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Mike Bouchet Brings “The Zurich Load” to Manifesta 11

BY RACHEL CORBETT | JUNE 13, 2016



Mike Bouchet, "The Zürich Load," on view at the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art
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“It smells, but the smell has been reduced a lot,” artist [Mike Bouchet](#) says of the 80-ton sculpture made entirely of human waste he is presenting at Manifesta 11, which opened this past weekend in Zurich and runs through September 18. “I’m not interested in entirely erasing the smell but I didn’t want it to be a total turnoff.”

Reactions to the work, titled “The Zurich Load,” have been mostly positive, Bouchet notes. Some of his gallery neighbors in the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art, where the piece is installed, “expressed concerns” about the smell lingering in the hallways, where they will be greeting clients and curators



throughout the biennial. They told him, “‘It’s not our favorite thing to deal with,’” Bouchet says, adding that, overall, however, “they were willing to work with me.”

“You imagine most museums would say, ‘No way, are you kidding me?’ But they didn’t give me that at all,” Bouchet says of the Migros staff. Visitors, too, often have immediate reactions of revulsion once they discover the work’s content from the wall text or the farm-like aroma. “But they’re not necessarily put off by it,” he says. “The shape has a seductive side — the scale, color, and materiality. The whole presentation.” It reminds him of Mayan architecture, or constructions of other ancient civilizations that combined “shit and mud to make bricks.”

To create the blocks of hand-pressed waste, arranged into a minimalist grid of 23-by-100 feet, Bouchet worked closely with the Zurich sewage-treatment facility. Many of the biennial’s artists collaborated with local workers on “joint ventures” as part of Manifesta’s curatorial theme, “What People Do For Money.” Water treatment workers were not on the list of possible professionals supplied to artists, but Bouchet was struck by how clean Zurich was and began to wonder where the waste ended up. He took a tour of the plant and “realized, wow, the volumes of material we produce every day is staggering,” he says. “When you see so much of it all together you don’t think of it as something that’s so dirty. It just seems so much more natural and elemental.”

Bouchet worked with a team of specialists to preserve the brown color, prevent mold and bacterial growth, and reduce the smell. They mixed together Portland cement, pigment, and calcium oxide into an amalgam that Bouchet says is reminiscent of the one used by Renaissance fresco artists.

He considers the work a collaboration between himself and the 400,000 residents of Zurich, who supplied the eight tons of raw material on the day he collected it, March 24, 2016. If that sounds like an impressive amount, Bouchet notes that New York City produces 1,600 tons a day. And already he’s imagining the possibilities: “You could probably fill up Yankee stadium with that.”

