



Loïc Raguénès, *Only a Grain of Sand* at CLEARING, New York
XIBT, 2024
(author: Isaac Aden 1/6)

XIBT

LOÏC RAGUÉNÈS, ONLY A GRAIN OF SAND at CLEARING, NEW YORK

by Isaac Aden

*Always fresh and friendly.
Who drinks, who laughs, who sings
To please his lover.
Very sweet, my dear beautiful
Love your frail lover:
He is just a grain of sand,
Always fresh and friendly.*

– Erik Satie
Trois poèmes d'amour, 1914

Footprints left along the shore ever erased by the ceaseless relent of the sea recall the ephemeral aspects encompassed in our existence. Just as a grain of sand on the beach, each individual's reach is unique, yet small relative to the infinite specs of sand scattered across the coast, but collectively they are that which builds the earth beneath our feet. Prompted by the recent passing of the seminal painter Loïc Raguénès (French, 1968-2022) CLEARING has organized three concurrent posthumous exhibitions to honor his legacy at their Brussels and New York galleries. Fittingly, the New York exhibition, *Only a Grain of Sand* is titled after Erik Satie's *Trois poèmes d'amour* (*Three Love Poems*). This tripart song cycle from 1914, begins "Ne suis que grain de sable," translating to "I am only a grain of sand," which initiates the simple ode to an unknown loved one. The presentation brings together over forty paintings primarily rendered in tempera on canvas. While the paintings selected primarily focus on his production from 2016 to the present, the exhibition nonetheless seeks to encapsulate the totality of his oeuvre.



Loïc Raguénès, *Scirpe triquètre*, 2018, Tempera on canvas 24 x 29 inches, 61,3 x 74,6 cm, Courtesy of the Estate of Loïc Raguénès and CLEARING, NEW YORK

C L E A R I N G

Loïc Raguénès, Only a Grain of Sand at C L E A R I N G, New York
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Raguénès painted canvases imbued with poetics and quietude. Raguénès paintings are tenderly rendered and fraught with melancholy, nevertheless they maintain a romantic retention of hope. Simultaneously, Raguénès' work is self-aware, ripe with irony, yet he manages to maintain a deep sense of sincerity. The profound significance of Raguénès' work lies in his ability to defy a dialectical progressions of art historical norms. Raguénès manages to achieve this by presenting optical points of recognition or signs contrasted with a distinctly evident hand, harkening from an era entirely disconcerted with signifiers or representation. Raguénès' paintings exhibit scumbling, an acknowledgement of the compositional edge of the canvas, and a touch which evoke the tradition of the abstract expressionists. However, Raguénès abandons the virility of abstract expressionism while retaining its potential for tenderness and sensuality. The peculiar and perhaps most intriguing aspect about Raguénès' work is the presence of his painterly approach combined with a range and unexpectedly and seemingly antithetical inclusions of diametrically opposed aesthetic stances. The complexity of Raguénès' work defies the singularity of modernism in favor of the plurality offered by a metamodernistic or liminalist perspective on painting.

