

# The HAND

THE MAGAZINE FOR REPRODUCTION-BASED ART

ARTIST INTERVIEWS:

LAURENT MILLET

SEAN STAR WARS

ANNETTE GOLAZ



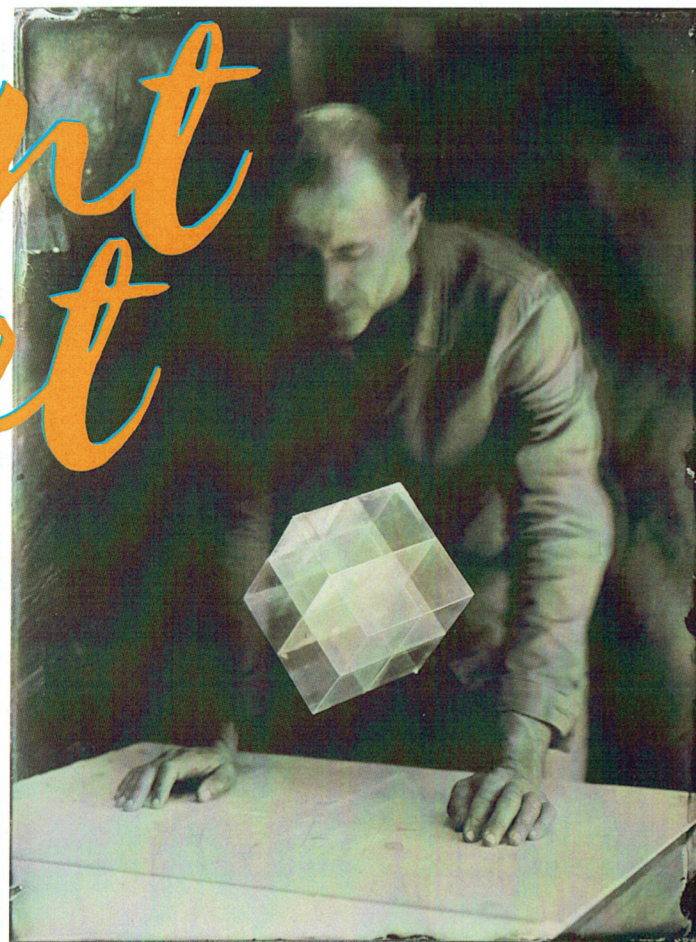


# Laurent Millet

Photographer and visual artist Laurent Millet creates objects from a range of different materials that he photographs in his studio or places in a natural setting. Depending on his interest and inspiration, his assemblages can be based on mathematics, architecture, objects, or inspired by artists he admires. Each construction explores a solution to a problem that requires the viewer to question its history, its place, the physical phenomena attached to it and its modes of appearance.

James: In your artwork you use the concepts of memory and play a lot. How do you get into that mindset when you are creating your artwork? Where does that influence come from? Is it your early childhood?

Laurent: Well, of course, I used to play when I was a kid... I suppose it has influenced the way I work even today. I don't think there is anything special in the way I used to work when I was a kid. It's a mix of ability to do some things and being conscious of not being able to do some other things. Still, as an adult I am playing with this capacity or incapacity to do things. I like to face and find myself in situations where I am not good at doing something. I know from the beginning that I'm not going to be able to be excellent at realizing something. Then I have to find a solution, or a way, or a process to handle the situation in another way - not the orthodox way, you know, the classic way to do things - and to be good at it. Kids are doing that. This is why they play. We say they play, but in fact it's just another solution for doing things because they are not strong enough, they are not experienced enough, they are not intelligent enough when they are very small. And still, as an adult I don't feel intelligent enough to do some things. It's like a certain kind of intelligence or the presence of another kind of intelligence. The kind of intelligence I have is a sort of adaptation of my creativity to be able to handle something. If I want to build something or handle something - a book or an idea - sometimes I am conscious of my inability to understand the idea so I just let my weakness handle the problem and so this



Somnium #5 Ambrotype

combined with my strength - because I am good at making photographs. But sometimes I'm not good at building a certain kind of object. And so the mix of my expertise in making photographs and my weakness in making some kinds of objects make this kind of a strange mix of freshness and precision.

