

# ALAIN SÉCHAS

JE NE M'ENNUIE JAMAIS ...

An exhibition at the BPS22  
Hainaut Province Art Museum

from Saturday 28 September 2024  
to Sunday 5 January 2025



*Jurassic Pork III*, 2001. Animated sculpture. Collection of Les Abattoirs, Musée - Frac Occitanie Toulouse. Photo BPS22

# DRAWING IS AT THE ROOT AND HEART OF EVERYTHING

The first major museum exhibition in Belgium by French artist Alain Séchas brings together more than 230 works from the different “periods” marking his career.

Strictly speaking, however, it would be wrong to consider this as a retrospective, since the collection favours recent pieces although these are punctuated by emblematic creations from throughout the artist's career. The originality of this exhibition resides in the narrative thread – drawing – that binds the works together. Indeed drawing, the art of the line, is at the root of the artist's first creations. Furthermore, it was a broad interpretation of drawing that led him to video, sculpture and installation art.

Alain Séchas places drawing at the heart of his work. With a few sharp, precise lines, he manages to build his shapes and organise the space around them. The speed of execution and fluidity of his gesture allow him to soften his shapes, which come to fruition through the work of numerous drawings, reproduced

directly on walls, silkscreens, printed posters or in neon (e.g. *Maryline*, where alternating luminous lines produce a short narrative sequence). The artist then turned to social media, like Instagram, where he regularly posted what he calls “*Insta Drawings*”. The need for quick and precise production therefore enabled him to build a huge corpus of spontaneous drawings, especially during lockdown (the *Kitchen Drawings*). More than 180 of these are included in the exhibition. Every drawing portrays a specific situation, often humorously, and shines light on the artist's many daily observations.

Initially rejecting painting, as he judged it to be bourgeois, pretentious and hence out-of-date, Séchas originally prioritised drawing. Not to grant it a prestigious artistic status, the result of technical virtuosity, but on the contrary, to assume its spontaneity and apparent simplicity. So he developed a highly personal style, quickly executed in broad, fluid strokes, creating curved shapes often reminiscent of the drawings of Henri Matisse (1869-1954). He subsequently used the various technical opportunities of

his time to “extend” his concept of drawing to other media: posters, murals, video installations, neons and even sculptures.

## Drawing vs. painting

Art history traditionally opposes drawing and painting. The first is the domain of the line, of duotone – the colour of the line and that of the paper – of separation; the second represents contact, colour and overlay. In a highly schematic way, this represents the

opposition between neo-classicism and romanticism, between Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867) and Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863). For a long time, and wrongly, drawing was overlooked because it was only perceived as a sketch or the first draft of a painting; whereas some drawings had actually been executed as finished works



*Insta Dessin (La vie en slip)*, 2022. Acrylic felt pen on paper.  
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris



*Insta Dessin (Télé asphalté)*, 2019. Acrylic felt pen on paper.  
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris



*Insta Dessin (Faudrait que je range un peu...)*, 2020.  
Acrylic felt pen on paper.  
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris

Portrait of Alain Séchas  
in the BPS22, 2024.  
Photo Leslie Artamonow



## Alain Séchas' Career

Born in 1955 in Colombes, France, Alain Séchas came to prominence in the 1980s after finishing his studies at the École supérieure normale des arts appliqués in Paris, where he learned to draw. He was soon supported by the Chantal Crousal gallery in Paris, and by the Albert Baronian gallery in Brussels, and participated in important exhibitions in France and abroad. During this time, he was a secondary school art teacher, first in the Metz region and then in the French capital. He worked as a teacher until 1996 when he was invited to represent France at the São Paulo Biennial in Brazil. From his years in teaching the artist says he learned the need to reinvent his work so as to constantly engage his students, as well as the ability to move from one technique

to another so that he could transmit whatever best responded to each student's aspirations.

The 2000s saw several major solo exhibitions, notably at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Strasbourg and the Consortium in Dijon (2001), the Palais de Tokyo in Paris (2005), Mamco in Geneva (2009) and the Musée d'art moderne in Paris (2016). Simultaneously, he created several monumental works for public spaces, such as *Superchaton* in Bezons, France, *Les Grands Fumeurs* in Vitry-sur-Seine, France and *La Cycliste* in Brussels, a miniature edition of which appears in this exhibition.

