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Yolande Fièvre (Paris, 1907 – Paris, 1983)

Le Festival de l'assassin [*The Assassin's Festival*]

1961

Box made from wood and hardboard panel featuring wooden compartments containing driftwood, stones, wires, textiles, and natural sponges covered in oil paint

92 x 167.3 x 9.3 cm

FGA-BA-FIEVR-0001

Provenance

Galerie Daniel Cordier, Paris

Urvater Collection, Belgium

Private collection, United States

Christie's, Paris, 8 June 2017, lot no. 160



Yolande Fièvre or the art of bringing matter to life

An artist with an unclassifiable and unique body of work, with a career spanning over sixty years and yet practically unknown to the public, Yolande Fièvre has categorically refused to belong to a school or to subscribe to an ideology, which she considered to be too limiting. Affirming a certain spontaneity in the face of the intellectualism of academic artists, she made a name for herself with her collage-assembly pieces, such as *Le Festival de l'assassin* [The Assassin's Festival], representing an accumulation of meticulously staged objects, where each and every element is of paramount importance.

Absolute automatism

Born in 1907, Yolande Fièvre grew up in an artistic environment with a musician mother, a circus performer father known for his inventiveness, and a painter uncle. A gifted and precocious artist, she exhibited at the Salon des Artistes Français in 1922, when she was only fifteen years of age, but was quickly excluded when the organizers became aware of her young age. She later attended painting and engraving



Fig. 1 - © All rights reserved

workshops at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, not as a student but as an auditor, and herself became a painting teacher at the École des Beaux-Arts in Orléans up until June 1940.¹ Her paintings were classical then, and far removed from the abstract experiments she would carry out later on in her career. An example of such classicism can be seen in *Beauce*, painted in 1940 (fig. 2) representing a traditional figurative landscape, executed with a knife, and acquired in 1941 by the Fine Arts Acquisitions Committee. At the time, and as underlined by Jean Paulhan,² a friend and confidant of the artist: “[Fièvre] particularly liked landscapes,

¹ Appointed on 16 January 1939, she held this position, teaching ten hours of classes a week until June 1940, when all teaching was stopped due to German attacks on the city. She was one of the few female art teachers at the Fine Arts Academy of Orléans. Between 1938 and 1946, five of the artist's oil paintings were bought by the Fine Arts Acquisitions Committee and are today housed in the public collections of the Fonds national d'art contemporain (National Contemporary Art Fund), including the work entitled *Beauce* (1940).

² Essayist, art critic, language and literature theorist, then editor-in-chief and director of *La Nouvelle Revue française*, Jean Paulhan had a considerable influence on the world of arts and letters. He was appointed to the Académie française on 24 January 1963 to Pierre Benoit's chair.



Ledeur. Photo credit: Yves Chenot

[especially] those with a crack, a ditch, or a dark hole in the foreground. She painted with passion, and, as they say, with a gift, which quickly led her to a disgust for painting.”³

Yolande Fièvre discovered the automatism of the Surrealists in the early 1930s and met André Breton in 1951: this was a decisive encounter. Two series, noticeably different, albeit with many similarities, then emerged: *Soies-Fictions*—collages made from extremely fine silks in bright colours, which

she placed in glass boxes of her own making—and soon afterwards, *Oniroscopes* (fig. 3), which broadened the field of investigation in collage by introducing sand,⁴ tiny shells, small pieces of driftwood, and coloured sequins that the artist left unattached, free to slide between the taut threads and pieces of silk. “Apollinaire dreamed of a painting that moves. Fièvre is the first painter—the first former painter—to do so,”⁵ declared Jean Paulhan. From the 1960s onwards, Yolande Fièvre’s work moved significantly towards new plastic research and the use of unusual materials. The *Oniroscopes* were followed by strange, fascinating boxes, housing a profusion of tiny characters made from driftwood, flotsam and jetsam, terracotta, and stones, as in *Le Festival de l’assassin*, done in 1961.



Fig. 3 - © Piasa, Paris © Xavier Defaix

A mosaic of reliefs

³ Paulhan, Jean. Preface in *Daniel Cordier présente... Yolande Fièvre, dessins automatiques, soies-fiction, épaves*, exhibition catalogue [Paris, Galerie Daniel Cordier, 10 May – 4 June 1962], Paris, Daniel Cordier, 1962.

⁴ The use of sand has been carefully calculated. If the sand is too fine, it doesn’t move quickly or freely. However, if the sand is too heavy, it falls too quickly and the effect of movement and suspension is impaired.

