions inherent in identity by referring to the notion of resemblance rather than dissemblance. Through this oeuvre, we feel the involvement of language in the artist's work and the use of the method of *mise en abîme*, a recurring theme. This aspect of fragility is reflected poignantly in several works, including *I (2)*, a pen and ink drawing executed in a single line and accomplished in a single breath. The work is composed of several sheets initially superimposed, only the first of which was drawn on by the artist. The ink has penetrated each sheet by capillary action, leaving lighter and lighter traces until it becomes invisible, thus linking the fragility of breath to the disappearance of a being.

Faced with this effacement of self, a work from the series *When are you more you?* (3) revisits the depths of identity. Fabrice Samyn takes as his starting point the meticulous observation of some of his childhood paintings produced between the ages of 6 and 7 years, mostly floral compositions. With the desire to regenerate reality, he invited florist Thierry Boutemy to identify the flowers and reconstruct the original bouquets. These were arranged in earthenware vases in the most accurate possible reconstruction of the drawings and then painted by the artist. The traditional practice of painting still life is a step back in time, recreating reality from childish interpretations of the world. The exact replica of an object alludes to the inevitable change that depends on the development of the child's outlook into that of an adult, but also to what is constant, the invariant rooted in the depths of our being. This dual movement, contraction and expansion of time, is likely to reveal, metaphorically, cracks as seen in the canvas *Now and Then* (4) resting on the window ledge.

Interest in conflicting movements is a constant in Fabrice Samyn's work. For example, the two fountains (5), oil paintings executed with lively gestures, repeated, doubled, link the impermanence of the water jet in the air to the impossibility of replicating the same gesture. Each painting consists of a blue background on which are thrown successively a jet of turpentine which dilutes the blue and a jet of white paint which spatters it. The dual relationship with time (Chronos and Kairos) is taking shape here because we can only capture the instantaneous image of the fountain, whereas it is flowing continuously.

The observation of cycles and the impermanence of things are also recognized in the blown glass timer filled with sand from Lampedusa on the one hand and Tanger on the other. On the one hand the island, gateway to Europe with all the hopes attached to it by migrants, and on the other hand, the final port on the shores of Africa, stumbling against the ramparts of the Mediterranean and facing Fortress Europe. Once twin continents, now separated by a sea. In *A Bottle to the ocean*, time stands still, the sand can

no longer flow. It is filled with the soil of Utopia, a common land freed of ownership. It is not surprising that the artist uses sand, this almost liquid material, eternally renewed, to talk about human territories.

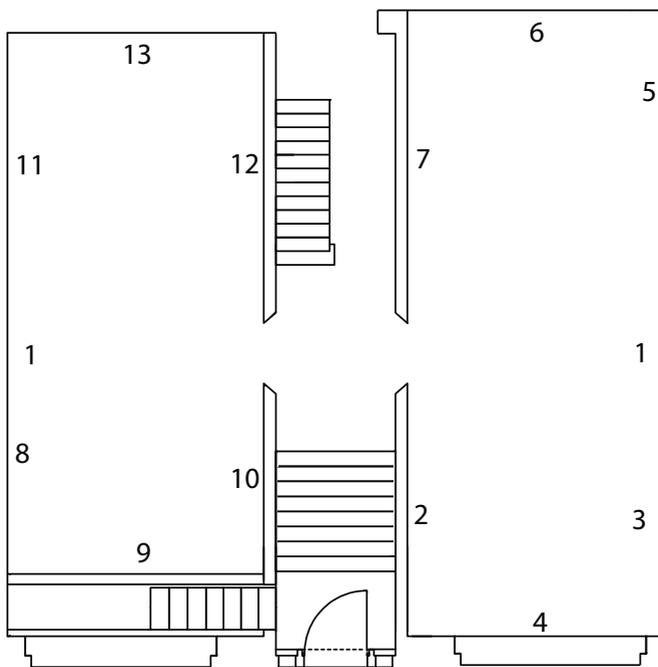
Territories are also examined in Love letter to an unknown person. The artist asked seventeen translators from different countries to translate, one after the other, a love letter. He sent this text on a journey along the line of latitude on which Belgium is situated (50° North). The letter makes a loop since the original language is French as well as the ultimate target language, which reveals the impossibility of being completely faithful to the subtleties of a language. The text is charged with the sensitivity of the translators and it is interesting to note that some impart a lyrical style to it, demonstrating the propensity that some cultures have to associate love and romance. In addition, it also demonstrates the difficulty that nations have in understanding each other.

