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Francis Baudevin, “Carrément”
November 8, 2025 – January 24, 2026

If, when viewing Francis Baudevin’s visual worlds, you feel reminded of something familiar from your daily surroundings, that is indeed the artist’s intent. If we were to forced to summarize his oeuvre created over around forty years in a single word, the best choice would be the somewhat dry term transformation, that is, an artistic practice in which the creation transformation process is linked to its social impact. Sampling, recycling, appropriation are several of the keywords in his artistic approach. With a first series of works in 1987, Baudevin, who was trained as a graphic designer, began to intensely engage with the appropriation of motifs from concrete art in visual design. He took packaging from the pharmaceutical and tobacco industries, logos from companies, book dust jackets, or record covers and returned their visual formulas, derived from geometric art, back to where they came from, to the realm of fine art. The guidelines of this return were fixed from the very start: shape and color are taken unaltered, written information is removed and the format is enlarged according to a fixed benchmark for the respective implementation in question (a painting, a mural, or a print).

Already in this series, until now the most comprehensive dealing with the graphic design in advertising, several questions come into play. What is an original, what is a variation, what is a pure copy? And what about concept of authorship in this context? When asked these questions in a conversation, Baudevin explains that he does not understand himself as an author in the traditional sense. Instead, he sees his role as that of a performer, that is to say he is an observer of what is concealed and often overlooked as a geometric formula in everyday life. It’s about creating a kind of continuum between reality and art, as Marjolaine Levy explains in a catalogue for an exhibition at Kunsthaus Biel, [1] where the formulas used in everyday products transform in Baudevin’s work in turn into a language of its own.

The 2023 retrospective at Kunsthaus Biel showed impressively how complexly this process of transformation unfolds with numerous cross-references to the world of communication, advertising, and consumption. Even if the current exhibition at Mark Müller only presents a small selection of Baudevin’s works, here the wide range of variations in the artist’s interpretations of a geometric formal vocabulary that is nearly inexhaustible and its material execution (in paintings, prints, solarizations, photography) come into play. It’s not always easy to follow Baudevin’s references, even when the titles sometimes indicate a direction. Some of his formations are based on direct implementations of logos, like that of the brewery Hürlimann or the graphic design of record covers, such as the famous banana motif by Andy Warhol on the cover of the debut album of the band Velvet Underground, a figurative motif, an exception in Baudevin’s visual world. In another work shown at the exhibition, Baudevin’s approach is more complicated: in the double painting *Jester*, on the one hand he refers to the record cover of the album *Jester* by British rock band Marillion and at the same time to a logo no longer used by the publishing conglomerate Axel Springer. As shown by works in the next space, music plays a key role in Baudevin’s life and art; the sampling of record covers in his painting, prints, and photography is a leitmotif that can be found throughout his oeuvre.[2]

Unlike the works mentioned, Baudevin’s technique of transformation transforms to a more recent group of square paintings that only feature the forms of the square and circle, as generally comes into play in the geometric art of advertising (*Dot and Circle*, *Square and Border*): allusions for example to music, literature, or film are not recognizable at first glance, often the arrangement of colors (*Rosa Vertov*, *Rose poussière*, or *Olive, Shelley Duvall*) refers to a motif taken up by Baudevin. As far as the classical language of this series is concerned, this can be traced back not to concrete art, but instead to the ideal engagement with classical modernism, especially in the Neo Geo movement. For example, in his painting *François et Olivier* Baudevin refers to Olivier Mosset’s 200 repetitions of a circular motif (including its questioning of the concept of the original), to transfer it to the square form in allusion to an additional radical proponent of geometric art, François Morellet.

With numerous references to advertising, film, music history, literature and fine art, the artist does not make it easy for us to follow his thought processes. Whether this is actually necessary to completely understand Baudevin’s intentions is another matter. Serious in intention, coupled with subversive humor in its execution, Baudevin’s art is above all, if you would excuse the platitude, especially one thing: a genuine pleasure to view.

1 The publication for the exhibition in Biel is being published soon.

2 The artist has a music collection with over 10,000 recordings.

Elisabeth Grossmann, trans. Brian Currid