

“The Representation that is made of a Body by Lines or Colours is considered as a mechanical Employment; for this Reason as there are different Workmen in this Art, who apply themselves to different Subjects; it is certain that in Proportion as one employs himself in the most difficult and noble Parts, he excels those which are low and common, and aggrandises himself by a more noble Study. Thus he who paints fine Landskips, is above him who only paints Fruits, Flowers, or Shells. He who paints after Life is more to be regarded than he who only represents still Life; and as the Figure of a Alan is the most perfect Work of God upon Earth, it is also certain that he who imitates God in painting human Figures, is by far more excellent than all others. Moreover though it be no small Matter to make the Picture of a Man appear as if it was alive, and to give the Appearance of Motion to that which has none; one who can only draw Portraits, has not as yet attained to this high Perfection of Art, and cannot pretend to the same Honour with abler Painters. He must for that end advance from Painting one single Figure, to draw several together; he must paint History and Fable; he must represent great Actions like an Historian, or agreeable ones as the Poets. And soaring yet higher, he must by allegorical Compositions, know how to hide under the Veil of Fable the Virtues of great Men, and the most sublime Mysteries. He is esteemed a great Painter who acquits himself well in Enterprises of this Kind. 'Tis in this that the Force, the Sublime and Grandeur of the Art consists. And it is this particularly that ought early to be learned by young Students.”

Text by André Félibien, *Conférences de l'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture. Pendant l'année 1667, 1668, in Art in Theory, 1648-1815*, Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger (eds), Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p.112.

Going further

Documentation centre

A team of librarians will be on hand to help you continue your visit and find out more about reference works.

Free admission Tuesday to Saturday, 2 to 6 pm
cdm@macval.fr or 01 43 91 14 64 — doc.macval.fr

Publication

Le genre idéal. En principe, une tentative d'épuisement.
Catalogue of the exhibition of the collection for the 20th anniversary of the MAC VAL.

Texts by Olivier Bonfait, Yuan-Chih Cheng, Anaïs Linares, Margaut Segui and Nicolas Surlapierre.
2025, MAC VAL editions, 248 pages, 260 reproductions, 17 x 21 cm, 15 euros.

Tours

— For adults and young people aged 11 and over
Every Saturday and Sunday at 4pm
— For families and children aged 4 and over
Every Sunday, 2.30pm. Wednesdays during school holidays, 2.30pm

Free with museum admission Information and booking:
reservation@macval.fr or 01 43 91 64 23

MAC VAL

Musée d'art contemporain du Val-de-Marne — Place de la Libération, Vitry-sur-Seine

MAC VAL
Musée d'art contemporain du Val-de-Marne
Place de la Libération, 94400 Vitry-sur-Seine
01 43 91 64 20
contact@macval.fr
macval.fr

Opening hours Museum

Tuesday to Sunday and public holidays, 11am to 6pm. Last tickets sold 30 minutes before closing time. Closed on 1 January, 1 May, 15 August and 25 December.

Opening hours Garden

Tuesday to Sunday, 9am to 6pm. Free access.

MAC VAL

Musée d'art contemporain du Val-de-Marne — Place de la Libération, Vitry-sur-Seine

THE IDEAL GENRE

*In principle, an attempt
at exhausting*



For full details of the exhibitions and programme: macval.fr
Follow us on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), [YouTube](#) et [Vimeo](#)