Adam: Can you talk about your early creative experiences? It sounds like you're saying the way that you work is intuitive when you have this object that you want to discover and play with. You're mixing that with your photographic expertise and that goes back to a way that you were working as a child. Can you tell us about some of your earliest creative experiences and some of the influences you had as a child or as a young artist?

Laurent: Well, as a child and as a young artist is quite different because as a child there is no intention of being an artist. It's just the intention of playing or building something. As a kid I used to make constructions in the woods. I was making models. I had a taste for handling things and building things. But in my imagination the idea of being an artist was absolutely absent. I had no idea what an artist was.



Brion Vega, Tribute to Scarpa  
Gum Bichromate, 55cm x 65cm

Adam: When did that come into your mind? The idea of being an artist?

Laurent: When I was a kid I experienced a certain kind of liberty and being solitary in my games. I had a great experience. And then when I became older I realized that being an artist could be maybe the only job I could have in which I could find myself again in such a situation; and that I could be as free and be solitary when I wanted. I became quite anxious of finding what I wanted to say. It took me from the moment I started to learn, because I was the assistant of several French photographers. And from this moment I started to be happy with what I do and find myself back in the things I produce. It took me something like ten years. The real beginning is not the first works. Because the first works, I had destroyed them, and they are not present anymore. The first works are, *Petit Machines Littorales*, that I did on the seashore with the fish traps and sculptures. This is the first work. This comes up because at some point I realized that what I had been living as a child was a kind of foundation for the adult that I was. I took that literally and I just started to make again what I did when I was a kid, which basically was playing along the shore.

Adam: What happens to the things you build for your photographs? Do they make their way into exhibitions, or do they get destroyed? Are they only built for the purpose of the photographs?

Laurent: Most of the time they are destroyed, especially when it's in the landscape. Because in the landscape the settings are quite big. To me the settings are like a piece of theater. Sometimes I keep a little bit because I think I am going to be able to reuse it, but most of the time I get rid of them. Because the final work, the end result, is really the photograph. It's like a movie. Some craftsmen are making marvelous objects for the movie but most of the time they are not kept.

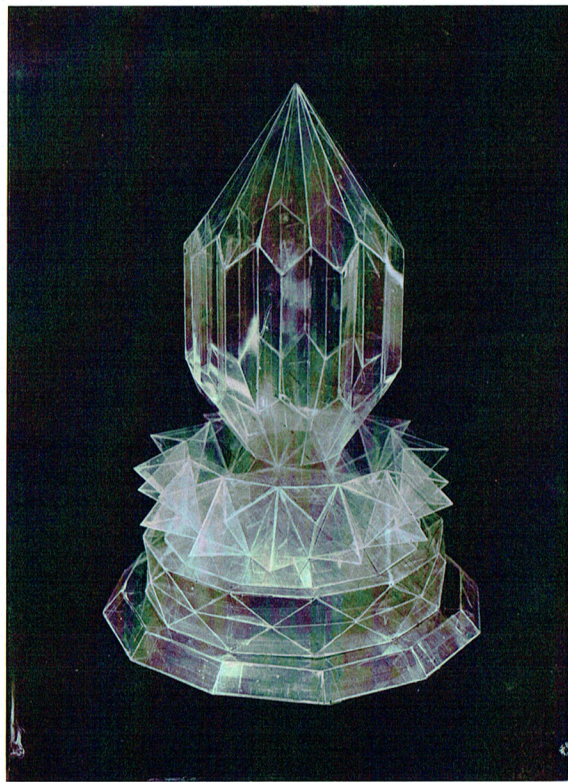
James: When you're photographing those, how do you decide on the photography processes? Why did you decide on those instead of shooting it really crisp and clean with a digital camera?