⁵ *Ibid.*



1961 was marked by success for the artist. In September, thanks to gallery owner Daniel Cordier, Fièvre saw one of her works, *The Guardians* (fig. 4), later put up for sale under the title *Composition* in 2013,⁶ included in the important exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*⁷ at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Somewhat indifferent about the news, she was surprised by the attention paid to her by the art dealer. She also wrote to Jean Paulhan: “It seems that Cordier is very enthusiastic about my things now exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, things about which I care rather little.”⁸ During this period, the artist embarked on some fascinating experiments around organic matter, conferring her reliefs with a strange appearance. *Le Festival de l’assassin* bears witness to Fièvre’s passion for these experiments, exploring matter, texture, and the accumulation of objects.

This work presents a closed universe, mixing poetry and singularity, where every detail is carefully considered. The piece is remarkable for its accumulation of objects left by the sea: pebbles, rocks, and driftwood, which Yolande Fièvre collected herself on the beachshore. In 1960, the artist moved to a small house in Longeville-sur-Mer, in the Vendée, where she collected these degraded residues of nature on which the forces of water, wind, and time had exerted profound and subtle

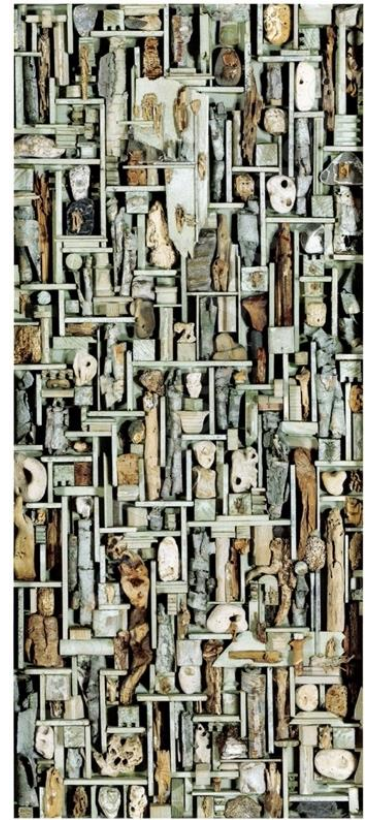


Fig. 4 - © Christie’s, Paris © All rights reserved

transformations. She recovered materials on a massive scale, and indeed, this activity exhausted her. Whether raining or windy, the artist could be found tirelessly hunting for materials on the beach, as weather conditions like these facilitated their shoring up on the sand. She referred to this in a letter dated 25 September 1960, addressed to her friend, gallery owner Iris Clert.⁹ Once she had collected enough materials, she would withdraw to her house and work relentlessly on the creation of a new box. Meticulously and obsessively, she would transform, glue, and paint all kinds of organic materials, leaving some in their natural state. Put into compartments in “box reliefs” that reveal more than they hide, these elements were

⁶ This work was sold at Christie’s Paris on 5 December 2013 as part of the *Art contemporain* sale.

⁷ The exhibition, presented in 1962 at the Museum for Contemporary Arts in Dallas and later the Museum of Art in San Francisco, recognized collage, ready-mades, Surrealist objects, and other kinds of assemblage as the various manifestations of a shared tradition, specific to the 20th century.

⁸ Fièvre, Yolande. *Lettre datée du 13 septembre 1961 de Yolande Fièvre adressée à Jean Paulhan, no. 9*, PLH61-37/3, Institut Mémoires de l’édition contemporaine (IMEC), Caen, Fonds Jean Paulhan.

⁹ Fièvre, Yolande, *Lettre du 1^{er} septembre 1960, adressée à Iris Clert*, Paris, Archives Jean-Paul Ledeur.



arranged in a scattered order. They were organized, layered, tilted, straightened, and finally given an eternal place. Each box was painstakingly constructed, and Fièvre made it a point of honour to give a form to the formless, while also inserting a few anthropomorphic glimpses. Assimilating the contemporary research of her peers, she brought a modernity to her work by