arte

Le Monde

BeauxArts

AOC

Slash

Télérama



Exhibition of the
2025-2026 collection

ENG

With works of de Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, Boris Achour, Etel Adnan, Roy Adzak, Dove Allouche, Pierre Ardouvin, Bianca Argimón, Arman, Étienne Armandon, François Arnal, Kader Attia, Bertille Bak, Gilles Barbier, Éric Baudart, Valérie Belin, Frédéric Benrath, Julien Berthier, Amélie Bertrand, Étienne Bossut, Halida Boughriet, Anne Brégeaut, Brognon Rollin, Elina Brotherus, Mark Brusse, Alain Bublex, Pierre Buraglio, Damien Cabanes, Ali Cherri, Claude Closky, Philippe Cognée, Pascale Consigny, Pascal Convert, François-Xavier Courrèges, Olivier Debré, Anne Deguelle, Benjamin Demeyere, Quentin Derouet, Daniel Dezeuze, Noël Dolla, François Dufrêne, Éric Duyckaerts, Erró, Sylvie Fanchon, Malachi Farrell, Philippe Favier, Valérie Favre, Clara Fontaine, Jakob Gautel, Ara Güler, Claire Hannicq, Laura Henno, Suzanne Husky, Neïla Czermark Icti, Pierre Joseph, Valérie Jouve, Piotr Kowalski, Carlos Kusnir, Denis Laget, Laura Lamiel, Ange Leccia, Rainier Lericolais, Élodie Lesourd, Philippe Mayaux, Mathieu Mercier, Annette Messenger, Olivier Millagou, Lahouari Mohammed Bakir, Jacques Monory, Roman Moriceau, Morvarid K, Jean-Luc Moulène, Netto, Jean-Christophe Norman, Antoinette Ohannessian, Vincent Olinet, ORLAN, Lucien Pelen, Laurent Pernot, Bruno Perramant, Françoise Pétrovitch, Éric Poitevin, Daniel Pommereulle, Présence Panchounette, Laure Prouvost, Enrique Ramírez, Judit Reigl, Germaine Richier, Gwen Rouvillois, Alain Séchas, Régis Sènèque, Bruno Serralongue, Société Réaliste, Daniel Spoerri, Peter Stämpfli, Nathalie Talec, Tsuneko Taniuchi, Barthélémy Toguo, Roland Topor, Patrick Tosani, Thu-Van Tran, Agnès Varda, Jean-Luc Vilmouth, Catherine Viollet, Hugh Weiss...

Commissioned by Nicolas Surlapierre

Co-curated by Yuan-Chih Cheng, Anaïs Linares, Margaut Segui and the teams at MAC VAL

20 years of MAC VAL, the museum where the future has already begun

Chronicle of an exhibition

20 years ago, the department of Val-de-Marne inaugurated its museum, the MAC VAL. This anniversary is an opportunity to confirm the quality of the museum’s heritage, a unique collection that is the fruit of over forty years of remarkable, expertly judged acquisitions. It is also an opportunity to reaffirm the expression of a museum that has remade itself and is open to the future.

This new hanging devised by the curatorial team is the result of a wide-reaching process whereby the selection of works to be displayed to the public was conceived in an unprecedented, collegial way, involving all the museum teams. Their choices, debates and selections were put forward in open workshops full of passion, conviction, enjoyment and, finally, agreement. Visitors will have the pleasure of discovering or rediscovering emblematic works from the collection. The display is designed to evoke the memories, emotions and discoveries that we have shared over the twenty years years of MAC VAL’s existence so far.

The ideal genre

The speciality of the MAC VAL collection is “contemporary art in France since the 1950s.” Over the years, it has acquired a unique, strong character conducive to encounters between major and emerging artists. Each of the regularly renewed hangings of this collection is an opportunity to rediscover these works from

He defined a classification that would govern academic painting and established the idea of noble genres and sub-genres in which subject matter took precedence over technical mastery.

Le genre idéal takes a mischievous look at each of the five genres in this hierarchy: *still life*, *landscape*, *genre scene*, *portrait* and *history painting*, restyled by this show as, respectively, *property*, *horizons*, *actions*, *people* and *hours*, as they become parodic participants in the great rhetorical adventure of art history and art education.