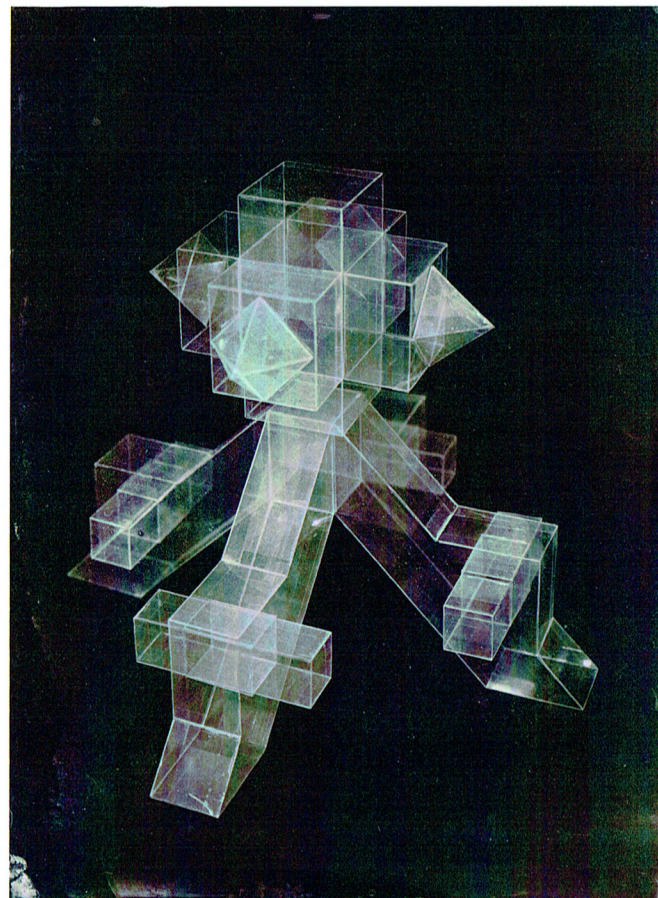
A Peu Pré Euclid Gum Bichromate

Laurent: I have always been fascinated by the print as an object, by the quality of the paper... I had a chance to work with some quite amazing printers, the guys that I've been learning with. One of these guys had in his boxes in the studio some old 19th century calotype negatives of French monuments. And the day I opened that box the photograph started to be a real potential way to express myself. Before that, I was kind of bored. And I was not at ease with the medium. It always seemed to be too thin, too absent. The transparency of the medium, which is the ultimate quality of most of the photography of the 20th century, from Walker Evans until now. Transparency as a metaphor really is the quality of photography. With this calotype in my hands, I had the feeling that this medium has a physical consistency. To me that was really important because it meant that the things I would represent on that support, on that paper, this very special paper negative, I had the feeling that these were more real, more present to me. And it was more in my intentions and my actions. My intervention as a photographer were more concrete. So, I decide to make photographs with these paper negatives. I was not able to reproduce the exact calotype paper negative process. I found some paper negatives, just regular printing paper. But as I started that, I realized that I was just making photographs that looked old of subjects that were contemporary to me. And to me that was not OK. Something was missing. I was not at ease with these photographs. After some time, I realized that there was a fictional dimension that was introduced with these older processes. And I realized that I could use that to push it forward by making the constructions; and try to make my constructions and my fictions enter in a time dimension that would be more uncertain and that would in a certain way would erase my personal intervention as a 20th century man. It would make them enter into a wider time perspective.





