ARTFORUM

View of "Raphaël Zarka," 2017. Photo: Florian Kleinefenn.

Raphaël Zarka

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For the past decade, Raphaël Zarka's work has prominently featured images of skateboarders taking advantage of the slick surfaces, hard edges, and smooth slopes of monumental public artworks. For the series "Riding Modern Art," 2007–, Zarka, himself a skater, compiled an impressive portfolio of video clips and still photographs that show sculptures by the likes of Pablo Picasso and Richard Serra serving as improvised ramps and illicit half-pipes. Similarly irreverent, the artist's recent exhibition, "Monte Oliveto," also raised questions about the relationship between form and function. Commingling artistic and scientific references, Zarka's new sculptures, drawings, and collages advocate the utility of forms that are ostensibly purely aesthetic and, conversely, emphasize the aesthetic value of useful objects.

The centerpiece of the exhibition was *Partition régulière W8M1* (Regular Score W8M1), 2016, a large wooden sculpture whose polyhedral form is based on geometric models developed by the nineteenth-century German mathematician and crystallographer Arthur Schoenflies. Originally, Schoenflies fabricated twelve modules in white plaster, using them to illustrate an impressive, but finite, number of natural crystal formations. Fitting together eight of these didactic modules according to his own aesthetic preferences rather than Schoenflies's rules, Zarka created a monumental oak structure that appeared more Minimalist than mathematical. Easy comparisons to Donald Judd or Robert Morris are complicated, however, by the fact that *Partition régulière W8M1* is far from pristine. It has, in fact, been used (and, one might even say, abused). Scuffed, splintered, and dented, the sculpture's surfaces bear the lasting marks of skaters, who were permitted to jump on and skid across the modular polyhedrons before Zarka positioned them in their final configuration. While negating some of the sculptures' street cred, the white-cube gallery setting promoted an aesthetic appreciation of Zarka's hallmark combination of rational perfection (mathematics) and free-spirited spontaneity (skate culture).

Another unexpected marriage of art and science appeared in two carefully rendered ink drawings of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Scottish sundials, *Cadran solaire n°1 (Ambroise Bachot)* (Sundial No.1 [Ambroise Bachot]) and *Cadran solaire n°2 (Musée du Pays Vaurais)* (Sundial No.2 [Vaurais Country Museum]), both 2017. Reduced to two dimensions, the ornate configurations resemble Constructivist compositions of rectangles and triangles. And while the titles clearly identify the function of Zarka's quirky subjects, the drawings themselves are intentionally ambiguous, appearing simultaneously representational and abstract. Remarkably, they manage to be convincing on both levels.

The bulk of the exhibition was devoted to decorative geometric patterns that Zarka observed in the Abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore, near Siena, Italy. The abbey's cloister is known for a Luca Signorelli fresco series depicting the life of Saint Benedict, yet Zarka, rather than turning his attention to these Renaissance masterpieces, focused on a collection of minor works by anonymous artists: twenty-three trompe l'oeil columns. Using collaged colored papers, Zarka faithfully recreated (to scale) the brightly painted bases of each faux column. Although the inspiration for this "Monte Oliveto" series, 2016, is art historical, there is a connection back to Schoenflies and his mathematical portioning of space. Working in two dimensions, Renaissance artists also used geometry to divide space and give it clarity. But, as Zarka's collages reveal, the original painted patterns are often imperfect and appear awkwardly cropped by predetermined rectangular frames. An ideal subject for Zarka, these mathematical solutions are both fueled and foiled by creative momentum.

—*Mara Hoberman*