

ARTFORUM

Michel François

BORTOLAMI DAYAN

Encountering an exhibition that eschews color, hints at violence, and deploys symbols most often associated with nationalism, one tends to expect political critique. This show, Michel François's first New York solo in five years, boasted all of these attributes but stripped them of their usual associations.

With its predominant use of anarchists' favorite color, a militaristic-sounding title, "Theater of Operations," and the prominence of motifs such as a flag and an eagle, one could be forgiven for likening François's show to those of younger European artists like Marc Bijl, Gardar Eide Einarsson, or Jakob Kolding, all of whom channel capital-*P* politics into their art. But the works on view here either thwart or muddy coherent political readings—and the graphic punch of all that black could be seen as an elaborate (if perhaps unintentional) red herring.

François's orchestration of Bortolami Dayan's unforgivingly over-size main space (which he cut down to more manageable proportions by filling it with a stagelike carpeted plinth sporting a flagpole, succinctly titled *White Flag and Carpet Installation*, 2006) revealed his keen ability as a stage director, an important skill to have when install-

ing as disparate a collection of objects as were included here. The whole thus seemed greater than its parts, though thematic links were difficult to discern. Far more striking were the formal correspondences between the sculptures, video, installations, and photographs on view, as among the blown glass and papier-mâché balloons or the small white polystyrene balls affixed to a coil of barbed wire in *Untitled (Barbed wire)*, 2005, the circles projected on top of the world map in *Map of the World*, 1992/2005, and the core sample that made up *Hole and Wall*, 2006.

Perhaps this tendency toward stylistic concordance is symptomatic of the fact that, despite ranging across media, François habitually revisits his own oeuvre (a recent exhibition at the De Pont Museum of Contemporary Art in the Netherlands was titled "Déjà vu"); he is a patient reviser. The gigantic, enigmatic image of an octopus, for example, here printed on canvas and doused with splotches of black ink, was earlier presented as a smaller stand-alone photograph. The visual concatenation somewhat tempers the confusion engendered by the artist's self-styled "rhizomatic"



Michel François, *Untitled (Barbed wire)*, 2005, barbed wire and polystyrene, 22 ¼ x 6 ½ x 6 ½".

practice, in which each exhibition is a temporary alignment of his nonhierarchical and divergent responses to the world (François is an itinerant artist). But here the rhizome's fragile network seemed to dissolve and disperse on sight, leaving the (arguably conservative) viewer to grasp for hints of all-encompassing meaning.

What emerged instead was François's intuitive ability to marshal a great number of objects into a seemingly coherent (if still ambiguous) *mise-en-scène*, as well as his penchant for creating sculptures that have a tactile quality (an eagle made of ice dipped in black ink; the wood and spent charcoal in *Contamination*, 2005; the plaster enveloping the bristles in *Black Broom*, 2005), two characteristics that unexpectedly brought to mind Gabriel Orozco. To make *Gold Leaf Cube*, 2005 (for me, the most compelling work in the show), François removed a fistful of gold-covered cement from the side of a still-drying block before setting it on top to harden. The simplicity of the gesture echoes the Mexican artist's work. But whereas Orozco's photographic diptych *My Hands Are My Heart*, 1991, in which the artist holds out a heart-shaped lump of clay bearing the visible imprints of his fingers, embodies his sense of poetry and suggests that he has a romantic streak, François's sculpture was undeniably beautiful but remained coolly distant.

—Brian Sholis