*The Reliquaries of the Diaphonous*, Ambrotype  
30cm x 40cm (digital prints 40cm x 50cm)

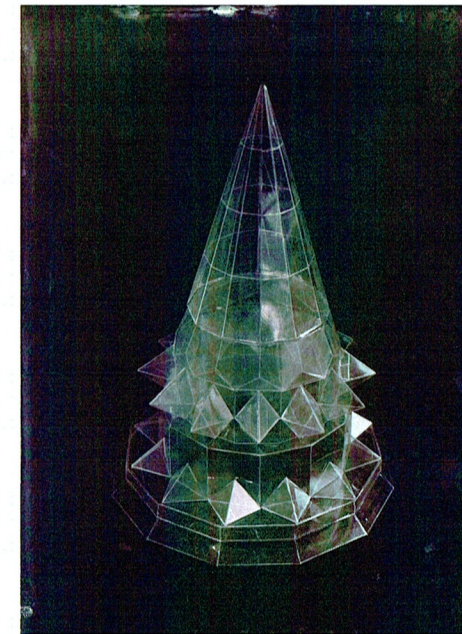


*The Reliquaries of the Diaphonous*, Ambrotype  
30cm x 40cm (digital prints 40cm x 50cm)

Adam: There are so many bodies of work that you've produced. Looking at your website there's just so much to look at, so many things you've worked with. What kind of overarching themes do you feel you have in your work? It seems to me that there's this idea of you interacting with your environment. But it also seems that there's a lot of nature, and science, and physics involved. Can you talk about other backgrounds that you have? I'm curious to know if you have a background in some kind of scientific field or if there are underlying themes that you tend to come back to?

Laurent: Sometimes I wonder that too! I think that knowl-edge and the feeling of being half able to reach knowledge is something very important. This is what we talked about earlier in the first question. This is really central. This is why if the whole production is considered then it's a little bit perturbing because it's quite difficult to understand the logic behind that. The series are very eclectic and look different. It's the kind of special relationship to knowledge that I have. This is why I produce so much and why I have the taste to keep producing. I have the curiosity and the desire to know things and to approach books and landscapes and history and vision. There is no limit to my incapacity to understand things! The most recent body of work (*A Peu Pres Euclid*) is about a book of mathematics from the middle of the 19th century which is about Euclidean geometry by Oliver Byrne (*The First Six Books of*

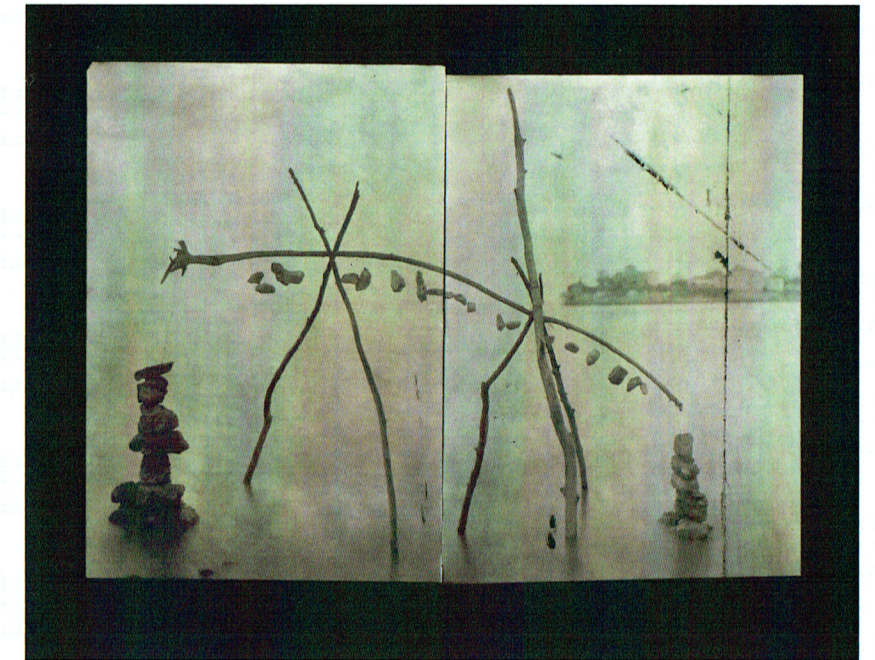
*the Elements of Euclid: In Which Coloured Diagrams and Symbols Are Used Instead of Letters For the Greater Ease of Learners*, by Oliver Byrne), and he did a marvelous book with colors to explain geometry to his pupils. Of course, if I was really working on it, I could understand Euclidean geometry. But it's not my thing. I like the feeling of being on the side of the road with that, you know? The thing is just passing, and I look at it and I just find it great and beautiful. I get some things about it, some little things, but I don't need to enter that fully. I like the feeling of being beside it. I like the fact that photography, like cinema, has the capacity to absorb anything. They are absolutely impure and that is why they are so amazing. There is no possibility of purity because they are like sponges. Everything goes in and they keep everything. I like photography for that. I can make all these things that I like, they can become mine. I like this idea of making these things mine. I appropriate them through a very personal way, but still I don't cut these objects and inspirations from where they come from. This is a constant idea that is in the works, to make things mine. It's a very... it's like I'm very open to the world and the things that I see. At the same time, everything comes to me. I try to keep everything to me. It's a way to liberate myself from having the things in my mind. From the moment I have produced something, it exists at a smaller level inside my head.