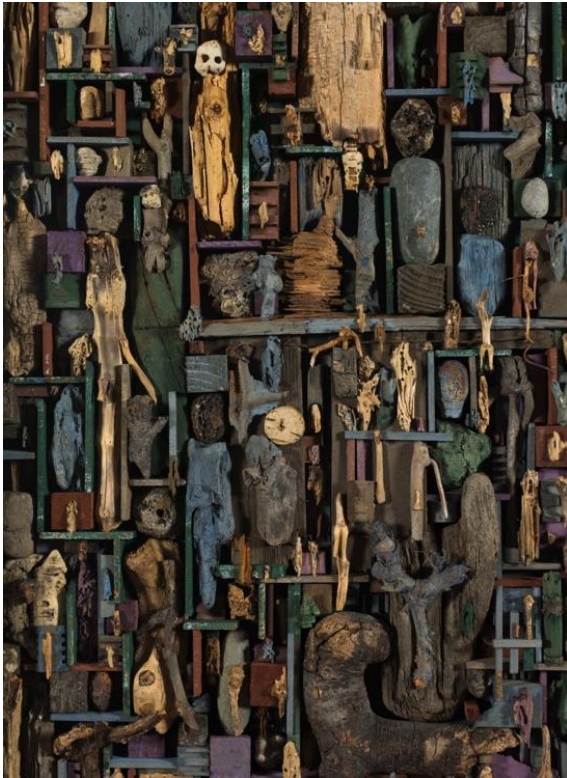


Fig. 5 - © Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: André Morin © All rights reserved

occasionally integrating wire, textiles, and certain objects in natural sponge, which she shaped by hand. The materiality of the sponges, amplified by the stones, pebbles, and driftwood, may be said to accentuate the expressiveness, and contribute to the effect of relief.

As Jean-Paul Ledeur notes, Fièvre was obsessed with the idea of reintroducing painting into her art, which she had done away with since her *Soies-fictions* and *Oniroscopes*.¹⁰ Yet colour in itself had never ceased to play a role in her work, giving order and life to her silent universe. From 1961 onwards, Fièvre began to paint the wooden compartments and most of the natural objects they housed, as in *Le Festival de l'assassin* with shades of blue, purple, green, brown, and grey. Colour was now a means of expressing the artist's feelings, bringing life to the elements of her small

theatres, and accentuating the reliefs. She uniformly dressed her work and revealed herself through the raw material of the assembled objects. Blue—omnipresent in the artist's repertoire—is evenly distributed in this work. In Fièvre's chromatic landscape, this hue accentuates the dramatic expressiveness as it is a dangerous colour, associated with anguish, as outlined in one of the artist's letters to Jean Paulhan, dated 1963.¹¹ Through the alternation of materials, forms, and colour, and indeed by playing on the relationship between form and colour, and colour and space, her compositions became plastic proposals. *Le Festival de l'assassin* bears witness to this very important period in the evolution of the artist's work, with its own distinctive artistic language.

¹⁰ Ledeur, Jean-Paul. "Chronologie" in Lusardy, Martine (ed.), *Yolande Fièvre*, exhibition catalogue [Paris, Halle Saint Pierre, 17 Sept. 2007 – 8 Mar. 2008], Paris, Halle Saint Pierre, 2008, p. 106.

¹¹ Fièvre, Yolande, *Lettre non datée de Yolande Fièvre adressée à Jean Paulhan, no. 15*, PLH61-37/4, Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (IMEC), Caen, Fonds Jean Paulhan, 1963.



The place of the object

The universe invented in 1960 by Fièvre would follow her all throughout her career as a painter, via the act of integrating a set of diverse materials. Appropriating Dadaist and Surrealist practices, Fièvre made the found natural object her subject and creative tool. In an article entitled “Le bois est dans la boîte” (The wood is in the box), Georges Sebbag asks: “What prompted the artist to establish a veritable catalogue raisonné of stones, clay, and driftwood? [...] Going beyond the stage [of the automatic impulse, then that] of found materials, she had to compose with the impressive amount, the multitude of objects and forms found.”¹² Yolande Fièvre therefore decided to partition this amount and frame everything through the use of the box, a characteristic means of expression of a specific era. In her methodical way of accumulating materials and filling a box, can be read a constructive desire, unaffected by natural objects. In response to a consumer society that throws everything away, and at a time when some artists scavenged to create artworks, Fièvre decided instead to accumulate natural objects in boxes. “In appearance, she amass[es] (...) the debris of nature; in reality she collect[s] other reliefs, those of the world of objects designed by technology,”¹³ adds Georges Sebbag.¹⁴ The decision to codify the components of nature, like the desire to indulge in automatism, are two of the hallmarks of Fièvre’s work.