According to Nicolas Surlapierre, “Le genre idéal is therefore an open-door exhibition that brought together everyone at the museum who wanted to take part, who wanted to play with this parody of the heritage business. The participatory workshops made the porosity and instability of genre and subject hierarchies immediately perceptible [...] At a time of undeniable societal change, why should we hold on to classifications in art, and in the end who, among the artists, critics and visitors, really wants to hold on to them? Might it not be possible to find another way of classifying? Do we really believe in the principles of equivalence? In the end, isn’t it really rather the desire to rediscover inviolable subjects which will of course be treated very differently that adds nuance to the supposedly iconoclastic nature of contemporary art?”

a fresh new perspective. In 2025, to mark its twentieth anniversary, MAC VAL is planning a display devoted to the hierarchy of genres.

Such a notion was put forward by the art historian André Félibien in 1667 in the preface to his *Conférences de l’Académie Royale de peinture et de sculpture*.

He defined a classification that would govern academic painting and established the idea of noble genres and sub-genres in which subject matter took precedence over technical mastery.

Le genre idéal takes a mischievous look at each of the five genres in this hierarchy: *still life*, *landscape*, *genre scene*, *portrait* and *history painting*, restyled by this show as, respectively, *property*, *horizons*, *actions*, *people* and *hours*, as they become parodic participants in the great rhetorical adventure of art history and art education.

Property — Still life

Still life, a minor pictorial genre according to the theorist André Félibien, consists of the representation of inanimate objects, plants and animals. It conjures up a tension between the living and the inert, which is reflected in the terms of its name. While the English and German expression emphasises the idea of an “immobile life” [*still life* and *Stilleben*], the French *nature morte*, in use from the eighteenth century onwards, speaks of a “dead nature.” Here, “possessions” hold within themselves the ghosts of the past, questioning us about the conditions of our own loss. Taking a reflexive look at our consumer society, the artists confront us with the future of all organisms and the evolution of our environments and ecosystems. This section of the exhibition presents a genre that, over the centuries, has challenged us about the way we live and relate to things and living things.

Horizons — The landscape

Starting from the principle that a painting illustrates a single subject which defines it as a genre, André Félibien drew around landscape contours that limited it to the representation of nature alone. He did not consider the genre in the context of diversified and growing artistic creation. The works in this section reflect the diversity of artists’ views of nature, as well as the new issues and constant changes associated with landscapes. All of these viewpoints differ according to the practice and sensibility of the artists, who perpetuate and reinterrogate the genre while at the same time enriching it. The sky, the cosmos, the sea, rocks, the garden, the island, the luxuriant or burnt-out forest are all part of this universe, multiplying its horizons. Discovering the works becomes a stroll punctuated by movements back and forth between landscapes painted, drawn, photographed, retouched, filmed, but also invented and literally built from scratch out of manufactured elements or natural residues, embodying the relationship between humans and their environment.

Everyday actions — Genre painting

This *genre* is concerned with the depiction of everyday, often anecdotal scenes. It is partly for this reason that genre painting, as it was known, was placed in the middle of the hierarchy, despite its popularity, which, in terms of taste alone, would certainly have placed it at the top. There is no heroism, no epic situations, just a new science of relationships.

In this section, the action is enough to signal the work of art; it is declarative. In its funny, evanescent, tragic or unconscious form, it is often the expression of a decision, that of artists who like to point out what will remain of most of our acts or decisions. Whether in painting, photography or installation, a good many of the works gathered here describe spaces that are strangely deserted. When did the world come to resemble an abandoned dance hall? When did we stop talking about genre scenes? No one really knows, because no one pays any attention to this terribly dated formulation any more. Only the actions still bear witness to these edifying scenes whose subject is now our attitudes.

People — The portrait

Is it anachronistic to talk about the “portrait” genre from the point of view of contemporary art – and sociologist Nathalie Heinich argues that this is already a genre in itself – insofar as, according to Pliny the Elder, the invention of the portrait was concurrent with that of painting itself?