## **GROUND FLOOR - Left-hand room**

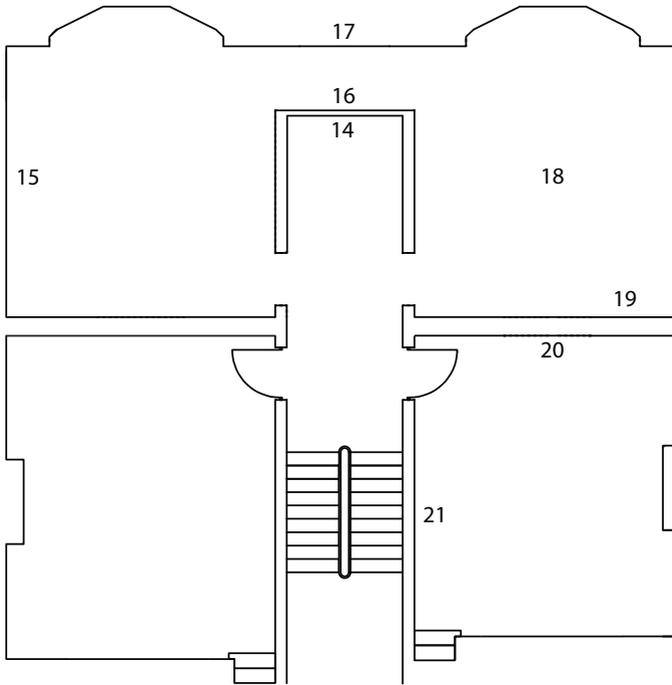
In the left-hand room, the second version of the fairy-tale is visible and symmetrically counterbalances the first one, seen in the other room. The idea of duality is addressed from a different viewpoint with *The mask of time* (8), a painting depicting a young impassive man, bare-chested, with his face painted black and white. A false charoscuro is being portrayed here. The scary make-up of this bust portrait reminds us that Fabrice Samyn often introduces a shamanistic side to his work. *L'espace d'un instant* (9) is a sculpture composed of three clock hands resting on a pine trunk turned to a perfect cylinder. The hands, placed at the centre of growth rings, are facing an obvious flaw and symbolically indicate a break in the 'clock time'. Another relationship to time is understandable in the painting which depicts two moments on a single surface: daylight for the flowers and night for the background (10). Fabrice Samyn's painting is addressed both from a technical viewpoint as well as conceptual. In the quadriptych *Our Wallpaper* (11), which takes its title from the floral motifs on a plain background that characterize conventional wallpapers. These four paintings are done from the observation of a bouquet of flowers that has wilted over time. The artist follows the collapse of the flowers, removes the superfluous and paints only vivid touches that paradoxically reveal that there are bright spots in dilapidation. Although deterioration is generally perceived as impoverishment or corruption, here it proves just the opposite; the qualities of the flowers migrate from one painting to another to express themselves fully in an economy of material.

Describing with scattered patches can also apply to the series of drawn portraits, *Breath piece 3* (12), which finds its existence in the meeting between Fabrice Samyn and a model suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Facial features and pencil lines are intimately intertwined; every breath by the model corresponds to a lifting of the pencil as described in the protocol. Some drawings are more detailed than others but all are executed with

delicate touches and lightweight contours illustrating the vulnerability of the moment. Although the lines are very precise at times, the model's face remains impenetrable. Near the window, a book is placed on a table, like a visitor's book, and awaits the viewer (13). It consists of several school exercise books sewn together and on each page, bearing the words *Je m'appelle*. Every visitor is invited to continue the handwriting exercise by repeating this sentence. The repeated act done in good conscience is a common meditative practice in many cultures and this sentence which is usually followed by a name and thereby precisely identifies an individual, takes on a more universal dimension to become an appeal or a prayer.