*The Reliquaries of the Diaphonous*, Ambrotype  
30cm x 40cm (digital prints 40cm x 50cm)

Adam: Hearing you talk about this, I really understand what you're saying. It really makes a lot of sense to me. I've been a fan of your work for a really long time and listening to you say these things about your work is really exciting because... James and I are both teachers. That's how we met. And I think it's really interesting to both of us how people learn things. And it sounds to me like what you're talking about is this constant, wanting to learn about a wide variety of things, whether it's mathematics or biology or environmentalism, physics, vision, all the different things that you're talking about. And that childlike wonder that you have, that you've retained from being a child and working through playing with different objects to try to figure out how the world works. That's still something that you are doing with your photographs. And I feel like I understand that really well.

James: It's kind of like a philosophy of life of releasing control and knowing that you're not going to be very good at everything. And it seems like you're using your artwork to function in life even when you're not making your artwork. Things are not always going to go your way and that's OK. But you use the skillsets that you have and the things that you've learned throughout life to make this artwork but also face this challenging time in life, which I think is really incredible.



*Petite Machine Littorale du 16 novembre I*, Silver print

Adam: I've got a question about the process. With your most recent work you're doing these gum bichromates. I imagine you're reading or studying something that inspires you and you start working on it. How do you decide on the process? The Euclidean stuff I can only see as the gum prints with these really fantastic colors but you've tried other processes in the past. Do you try something and think, "I need a different process"? or do you know from the start what kind of process you'll use?

Laurent: It is not always the same selection process. I think of the process along with the subject. With the colored gums, I was very intrigued by the possibility of making my own color photographs, and with the possibilities of interpretation that I could have with the process. I studied that in my lab. It took me six months to a year to progressively succeed in that. At the same time, I had that book by Oliver Byrne, and I was so much involved with the three-color stuff, trying to understand it, trying to find solutions. And I was also looking at a text that I was reading in which there were some elements that eventually made me transform the geometry drawings into 3D models. And at some point, I don't know, everything...it's the kind of mysterious stuff that happens in studios. Or when you are cooking you mix several things at one time. At some point they just merge or go together, and the stuff is... done! In the case of the *Petit Machines*, it was different. I had the medium and I had the process. I wanted to work with the process, absolutely. I was looking hard for a subject that would be personal and at once both at ease and strange with the process. Another project, the transparent models that I did in 2015/16 (*The Reliquaries of the Diaphonous*), were really magnetized by the collodion process which is...



Adam: These are the Reliquaries of the Diaphanous?

Laurent: Yes, and the, *Somnium*, series. Both are dealing with transparent objects and self-portraits. I wanted to have an object or some objects that would be equal to the plate itself. By talking to you, I realize that I have more of a tendency to start from the reverie or imagination that I have about a process, and this takes me to a part of my knowledge or imagination or subject that is already there, that is waiting for a body.

Adam: What is your studio like. You have a large number of processes you work with. What kind of studio space do you have and what kind of creative space do you like to have? Is it chaotic with music going on and loud or do you like a more quiet, contemplative space?

