MARSEILLE MODULOR (MAMO), the art space on the newly refurbished roof of Le Corbusier’s Cité radieuse housing block, a midcentury experiment in vertical-urban planning in the south of France, has taken an audacious step forward in its sophomore annual summer exhibition. The show (on view through September 30) presents a monumental, site-specific installation by Daniel Buren, Défini, Fini, Infini, which significantly raises the bar for the fledgling space by staging a remarkable encounter between a weighty architectural context and an ambitious artistic intervention.

MAMO has evinced a strategic awareness of the historical import of their location from the beginning, opening last year with an exhibition of explicit homages to Le Corbusier by French artist Xavier Veilhan. He transformed images of the venerated modernist architect, real and imagined, into sculpture: A small-scale diorama featured bronze versions of Le Corbusier rowing a catamaran with his contemporaries, Pierre Jeanneret and Buckminster Fuller; a monumental bust created the illusion that the late architect, pencil in hand, had drawn the entire building into being. “Xavier was a perfect fit for the opening,” says Ora Ito, the Paris-based but Marseille-born designer who founded MAMO after leading the roof’s renovation process. “For me, it was very important that people could see the space. He didn’t hide anything. He didn’t transform the building.”

By contrast, Ito’s second show has separated itself entirely from such literal representations and genuflections to the Le Corbusier legend; as little as Buren’s abstract work has to do with image, it has even less to do with
homage. He took a decidedly more disruptive route, focusing less on the architect and more on the architecture. He combined the familiar mainstays of his visual vocabulary—expanses of mirrored glass and narrow white-and-colored stripes—with Le Corbusier’s recurring square motifs to shatter and distort the architecture and its surroundings, which, in this outdoor space, mean Marseilles’ mountains, sea, and sky.


The exhibition begins quietly as visitors pass through a southward-facing door toward *4 Carrés pour 3 Couleurs, bas-relief, travail in situ* (*4 Squares for 3 Colors, bas-relief, work in situ*), 2014, four square panels colored green, white, and yellow to correspond with the square tiles Le Corbusier had scattered on the walls throughout his design. Turning the corner, the show explodes into a series of colors and illusions: *Fragments de ciels, haut-relief, travail in situ* (*Fragments of sky, haut-relief, work in situ*), 2014, in which a row of alternately convex and concave angled mirrors are a checkerboard of red, white, and blue panels and mirrors that create exactly the condition suggested by the work’s title. It is difficult to discern what is real and what is a mirror image, what is blue panel and what is a reflection of cloudless sky. The mirrored panels, too, turn Le Corbusier’s ship-shaped concrete solarium on its side as if it were sinking, and redistribute architectural elements in new compositions. Throughout the progression of the day the panels undergo constant change, representing what Ito calls the *infini* (“infinite”) aspect of Buren’s work; as midday turns to dusk, their reflections shift from blue to orange to deep purple. The squares of light they reflect onto the béton brut floor grow long and distant before they disappear entirely.

On the façade of the concrete solarium, Buren created *La Mire, travail in situ*, 2014, a Mondrianesque, kaleidoscopic composition of brightly colored inlays of square and rectangular film on its windows. On the tubular (rather than rectangular) interior, sunlight filters through the colored film and is reflected by the mirrors Buren placed on the floor below, encircling the viewer with streams of rainbow light. The effect falls between the religious, meditative experience of being enclosed in stained glass and the whimsy of standing inside a man-sized kaleidoscope. Yet despite these evocations, Buren’s works are largely indifferent to the space’s deified historical legacy: “If someone were to say these works were an homage to Le Corbusier, I wouldn’t say no, but in my mind, it’s not an homage. It’s a work in such a place which I found absolutely interesting, very well thought out, and even beautiful.”

With his long-running history of installing works in venerated spaces (the Grand Palais, Palais Royal, and the Guggenheim rotunda, to name a few), Buren is quite the match for Le Corbusier. Unbeknownst to him (actually pointed out by Ito), his lines follow the *modulor*, the system of measurement Le Corbusier invented to guide the proportion of the modular, from which the space takes its name. Perhaps more importantly, Buren’s work also brings to light the particular characteristics of a space: its site and the nuances of its architecture, which is, after all MAMO’s defining asset.

*Défini, Fini, Infini runs through September 30, 2014 at Marseille Modulor.*

— Janelle Zara