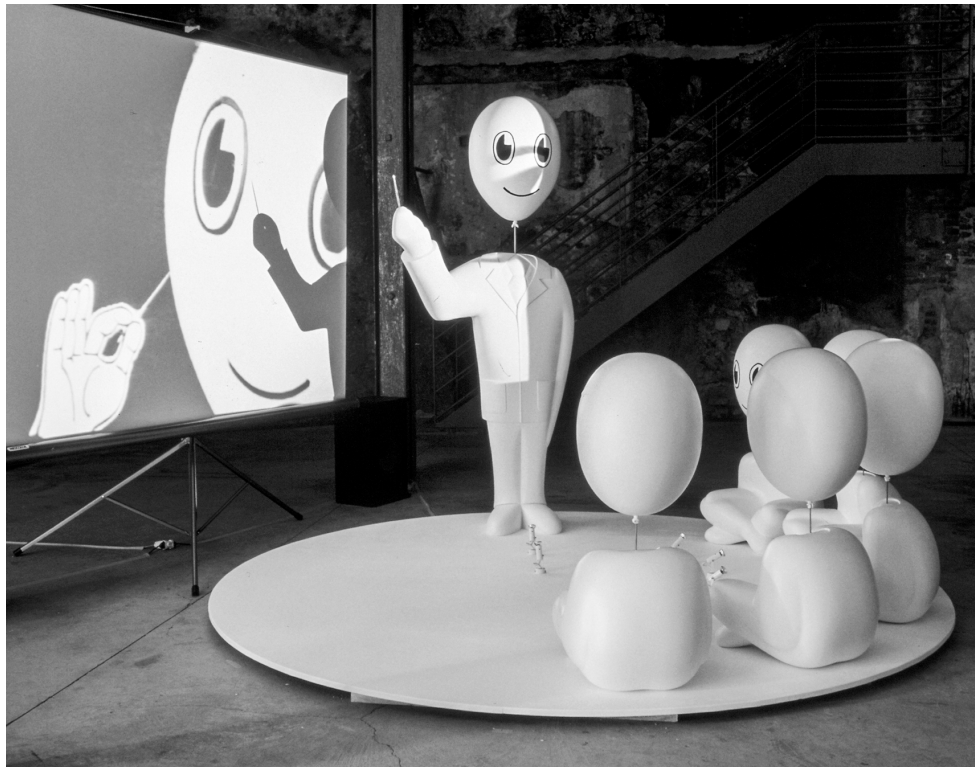


## MY DRAWINGS ARE NOT PRESS CARTOONS, CARICA- TURES OR COMIC BOOK ILLUSTRA- TIONS...

Depending on the piece, Séchas has some-  
times approximated press cartoons, carica-  
ture or comic books. Nevertheless, he always  
takes care to differentiate himself from these  
forms, so as to create the visual uniqueness  
that characterises him. While he can reprise

certain press cartoon styles, he states he is  
incapable of actually doing this: “*It’s a true  
craft which I don’t possess, he explains. A  
press cartoonist has to produce drawings  
every day and react to the news, sometimes  
dealing with highly sensitive issues. I’m not  
capable of that. I can occasionally react to the  
news in my Insta Drawings, but I can also get  
excited about the reflection of light on water,  
someone’s stance at an exhibition, the shape  
of a building.*” Besides, he has always turned  
down requests to work for the press.

Séchas likewise rejects the exaggeration  
required by caricature, in the same way as he  
refuses to surrender to irony: “*The person  
who uses irony does not engage, he explains,  
they use irony for their own satisfaction while  
the humourist thinks of others.*” In the end,  
while he does confess to a real interest in  
comic books, he accepts that he has never  
wanted to enter a longer narration that would  
stretch to several drawings, which does not  
prevent him occasionally reprising certain  
codes, such as speech bubbles and including  
text to direct his drawings.



*Professeur Suicide*, 1995.  
Polyester mouldings, acrylic,  
wood, canvas, spotlights,  
music, video. Collection of  
the Centre national des arts  
plastiques © Adagp, Paris  
- Cnap, Courtesy Galerie  
Ghislaine Hussenot

### **Platée**

Platée is name of a character and also the title of the comic bal-  
let by Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) in which he dramatizes  
Platée’s love for Jupiter. An allusion to the marriage between the  
Dauphin Louis and the Spanish Infanta, the play depicts the ugly  
and concealed Frog Queen, Platée, who falls victim to the gods’  
manipulation when they trick her into believing that Jupiter loves her.

Séchas returns to this situation using a paradoxical figure : a spindly,  
anthropomorphic silhouette, with excessively long legs, posing like  
a pin-up and smiling as though in an advertisement. But the skin  
is green, the colour of otherness, and the head is that of an extra-  
terrestrial, namely a xenomorph (literally “other form”) to borrow an  
expression from the *Alien* franchises. However, this Platée turns out  
to be a naive and endearing alien.