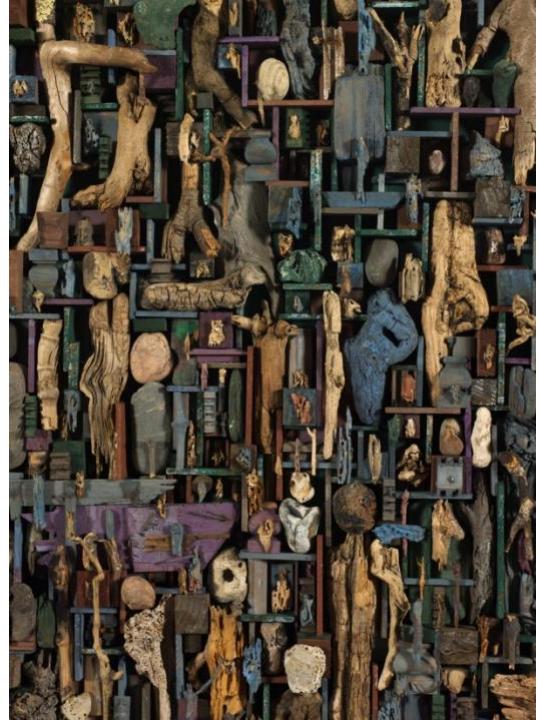


Fig. 6 - © Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: André Morin © All rights reserved

¹² Sebbag, Georges. “Le bois est dans la boîte” in Lusardy, Martine (ed.), *Yolande Fièvre*, exhibition catalogue [Paris, Halle Saint Pierre, 17 Sept. 2007 – 8 Mar. 2008], Paris, Halle Saint Pierre, 2008, p. 8.

¹³ A technical object is made by man from natural objects and may be composed of several elements and materials.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.



Fig. 7 - © Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: André Morin © 2022, ProLitteris, Zurich

While *Nouveau Réalisme* was, in part, a denunciation of consumer society through the exhibition of its waste, Fièvre's work also critiqued this system by returning to nature, the seasons, and the elements. This is captured by the sheer number, less by the range of natural diversity, reflecting the growing quantities made by human industry. Between 1960 and 1962, Fièvre produced no less than ten boxes. These can be compared to Bernard Réquichot's¹⁵ reliquaries, such as the *Reliquaire des Rencontres de Campagne* from 1960-1961 (fig. 7), through the proliferation of objects that are more ordinary than extraordinary. In this piece, Réquichot glues random objects (scrap items, bones, feathers, paper, and pieces of wood) collected during his walks, then covers them with compact paint in mixed colours. This penchant for

accumulation may be seen in both artists who assembled and staged objects at the heart of an almost realistic representation. These panoplies of driftwood and stones, carefully arranged in their boxes, are the mirror of a whole range of products and goods, increasingly mass-produced, and distributed in supermarkets and other temples of consumerism.

The search for mysticism

Away from fashion and high-society circles, Yolande Fièvre lived in her own cultural universe, removed from any intellectualism. She created a work in a "brut" style, marked by a rich artistic imagination, and leaving all kinds of organic materials in their natural state to compose a fantastical world. Thus, *Le Festival de l'assassin* presents a poetic universe from which a story emanates. At first glance, the viewer may have the impression of seeing a building in profile without its side facade with, on each floor, debris of driftwood and pebbles reminiscent of bones, skulls, and even people. Upon reading the title, the viewer understands that this is the staging of an assembly that bears witness to the "talents" of a murderer. One can easily imagine an assassin's box of trophies, similar to a fetish object containing souvenirs of crimes.

¹⁵ Fièvre was friends with Réquichot. In 1959, she accompanied him to the Printemps and B.H.V. department stores when he was looking for the plastic curtain rings with which he would make his famous assemblages. Fièvre was distraught at Réquichot's suicide in December 1961, which can be felt in her work. She spent the winter of 1961-1962 creating *Hommage à Réquichot*, composed not of one but three relief panels, in the manner of a masterful commemorative work, which she presented in her exhibition in May of that year at the Galerie Daniel Cordier.



Here, Fièvre produces a raw creation, seeking at all costs to tame and domesticate her demons. Her work, populated by multiple figures, serves as an escape mechanism from the struggles of life and death.

Her compositions are an eternal return to the multitude of works that illustrate death, decay, and suffering. Her boxes, above all, evoke the frequently represented Dante's *Inferno*,¹⁶ and are an opportunity to deepen her understanding of evil in order to reject it. What is really important for Fièvre is to allow the viewer to "appropriate these dream spaces that she puts at our disposal. 'A dream is only interesting because of what it has to show us, and not because of what we want it to say', she explained one day to Jean Paulhan."¹⁷



Fig. 8 - © Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: André Morin © All rights reserved

These borrowed and subverted objects find themselves confined in an enclosed space that prevents any escape. Through her mixed-media box reliefs that are neither figurative nor abstract, Fièvre constructs a mystical world in which she engages in a long process of incorporating unusual elements. The artist's approach is also intended to be magical, evoking the universe of the fairy tale that abolishes time and space. The magic is born from the contrast between the care taken to organize these elements and the absurdity of the flotsam and jetsam collected here, this accumulation of polished wood and pebbles. Oscillating between the mystical and the dreamlike, her works leave room



Fig. 9 - © André Morain, Paris © All rights reserved

for the imagination as much as for sensation, and allow the viewer to share an inner journey, where things escape them, where consciousness finds its limits. The artist also ventures into mystical and spiritual realms with a series of works with evocative titles like *Oracles* (fig. 9), representative of the esoteric production she was developing at

¹⁶ *Inferno* is the first section of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, written in 1307. The following sections are *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*.

