



# ARTFORUM

SUMMER 2023

ARTS INTERNATIONAL

The Museum  
Revisited

PARIS/POITIERS, FRANCE

## Théodore Fivel

LE COMMISSARIAT/LE CONFORT MODERNE

These were Théodore Fivel's first solo shows, marking his formal debut as an artist. Fivel's background is mainly in performance—in 2009, he founded the Parisian cabaret group Le Grand Bizarre—and this inflected both exhibitions in some intriguingly theatrical ways.

In "*Mais! Où est ma scène?*" at Le Confort Moderne in Poitiers, there were just six pieces, but Fivel's goal was to create an entire environment. At the entrance to the exhibition was *I See You, I See Thru, I See True* (all works 2010), a spray-painted mural of two great golden eyes. The piece is indicative of one of Fivel's chief concerns: the reactivation of pagan symbols and myths by way of up-to-date materials, techniques, and attitudes. Having crossed this literal and symbolic threshold, a viewer then entered a darkened environment, in which the pieces were very hard to make out. Most striking was *Sand #92185*, a bright painting made of colored miniature sand dunes, installed horizontally on a plinth (like a fantastic little disco desert) and lit from above by a skylight. On the walls were three pieces, all more or less lost in the shadows: *Chie mère*, a digitized photograph made of nine square panels, assembled edge to edge to form a larger square and depicting an abstracted nude woman on all fours wearing a mask; *Cryyyyyy*, a monumental black mask with painted golden tears; and *Tuniques*, four tunics placed side by side with sleeves crossed and surmounted by flesh-colored latex masks instead of faces. In a separate room in the back was *Pyramide All*, a tiny pyramid made of sand, perched on a colorful base and lit by a laser at its peak; smoke swirled around this miniature monument in the darkness.

Noteworthy was Fivel's willingness, even eagerness, to use the most kitsch or cabaret elements, at the expense of the integrity of the individual pieces, and reducing the potential, on the part of the viewer, to make a disinterested judgment. Fivel also disrupted the traditional viewing experience by way of his fascination with the occult, seizing on the word's literal meaning, "hidden," and orchestrating environments accordingly in actual occlusion. But as a result, the works were generally more convincing as stage design than as art; the exhibition's effect was mainly



Théodore Fivel,  
*Illuminati Hall*,  
2010, mixed media.  
Installation view, Le  
Commissariat, Paris.

of pampered slickness, as if at a club or cabaret; the show was neither committed (that is, mad) nor sophisticated enough to compel assent.

At Le Commissariat in Paris, with an installation called *Illuminati Hall*, Fivel combined very similar elements to much greater effect. He blocked off the gallery so that viewers had only the storefront window to look at, and this was covered to just above eye level with a wooden board and a zigzag pattern made of white tape. The angles of the taped zigzag rhymed with a wavelike accumulation of sand at the bottom of the windowsill (and makeshift picture frame); sand also spilled out from below the wall onto the street. If one had climbed up and attempted to peer over the cardboard, one would have seen still more sand; similarly, the mail slot in the gallery door to the left gave a glimpse of the space inside, blocked off and filled above ground level with sand. Again, Fivel's occult leanings insist on something that is literally hidden, but whereas in Poitiers the attempt to orchestrate an environment was hampered by the more traditional exhibition format and the tackiness of the individual pieces, at Le Commissariat there was only the situation, which spilled out into the street, activating the environment as an element in an urban theater.

—David Lewis