## FIRST FLOOR



Going up to the first floor, the visitor discovers *Suppose you don't exist* (14), a painting of a bare-chested man seen from behind, holding a mirror in his left hand. Unexpectedly, nothing is reflected in this mirror. This painting speaks as much about vision as blindness, about potential and erasure, presence and absence.

The perception of space and understanding of what perspective is are subjects of interest to the artist.

In the left-hand room, this issue is highlighted vividly with *From The Decorum* (15), a large mural with blue borders that shows, very dynamically, what is usually hidden. The figurative image has disappeared, leaving only a trace of its presence. So these blue borders frame an emptiness, causing visitors to live a rather physical experience, to challenge the conceptual approach of emptiness.

The small passageway enables you to discover *Eclipse 2* (16), an antique mirror; very oxidized, circular in shape, of which only a crescent was de-oxidized to restore a forgotten brilliance. With a light but precise gesture, FS invokes the sun and the brilliance of time. Not forgetting to mention that its location recalls that on the other side of the wall is a painted mirror ... Facing the mirror flies *Flower's rag* (17), a flag made of sewn fabric stained with oil paint and turpentine that the artist used to clean brushes after painting the pictures on the ground floor. Although an obvious relationship to the

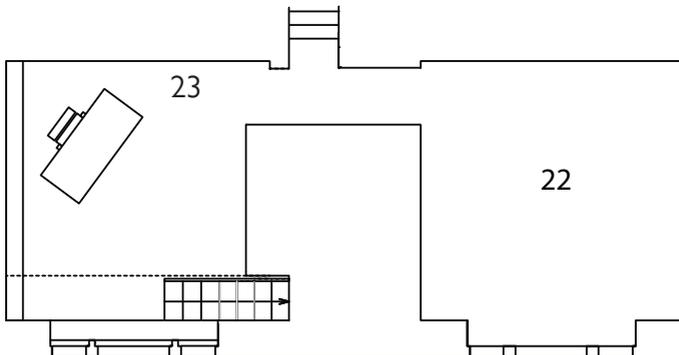
flower is visible, the poor and colourful qualities of this flag undermine the well-ordered, authoritarian codes used to symbolize a nation. In recalling “flower power”, one cannot help seeing a reference to the inanity and futility of all nationalism.

In the right-hand room, *Echo* is an installation consisting of five wild cherry tree trunks placed vertically, showing their growth rings that reflect the age of the tree when it was felled. In the centre of these circles, a symbolic place if ever there was one, the artist has placed a drop of fossilized sap. *Echo* questions origin and the relative concept of time. One could say that these are periods of time which are juxtaposed: that of the drop of water falling into the water and forming concentric circles, that for the tree to grow, that required to fossilize the amber resin.

The observation of nature finds fertile resonance in *Breath piece 4: the cloud library* (20-21) which, as stated in the protocol, is a work which is both sculptural and performative. Throughout the exhibition, Fabrice Samyn will shape clouds that he will observe through the window of the next room, according to a precise procedure based on his breath (one inhalation + one exhalation = one cloud made). The instability of the cloud is reinforced by the vulnerability of breath and the attempt is as commendable as it is futile. How to reproduce what disintegrates, which has a visible relief but a shape that is impossible to identify from the terrestrial viewpoint?

## WUNDERKAMMER

Finally, in the basement, in the Wunderkammer, a work of another kind is unveiled: a work which inaugurates a series of collaborative works *The Point and the nowties*, for which FS brings together several sensitivities embodied by others or himself. The first work in this series, *If I was my lover* (22) takes the form of a vinyl record and therefore affirms its identity textually, musically and visually. The lyrics humorously challenge some cultural assumptions about love and self-awareness.



By concluding his exposition where he started in the field of identity, Fabrice Samyn allows everyone to understand the natural progression that underlies the arrangement of his works. The device to bring them into communion with one another is based on a tireless quest: "that of feeling one's identity by multiplying the forms of one's work, that of making oneself different to attempt a unified experience of the real".