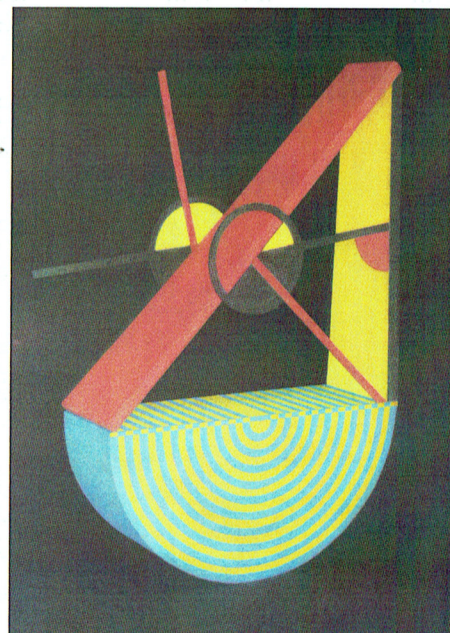
Laurent: The studio is small, about 25 square meters. The lab is so small. It's 8 square meters. And as you see the studio is quite empty. There are some models from the last series I have kept to make sure everything is finished. But when the series is over I throw the models away to make some room and make some space again. Then I start again.

Adam: A lot of your series are installations. I would have expected the Euclidean series.. those are really beautiful objects, the sculptures. Are those something you would exhibit with the photographs?

Laurent: I was thinking about it because I like the models. I like the colors, I like the shapes, and I was thinking about making some models that have not been photographed. I don't want to have in the photo-graphs what is present in the room. Maybe I will. I don't know. They are quite fragile, made of cardboard, not wood.

James: Are there any artists that really influence you? I'm looking at the work about Euclidean geometry and the sculptures. Are there any artists that influenced that work or influence your work in general?

Adam: Or just any artists that you are looking at right now?



A Peu Pré Euclid Gum Bichromate

Laurent: Right now I am looking at artist that are working with screen printing. I'm looking at pop artists that worked with that. I am also looking at this book that is amazing about the Kindred of the Kibo Kift, who where a group of English guys in the 1920 and 30s who invented sort of a folklore or mythology with objects and sculptures. They were making events in nature with painted tents and clothing, flags... They were quite amazing. There was a whole philosophical thing going on with that.

Adam: I have two more questions. One, I am curious to know if you teach. You have such a wide range of knowledge and you really understand the concept of learning and are a constant student yourself. Do you teach?