*Grosse Bêtise*, 2003.  
Polyester, acrylic on  
canvas. Collection of the  
Province of Hainaut, on  
deposit at the BPS22.  
Photo BPS22

## ... BUT HIS SCULP- TURES ARE 3D DRAWINGS

The artist soon felt the need to give his  
drawings a more physical presence, by  
endowing them with a three-dimensional  
aspect. He made the transition to sculpture  
by what could be called “extending” his  
drawing, since he endeavours to give his  
sculpted forms the same linearity as his  
drawings. Moreover, his first installations and  
sculptures represent a kind of intervening  
period, between drawing and paperboard  
sculpture, created from cutout panels  
enhanced by lines and lacking any real depth.  
The artist gradually fleshed out his forms,  
which became almost synthetic.

Alain Séchas’ first sculptures are characte-  
rised by the same framework design. He  
aimed to build structures starting with seve-  
ral figures portrayed in huge black lines, with  
the occasional touch of colour. A vivid  
contour line brings his forms to life and its  
presence is a given. Séchas favours curves,  
avoiding angles and breaks so as to soften  
the figures and lend them a touching and

spontaneous side. This “gentle” way of  
proceeding fosters the viewer’s empathy,  
which is immediately sympathetic to the sub-  
jects portrayed, even when the topic is some-  
times difficult to approach. This is the case  
with *Professeur Suicide*: a bal-  
loon-headed teacher instructs his students  
on how to commit suicide with a pin, to the  
soundtrack of an *andante* string quartet,  
*Opus 77* by Joseph Haydn (1732-1809).  
Reminiscent of the collective suicides  
conducted by certain sects, such as the  
Order of the Solar Temple during the 1990s,  
the work defuses immediate sympathy for his  
round shapes due to its subject. It is a recur-  
rent formula with the artist: to “capture” the  
spectator with a sort of formal sympathy in  
order to lead them towards issues that can  
sometimes be difficult.

Also contemporary with this period is *La  
Grosse Tête*, an immense head placed on  
top of a miniscule body trapped in a plexi-  
glass sarcophagus. A metaphor for ambition  
and narcissism, this piece is an example of  
the way in which the artist moves from  
drawing to sculpture: the form is composed  
of a carved block of hard polystyrene or sty-  
rofoam covered with glass fibre, like a sur-  
fboard, and seeks to reproduce the scale of  
a preparatory drawing. Séchas removes the  
material so that it takes the outline of the ori-  
ginal drawing, in opposition to a classical  
sculptor who models the clay into shapes.  
Which is why the artist considers his sculp-

tures to be more like “drawing in volume”.  
Doing this, and with these techniques, he  
opens the way to his cats.



# CATS AND MARTIANS

Alain Séchas first gained wide recognition on the international scene in the mid-1990s, with his elongated cat figures whose minimally-sketched expressions engage viewers with their large, bulging eyes. Placed in absurd or comical situations, these figures—initially cats, later Martians—address serious or trivial subjects with a sometimes humorous, even disenchanted tone. In this way, societal problems (e.g. *Grosse Bêtise*, *Professeur Suicide*) exist side-by-side with daily incidents which may include banal or comical elements, such as *Hugh Chat Guitariste*, a humorous nod to visual artist and musician Hugues Reip. A reproduction of the sculpture appears on an album sleeve of the group SPLITt.

But whatever the context in which these pieces develop, the figures are always positioned face-to-face with the spectator. Séchas gives his characters big eyes, staring straight at you, so as to generate an immediate attraction, and even amazement. An example of this

are the luminous eyes of *Jurassic Pork* which reenact the magic lantern's attraction in a burlesque reinterpretation of the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*. For the artist, it means immediately capturing the observer and seducing them with humour before inviting them to move beyond the amazement and delve deeper into the subject being addressed. The look is again the issue at the centre of the animated installation *Hommage à Emile Coué*: a drawing of a hypnotic spiral spins faster and faster while a voice, keeping pace, repeats the emblematic self-help healing mantra of the famous pharmacist: “Tous les jours, à tout point de vue, je vais de mieux en mieux” (Every day in every way I am getting better and better)

It's one of those paradoxes that the artist loves to manipulate: while his works are accessible at first glance, with a playful tone, they require time to fully appreciate their conceptual and artistic depth. Behind a smokescreen of light humour, Séchas offers a sharp critique of our world, highlighting its attitudes and flaws, but without making any moral judgements. Indeed, he identifies with the figure of the French 17<sup>th</sup> century moralist who would observe the morals and activities of his contemporaries with watchful eyes, from his own perspective,

without representing any authority such as the Church or State. Just like the moralists, Séchas adopts a brief format and offers a veritable reflection on human nature in all its complexity that goes beyond amused observation.