¹⁷ Ledeur, Jean-Paul. "Chronologie" in Lusardy, Martine (ed.), *Yolande Fièvre*, exhibition catalogue [Paris, Halle Saint Pierre, 17 Sept. 2007 – 8 Mar. 2008], Paris, Halle Saint Pierre, 2008, p. 108.



that time. Through this painting, where Fièvre appears as a prophetess with the many stones evoking the divinatory game that is the oracle, viewers are invited to enter the magical and esoteric universe that she has invented. As Charlotte Thoraval suggested: “Fièvre was not indifferent to questions of occult powers. The friendship that bound her to Iris Clert, an astrology enthusiast, was undoubtedly not unconnected to [her] beliefs.”¹⁸

The presence of God was essential to the life and work of Yolande Fièvre. For her, God was everywhere, in the air, the earth, the water, and animals, as illustrated by this excerpt from one of her letters dated 1961: “Ah, it is curious this tendency that I have to ‘explain myself’ by God, as if there were no other proof outside him.”¹⁹ Her works derive their unique and incomparable character from the consideration of this spiritual, even cosmogonic dimension. The artist could not have belonged to the Surrealist movement because, although she wasn’t attached to a specific church, she affirmed the omnipresence of God in her existence. Her spiritual life was inseparable from her work, which placed her at the limits of this movement. Yet her work, in all its magical dimension, is nevertheless very surreal.

Marginalized since her death in 1983, Yolande Fièvre has crossed the 20th century alone, leaving behind a prolific body of work that is both poetic and mysterious, escaping all classification. It contains a creative digest that spans eras, genres, and media. Its singularity is not to be found in the quality of the style, nor in the variations of the imagination, but in its ability to draw on the sources of automatism and to take stock of the resources of natural objects, as illustrated so well in *Le Festival de l’assassin*.

Adeline Lafontaine
Assistant Curator Fine Arts Collection
Geneva, June 2022

¹⁸ Thoraval, Charlotte. “Du Rêve au Réel ou vice-versa: la littérature de Yolande Fièvre” in Lusardy, Martine (ed.), *Yolande Fièvre*, exhibition catalogue [Paris, Halle Saint Pierre, 17 Sept. 2007 – 8 Mar. 2008], Paris, Halle Saint Pierre, 2008, p. 62.

¹⁹ Fièvre, Yolande. *Nuit du 12 au 13 avril 1961 de Yolande Fièvre adressée à Jean Paulhan*, no. 1, PLH61-37/3, Institut Mémoires de l’édition contemporaine (IMEC), Caen, Fonds Jean Paulhan.



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Legends:

Fig. 1

Photograph of Yolande Fièvre taken at home in her studio.

Fig. 2

Beauce, 1940, oil on canvas, 60 x 73 cm, Inv.: FNAC 18120. Collection Centre national des arts plastiques.

Fig. 3

Yolande Fièvre, *Oniroscope*, 1960, coloured sand, fabric, and mixed techniques in a box made by the artist, 13 x 18 cm. Private collection.



Fig. 4

Yolande Fièvre, *The Guardians*, 1961, wooden compartments with driftwood, bark, stones, and pebbles, 90 x 40 x 5 cm. Private collection.

Fig. 5

Le Festival de l'assassin (detail), 1961.

Fig. 6

Le Festival de l'assassin (detail), 1961.

Fig. 7

Bernard Réquichot, *Reliquaire des rencontres de campagne*, 1960-1961, box in wood and hardboard panel including canvas, objects, bones, feathers, paper, and pieces of wood covered in oil paint, 97 x 78.5 x 38 cm, FGA-BA-REQUI-0002.

Fig. 8

Le Festival de l'assassin (detail), 1961.

Fig. 9

Yolande Fièvre, *Oracles*, 1961, box in wood and hardboard panel comprising compartments in wood with driftwood, pebbles, stones, and clay covered in oil paint, 65 x 125 x 46 cm. Private collection.