Starting with the idea that the human being is the main subject of artistic creation, this section brings together tributes, faces and stories, expressed through the figure, alter ego and portrait of the other, which form the infinitely polysemous figure of “people” and designate an indefinite society. This indeterminacy also corresponds to an idea of art that, in perpetual metamorphosis, never ceases to define and de-define itself, as proposed by the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in *L’Autre Portrait*. He concludes that art’s contemporaneity lies solely in its own questioning, its own wandering, and its “always uncertain and trembling” birth in “forms that would be appropriate to an ‘elusiveness’ of all received properties.”

The hours — History painting

In his hierarchy Félibien considers “The Hours,” or history painting, to be the major genre. For a long time, and perhaps for some time to come, our relationship with history as it is being made and unmade has taken the form of TV news. There, historical, sociological and political events unfold, happily or less happily. This section is based on this model, because artists are good historians, especially when they play with the codes of history.

For artists, history is a science of limbo, a science that seeks to rediscover all that is not quite lost, or all that has been lost along the way. As we go through this section, it becomes clear that there can

Excerpt from the catalogue text by Nicolas Surlapierre

“This hanging is also intended to be a participatory exercise. As part of MAC VAL’s twentieth birthday celebrations, this anniversary presentation was based on a simple premise: five categories, and over 2,700 works between us to be shared. Workshops were organised so that everyone could have their say as how this or that work related to still life, landscape, portrait, allegory or genre scenes. It was both a game and a lesson. Sometimes the proposals were surprising, because these categories, far from being fixed, were as fluid as they were porous, with one sliding from one to the other and being made up of one and the other, in unequal parts, forcing us to ask ourselves a simple question about representation: in the end, which subject dominates and on what conditions, if not at what price? Even if such a remark remains somewhat empirical, the workshop that posed the most difficulties was the one named after what Félibien called “history painting” or the “representation of history.” Today, in fact, the subject can no longer be assigned and limited to one medium. It seems significant that this genre which unquestionably reigned supreme despite artists’ taste for landscape or still life is now the one that no longer fires the imagination, or even seems to mean anything to anyone.

The hesitation could be explained by the constraint of having to draw on the collection, but the nature of the slight unease came from elsewhere: politics and the political have supplanted history. No one is sufficiently familiar with allegory, its reincarnations and its many avatars, to shift history onto one of its rhetorical dependencies. At which point, the theory of genres returned to first principles. The beauty of the exhibition arose from the strangeness of some of the proposals and the collusion, in the

be no historical science without a divinatory character, without the ability to read oracles in order to better understand the present by traversing the past.

five sections, of artists who are very different from each other. Their juxtaposition will certainly create new meanings (perhaps even new subjects) or, in any case, ways of inscribing them not in accordance with historical logic but in accordance with a rhetorical tradition, to such an extent that they even acquire new functions.

Each of the sections therefore resembles an exquisite cadaver or, more precisely, must respond to the poetry of the non-sequitur and anachronism. It would have been unsatisfactory to keep [...] the old names, so the poetry of these fortuitous or chance encounters is reinforced by the play of words rather than by wordplay. Still life has become possessions, landscape has become horizons, genre scenes have become actions, portraits have become people and the old history painting has become hours. Beyond the choice of words that each of the section openings will endeavour to describe, we felt it was important to opt for the plural, which allowed greater freedom [...].

It remained to mention the subtitle, which made a clear reference to a strange work by Georges Perec, *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien (...)* Georges Roque’s work, which is so necessary for understanding this new proposal, includes a fine quotation by Georges Perec from *Penser/Classer*. These two infinitives, which can sum up the work of a curator, are particularly effective in the context of presenting the permanent collections. The rather long quotation from Perec concludes: “(...) which must say something about the different roles of marked and unmarked terms in classifications and hierarchies.”¹

^[1] Georges Roque, Majeur ou mineur, Les hiérarchies en art, Nîmes: Éditions Jacqueline Chambon, 2000. Perec translation in Thoughts of Sorts, David R. Godine Publisher Inc, 2009.