For this exhibition, the artist decided to diversify the format of his sculptures to create a very different relationship with space. While the large sculptures or installations, such as *Platée*, *La Grosse Tête* or *Jurassic Pork*, are displayed quite naturally in the vast expanse of the BPS22 and maintain a well-defined relationship with the space — as a line drawn on white paper might do — the smaller pieces, such as *Mister Mazout*, *Petit Baldaquin*, *Le Monument pour Jacques Lacan* and *La Cycliste*, work on another level. They are displayed on plinths of different kinds within a classic scenography arrangement that favours the effects of scale with the visitors, refusing to “contend” with the building. So, *Mister Mazout*, an evocation of oil slicks, responds to the *Monument pour Jacques Lacan*, a visualisation of personality disorders, one example of which is a split personality. *Petit Baldaquin* and *La Cycliste* are small models of monumental sculptures, the latter is located at the exit



*Le Martien hamburger* (detail), 2001. Polyester, acrylic, mural. MAMCO Collection, work acquired thanks to a subscription from the Association des Amis du MAMCO and anonymous donors. Photo BPS22

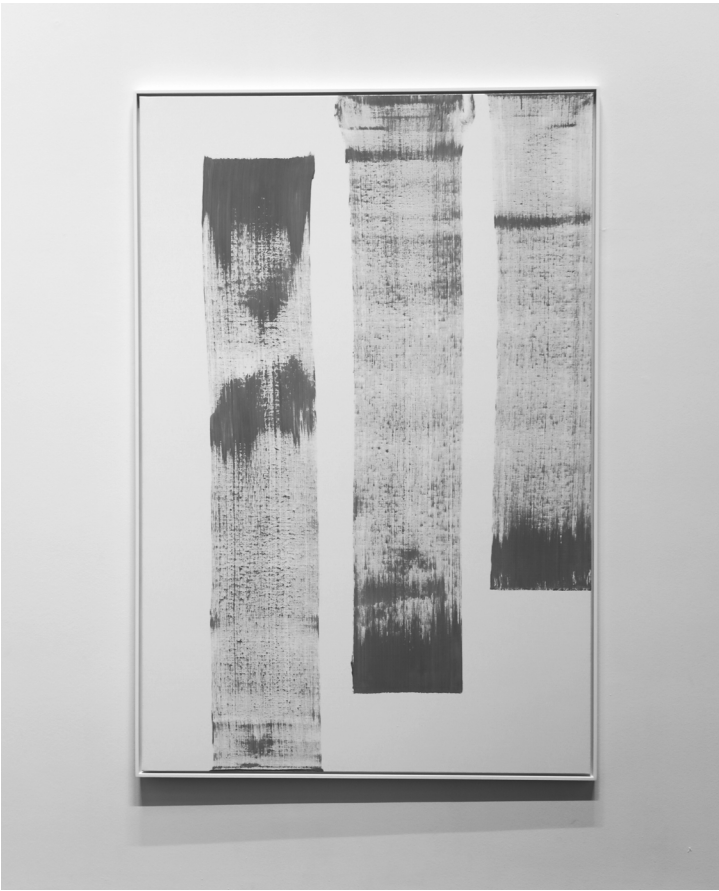
## Face-to-Face Staging

A cat wearing baggy trousers and armed with a gun brings the visitor up short in a face-to-face encounter. As a backdrop, scenery showing almost abandoned suburbs. The painting, an impersonal flat reproduction of a projected drawing, acts as scenery and contextualises the character positioned in freeze frame, expressing hesitation. The artist chooses the moment when the action is suspended and pre-

pares to pivot between burlesque and drama, comedy and tragedy. Opposite, the *Martien hamburger*, a “little green man”, a paroxystic figure of otherness, also gives in, like the cat in *Grosse Bêtise*, to a very human impulse: he indulges in eating a hamburger, the ultimate symbol of junk food. Behind him, his silhouette is magnified as a mural painted in the same colours as the sculpture, while a text written on the wall confirms the meaning of the installation.

from the Galeries Royales Saint-Hubert in Brussels, which are displayed in the public space without plinths in an immediate relationship to the spectator, as originally initiated by Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) with his famous group sculpture *Les Bourgeois de Calais*. In contrast, and paradoxically silent, *Hugh Chat Guitariste* appears on his own stage, which acts as a plinth.

