

ARTFORUM

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CLOSE UP: FULL DISCLOSURE

Molly Warnock on Gilles Aillaud's *Rhinocéros, eau et rochers*, 1969



Gilles Aillaud, *Tuyau et porcs-épics* (Pipe and Porcupines), 1976, oil on canvas, 57 1/2 × 44 7/8".

AT FIRST, it looks like an enormous beetle, this mysterious form mostly submerged in water. Two tubular ears, antennae-like, swivel in opposite directions, while the stump of an amputated horn rises above the preternaturally still pool. A rhinoceros. Stripped of narrative context and confined, like the picture as a whole, to the narrowest of chromatic ranges, the unblinking beast resides in a perpetual present, monumental and unyielding. The brushstrokes are opaque yet utterly devoid of painterly bravado: Drab brown and gray daubs denote a mottled hide; creamy strokes suggest ribs beneath the skin. A fringe of rivulets drips from a dorsal ridge, underscoring both the tactility of the fold and the armor-like impenetrability of the hide. At the waterline, however, there is a palpable shift. The compact density of the head and flank gives way to a ghostly, all but illegible undercarriage, concealed in turn by the

animal's partially reflected likeness. Unlike Narcissus, the creature does not regard its image but is simply enshrouded by it. Behind the rhinoceros, taking up nearly two-thirds of the vertical canvas, is a cement wall roughly molded to resemble rock. Brushed in milky white and tan, the sloping, loosely stepped ridges appear to ripple up from the body, while an eyelike cavity just right of center suggests a more general dissemination of the figure about the field. Other correspondences emerge—between blackish splatters and deliberate stippling; between exposed nubs of canvas and plainly applied pale spots; between the multiple veils and vertical runs of diluted pigments that articulate the wall and the darker patches and striations that pattern the carapace. But then, no less important are the protruding, vertically stacked white rectangles at upper right. Blankly interrupting the otherwise captivating relays between the roughly centered form and the depicted decor—and clearly underscoring the ersatz nature of the latter—they equally recall and coolly regularize the roughly divided structure of the painting, as if bridging one manufactured surface and another.



Gilles Aillaud, Eduardo Arroyo, and Antonio Recalcati, *Vivre et laisser mourir ou la fin tragique de Marcel Duchamp* (Live and Let Die or the Tragic End of Marcel Duchamp), 1965, oil on canvas, eight panels, overall 5' 4 1/8" × 32' 6 1/2".

Rhinocéros, eau et rochers (Rhinoceros, Water and Rocks), 1969, is the work of a singular figure in postwar French art. Gilles Aillaud, who died in 2005 at the age of seventy-seven, attained notoriety for the sardonic polyptych *Vivre et laisser mourir ou la fin tragique de Marcel Duchamp* (Live and Let Die or the Tragic End of Marcel Duchamp), which he produced collaboratively with Eduardo Arroyo and Antonio Recalcati in 1965 and exhibited that same year at Paris's Galerie Creuze. Pitted against what these artists perceived as Duchamp's incurably individualistic attitude—the ways in which, in their view, the readymade enshrined a fundamentally reactionary understanding of the artist as a demiurge—the flatly painted work reveals affinities with the Pop-like pictorial tendency known in France as *la figuration narrative*. Another collectively produced canvas-scandal, made with Arroyo, Francis Biras, Lucio Fanti, and Fabio Rieti, followed in 1969, in the bitter aftermath of the events of May 1968: *La datcha* (The Dacha) depicts Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes in full retreat from the world, while a shadowy Louis Althusser hovers just beyond the sliding-glass door.



Gilles Aillaud, *Rhinocéros, eau et rochers* (Rhinoceros, Water and Rocks), 1969, oil on canvas, 78 3/4 × 59 1/8".

However, as an outstanding recent exhibition at New York's Ortuzar Projects (the painter's first solo show in the city since 1982) reminded us, Aillaud's main—and to this day most powerful—body of work consists of the notably self-contained paintings of animals in zoos that dominated his production in the 1960s and '70s. At a time when other artists in the Hexagon were turning to forms of “deconstructive” or “analytic” abstraction (think BMPT and Supports/Surfaces), or, indeed, abandoning painting altogether, Aillaud concentrated almost exclusively on depicting animals—often alone, as in *Rhinocéros*, but sometimes in pairs or groups—behind bars or glass, in aquariums or terrariums, taking in the sun or huddled under heat lamps, in one man-made enclosure or another. The creatures are frequently reduced in scale relative to the composition as a whole, with considerable space given over to stagelike settings. There is no discernible development in the oeuvre until 1976, when Aillaud traveled to Greece and began to draw and paint animals in their native habitats.



Gilles Aillaud, *Deux serpents (Two Snakes)*, 1964, oil on canvas, 31 7/8 × 51 1/8".