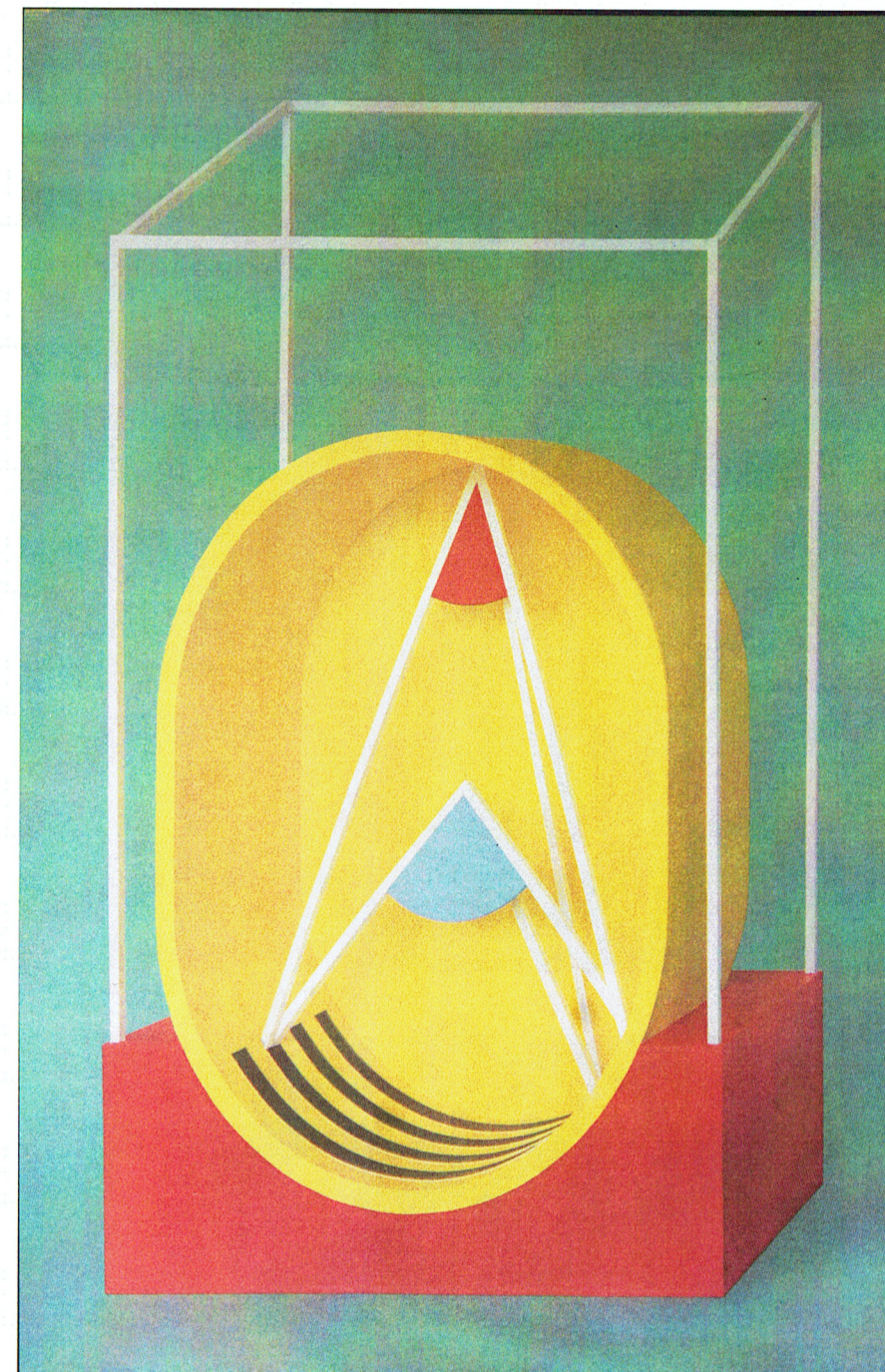
Laurent: Yeah, I do! I teach in the School of Fine Art in Angers, a small city in the west part of France about 300km SW of Paris, about 200km north of where I live in La Rochelle. I have taught there for about 12 years now.

Adam: I imagine you're a really great teacher.

Laurent: Well, I do my best.

Adam: It seems like you have a lot of things you could teach your students. My last question is if you have anything else coming up or anything you would like our readers to know about?

Laurent: The Euclidean images will be exhibited at Paris Photo along with some other photographs which is the black and white gums about this place in Italy called, Brion Vega. It's a very strange cemetery and architectural complex done by an architect in the 70s, which is really amazing. The Euclidean Geometries will be exhibited in a fair called, *Approche* (Approach), at the, Galerie Binome. It's during the Paris Photo Fair during the same week.



A Peu Pré Euclid Gum Bichromate

Laurent: I'm very happy about this color series because it opens some new perspectives with all the color processes. So these days my imagination is very focused on that. I don't know if it will produce anything. It will take some time. But right now I am very much into that. Maybe to use the gum color in another way than I've used it so far.

Adam: It was so exciting for me to see that color work because the rest of your work is so based in the black and white, monochromatic, calotype, wet plate, and other older feeling black and white processes.

Adam (cont.)The gum prints seemed like a completely new aesthetic but it made perfect sense with constructions and the bright colors of your prints. I make gum prints as well, though they aren't nearly as good as yours. The color that you get is really bright and beautiful.

Laurent: I'll give you some tips some day!

Adam: I could talk to you all day! I would love to get some tips some time.

Laurent: Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.