*Concorde 1*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Baronian, Brussels. Photo BPS22



# PAINTING, FROM ACCESSORY TO PREFERENCE

In 1996, Séchas created *Le Chat Écrivain*, an installation consisting of a sculpture and a painting, which has become central to his career, depicting a young painter writing a pompous letter to his sister, expressing his pride in finally completing a convincing portrait of their father, which he believes will bring him fame. This work, featured in this exhibition, is retrospectively seen as a key milestone in the artist's journey. It was not only his first cat sculpture, which would earn him his renown, but also marked the return of painting to Séchas' work. Having previously taken pains to avoid the art form, he uses the painting here as “scenery” intended to contextualise the sculpture. It is this particular “journey” that the exhibition takes us on, with painting initially serving as an accessory to the sculpture, in the form of murals (e.g. *Martien hamburger*) or painted canvasses (e.g. *Grosse Bêtise*), before gradually becoming the artist's preferred medium.

Around 2005, Alain Séchas abandoned sculpture and more particularly his famous cats, a promise he only partially kept given that he returns to them every now and then. The length of time taken to produce them no longer met the need for rapid execution which characterises the artist's creative process. Above all, Alain Séchas (re)discovered painting, which has mainly occupied him since this period. So he extensively examines his “new” medium while finding real pleasure in its execution. Thus the artist moves from one style to another, from geometrical or lyrical abstraction to figurative painting in a variety of styles, increasing the techniques and media along with the projects under consideration.

So, canvases such as *Glace citron*, *Crabe* or *Chips* are executed using a contrasting method to the artist's usual process: he starts with splashes of colour on the canvas before overlaying silhouettes with a paintbrush. This creates tension between the painted background and the depth achieved by the drawing. In recent unseen series, such as *Maryline*, the artist uses another method: he chooses images from social media of young women in stereotypical poses and expressions, at the intersection between truck driver calendar pin-ups and art history figures. From these images the artist draws a picture that he reproduces on canvas in almost a 1:1 ratio before applying layers of colour, building his composition according to classic painting techniques (underlying sketch, underpainting,

shaping, contrasting colours, etc.) and using flat tints heightened with black lines to portray the art objects. In contrast, works such as *Last Cocktail*, *Château*, *Couple en rouge* or *Visite d'expo* are composed directly onto the canvas, with the artist emphasising the forms at the end.

Alain Séchas' very first paintings were abstract works that could be called “lyrical”: the artist creating his composition from the magma of colours available to him and dispensing with the preparatory or underlying sketch. In one sense, he was dispensing with his way of working. Later, he also produced geometric compositions, even mixing styles and techniques (painting and drawing), as in *Genève 2* where painted lines appear to wave freely across a uniform background. The recent series *Monaco* exacerbates this tension: one or more thick vertical lines of colour traverse a monochrome canvas, deceiving the eye as to the order of the layers or suggesting spindly silhouettes standing upright.

While the exhibition is titled *Je ne m'ennuie jamais... [I Never Get Bored...]*, reflecting the abundance of the artist's output, it could also have been called *Changements de méthode [Changes in Method]*, given how much Séchas delights in exploring different technical registers.



Also on View at BPS22



Exhibition *Tout cramer* [Burn it all down]  
by Juliette Vanwaterloo  
takes over the Entresol

An activist artist considering feminist, ecological, and decolonial issues, **Juliette Vanwaterloo** (FR, 1998) creates embroideries, lace, tapestries, and textiles installations denouncing police violence. In opposition to the dominant narrative of the police, justice system, politicians, and certain media, she notably represents cop-watching videos broadcast found on social media. Her artistic work involves the invention of counter-narratives constructed with soft, delicate, colourful materials imbued with a domestic history long attributed to women.

Juliette Vanwaterloo,  
*Tout cramer* (exhibition view),  
BPS22, 2024. Photo BPS22

But also

**The Petit Musée** is a space for mediation, specifically designed for and adapted to children. In tune with the figurative works of the main exhibition, it offers a selection of drawings in precise lines or cartoon styles. Some works evoke the world of comics, while others use animal figures to explore human nature. In this space, as in Alain Séchas' exhibition, some works are abstract. The Petit Musée exclusively features works from the collections of the Province of Hainaut and the BPS22.

Free admission on the first  
Sunday of every month