The zoo paintings are often seen as straight-forward allegories of human alienation under advanced capitalism, an understanding bolstered by the artist's militant anticolonialism—as was manifest, for example, in his directorial activity at the Salon de la Jeune Peinture from 1965 through 1969, which saw him organizing exhibitions such as “*Salle rouge pour le Vietnam*” (Red Room for Vietnam) and “*Police et culture*” (Police and Culture), both mounted in 1969. Such readings assume that the paintings of animals are essentially displaced portraits of human beings, an inference their author frequently contested. A second line of interpretation, more congenial to the works' compositional complexity, is broadly phenomenological, informed by Aillaud's early philosophical training under Jean Beaufret, then the foremost Heideggerian in France, and by the artist's lifelong admiration for Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In this view, Aillaud's animal paintings engage larger meditations on the ceaseless interplay of the visible and the invisible—on the very emergence of form.

While many of Aillaud's own writings move in the latter direction, they also suggest that his art still contains much more to think through. Consider, for example, his 1986 text “*Voir sans être vu.*”^{*} Translated into English as “The Hidden Eye” (a more literal rendering would be “Seeing Without Being Seen”), the essay is the painter's contribution to a volume of essays on Vermeer—a touchstone for Aillaud. Much of the piece addresses the Dutch artist's canvases, but the title suggests a broader painterly imperative, and more than a few passages read as implicit commentary on Aillaud's own project. At the heart of the text is the idea that the things “most overt and most accessible” are for that very reason the least seen, as if concealed by their very obviousness. Aillaud has in mind certain details of inanimate objects—“the black of the ink in an inkwell,” say, or “the studs of the chest gleaming in the shadows”—but also, suggestively, Vermeer's privileged models, “two or three different women, captured or entrapped in a perpetual afternoon.”



Gilles Aillaud, *Tortues sous les ampoules* (Turtles Under the Bulbs), 1975, oil on canvas, 51 1/8 × 76 3/4".

Vermeer, Aillaud intimates, sets all of these “things” at a reserve, freeing them of their patency so as to allow them, finally, to *appear*: “He reveals what is open to view.” Importantly, this act of revelation requires a specific authorial stance: “The epiphany of a thing,” Aillaud notes, “can be inhibited (by, for example, an oversubjective vision), or . . . it may be left alone and allowed to emerge of itself.” But, he warns, “this ‘letting alone’ [or “letting be”: *laisser-être*] is not easy; it demands not only acute concentration but also an equal measure of relaxation, since the energy expended in achieving the effect must then be dissipated if it is not to form a barrier.”



Gilles Aillaud, *Orang-outang derrière vitre* (Orangutan Behind Glass), 1972, oil on canvas, 53 1/8 × 47 1/4".

Here is a way of thinking about Aillaud's own paint handling in *Rhinocéros*, with its suggestive interplay of density and dispersion, of clearly intentional modes of mark-making and the "freer," less obviously authored (or less tightly controlled) echoes of those same painterly events. A similar dissipation via resemblance occurs in *Tortues sous les ampoules* (Turtles Under the Bulbs), 1975: A cluster of tortoises, among Aillaud's most-painted animals, appears strongly illuminated from above—a visual metaphor for "acute concentration" if ever there were one—at the radiant center of a putty-colored field whose texture loosely recalls that of the reptiles' incandescent shells and, like those shells, darkens toward the periphery. But in other works, this dialectic takes different forms. For example, in *Orang-outang derrière vitre* (Orangutan Behind Glass), also from 1975, Aillaud makes recourse to metaphors of evaporation. A solar simian, one arm a veritable profusion of orange and violet brushstrokes emanating from a white-hot shoulder, is set against a bleached environment, the cell's minimal features barely articulated by watery traces and pools seemingly on the verge of dissipation. Even the images of barriers participate—paradoxically, it can appear—in the very dispersion of energy on which Aillaud insists. Whether tiles or lattices, geometric or reticulated, the afocal structures that compose the animal enclosures engage our gaze in a larger play of lateral scanning.



Gilles Aillaud, *Cage aux lions* (Lion Cage), 1967, oil on canvas, 78 3/4 × 98 3/8".

Read against such pictures, Aillaud's interest in "letting alone" appears as a unique variant of the broader turn in the art of the 1960s toward impersonality—and indeed, he deployed techniques (watercolor—like handling, pours and veils, Pollockian spatters) and compositional strategies (grids and other repeating forms) plainly shared with major figures and currents in abstraction at the time. (One might also note the quasi-photographic quality of his cropping and of certain of his light effects, such as the overexposed appearance of *Orangoutang*.) Yet in Aillaud's work, those modes and devices not only inform depiction but, indeed, complement the artist's highly specific subject matter. In the zoo paintings, Aillaud's ethos finds its absolute antithesis, and therefore its perfect thematic foil, in the carceral impetus it puts on view. The zoo encloses; painting discloses.

"Vermeer," Aillaud tells us, "paints time—not Proustian time, which seethes with activity, ramifying and meandering, time that abuts on and mingles with everything it meets in its course, but time that is in the act of passing, the infinitesimal moment in which a thing exists, static and monumental, as a presence." This is the time of the rhinoceros in the glassy pool—but also, on the evidence of the Ortuzar Projects exhibition, of the lions behind their bars, the hippopotamuses beneath the jet of water, the serpents coiled on themselves. It is the time of animals somehow immobile in their very movement: the faceless porcupines in their equally blind corner, the mongoose suspended mid-scuttle in a Martian landscape. Aillaud paints the intractable otherness of things, the infinity of finitude.

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