



Art Review: Grazing at a Chelsea Grass Station

September 30, 2013

by James Croak

In his *Le Mariage d'Olympe* (1855) playwright Émile Augier coined the phrase “*nostalgie de la boue*,” in English: nostalgia for mud. This compelling term, which has long outlasted its birth in an obscure writing, offers an apt point of access to the latest installation of the work of François-Xavier Lalanne (1927-2008) in New York City, “Sheep Station,” at the site of the former Getty gas station at the corner of 24th Street and 10th Avenue.

In Augier’s play, he asserts that a duck placed in a lake with magnificent swans would have a nostalgia to return to his muddy pond. The term drifted into anthropology and art as a metonym for romanticizing those of a less developed civilization, especially people closer to dirt somehow.

A metrosexual hedge fund manager, for example, might have Walter Mitty daydreams of being a farmer, working the land in order to be closer to his imagined fountain of life, whereas an anxious contemporary farmer listening to futures market chatter collects photographs of muscled farmhands stumbling behind ox-drawn plows, also longing for the imagined profundity of a simpler time.

Sigmund Freud hit hard on this in his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, suggesting that the civilized longed to be uncivilized and attributed romantic virtues to those who were.

Think of the shiny photographs of faraway places in National Geographic magazine. A generation of hippies, including this writer, based their utopian thinking on Margaret Mead’s PhD thesis “Coming of Age in Samoa,” wherein the tiny island of Ta’u supposedly had topless young girls enjoying free love with a bevy of partners sans jealousy or other consequences.

Later research showed the 23-year-old Mead’s vision to be her own *nostalgie de la boue*, an anthropological fable based on pranks played on her by the local girls.

It’s a neat trick to arrange a *nostalgie de la boue* as a surrealist misplacement, but the late artist François-Xavier Lalanne managed to do just that over and over again since the mid-’60s, placing his country flocks of sheep in urban settings, a cheery amusement that tugs at viewers’ inner-shepherd. In 2009 a flock of his cast concrete sheep were gathered on the grassy center strip of Park Avenue, bringing an involuntary grin to all who motored by.

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Installation by François-Xavier Lalanne.

The latest appearance of Lalanne's sheep—installed by the Paul Kasmin Gallery—is at the superb “Sheep Station” in the former Getty station in the heart of the Chelsea section of New York City. Tons of dirt, grass, and shrubbery were installed as a rolling meadow among the gas pumps of a once busy gas station frequented by taxis stored in neighborhood garages.

A sheep ranch is created with Lalanne's sheep from earlier installations, *Belier* (1994), the *Brebis* (1994) the *Agneau* (1996), and *Le Mouton Transhumant* (1988), all assembled by the nearby Kasmin Gallery.



Installation by François-Xavier Lalanne.

It's both a perfect *nostalgie de la boue* and a surrealist psychological misplacement: a petrochemical depot returned to Manhattan's early landscape when it was owned and farmed by the Lenape natives. Gas stations and cars in general are perceived as a menace to pedestrians and, lately, the planet in general, but are also irreplaceable in the modern world. Lest we all go Luddite, they are here to stay, but who can gaze at the “Sheep Station” and not wish more service stations were returned to a preindustrial time, a time no one living ever knew? Hence the nostalgia for mud.



“Sheep Station” by François-Xavier Lalanne.

What makes it simultaneously surreal is that the gas station was not demolished even though, as part of a public art program, it is slated to be adapted as a permanent element of a collection of luxury homes being developed near the High Line. Instead, the station has so far been left intact, with pumps, weather awning, hoses, “Open” sign, all blanketed with a sylvan setting; two separate worlds improbably coexisting and sparking a mild psychological confusion that reveals dimensions of the world unnoticed: the goal of surrealism.

It's an uplifting installation and, mobbed and beloved by the locals, it's already the high point of the art season. A *nostalgie de la boue* delivered perfectly as a surrealist prank.



"Sheep Station" by François-Xavier Lalanne.

BASIC FACTS: "Sheep Station" featuring works by François-Xavier Lalanne opened on Sept. 17, 2013 and remains on view through Oct. 20, 2013 at 239 10th Ave., New York, NY 10001.

"Sheep Station" presents 25 of the iconic epoxy stone and bronze 'Moutons' and is the largest collection to ever be shown publicly in an outdoor presentation. It is co-presented by Paul Kasmin Gallery and Michael Shvo.

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