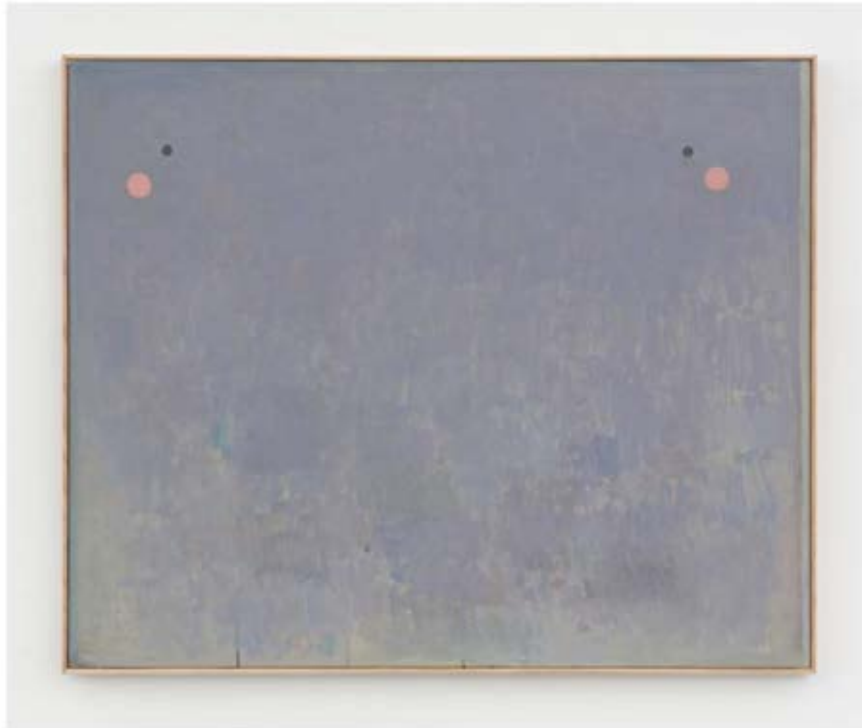


Loïc Raguénès, Only a Grain of Sand, installation view, Courtesy of the Estate of Loïc Raguénès and CLEARING, NEW YORK

For those unacquainted with the oeuvre of Raguénès, you will find his work unfolds through a number of self-described chapters of discreetly distinct bodies of work. The earliest works in the exhibition (dating from 2005) are drawings depicting images whirling dervishes appropriated from found images, which have had an abstracting halftone applied to them. Raguénès would then delicately render the halftone dots in a single color. These works seem to be in direct dialogue with Raguénès' monumental scale wall paintings, As is evident in is his mural of a polar bear or one of his early works with CLEARING depicting Pierre Brossolette Elementary School in Charleville-Mézières, France from 2011. Specific to this period, one can clearly consider these works through the lenses of postmodernism. Raguénès was appropriating found imagery, albeit, contrary to other earlier mechanical forms of reproduction, Raguénès made use of digital filters. Additionally, Raguénès would hand paint the final "layer" thus maintaining the sensitivity of his own personal touch. From these important precursors one can trace the aesthetic developments, which would ultimately inform the development of Raguénès' own unique style.

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Loïc Raguénès, Tempera on canvas, 28 1/2 x 34 3/4 inches, 72,4 x 88,3 cm, Courtesy of the Estate of Loïc Raguénès and CLEARING, NEW YORK

Following his halftone works Raguénès produced a serial body of paintings featuring a grid of circles. The paintings seem to be consistently 54 x 50 cm. and constructed with circles of the same size. The obvious connection between the grids of circles and the halftone watercolors of appropriated images is that of a micro expansion. One can see this relationship specifically in the painting *Max and Susann* in which Raguénès' grid contains a number of circles in which some have been painted the same color as the ground, thus causing them to recede and implying the potential of a similar halftone pictorial image. Although, any such image seems so abstracted it is not clearly visible.



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In a latter iteration of this series Raguénès abandons the overpainting of circles in favor of presenting a grid of circles all rendered in the same color presented against a ground of a single color such as *Candle in the Wind*. The space purposefully left around the grid implies the composition does not continue thus reducing the terms of the painting to the boundary of the canvas. Therefore, the grid of circles is clearly defined as a discrete set. These paintings diverge from the half tone works in that they forego representation and present what can be perceived as a prime object in the form of a pattern. I contend Raguénès' structural methodology defines a prime pattern. This approach has similarly been utilized by artists from the group BMPT or other painters who employ a type of emblematic abstraction, such as Daniel Buren's stripes, Niele Torini's strokes or Olivier Mosset's Circles.



Loïc Raguénès, Colored pencil on paper, 10 1/4 x 14 1/4 inches, 26 x 36 cm, Courtesy of the Estate of Loïc Raguénès and CLEARING, NEW YORK



Loïc Raguénès, Max and Susanna, 2016, Tempera on wood (two elements), 34 1/4 x 28 1/4 inches, 87 x 71 cm, Courtesy of the Estate of Loïc Raguénès and CLEARING, NEW YORK

The order of construction and the terms in which one can ascertain these paintings seem such that the system (in this case the grid of circles) is first, followed by the selection of color and finally followed by the handling of paint itself. Much like the half tone works, the concluding phase of this process (the physical application of the paint) which most strongly influences the painting itself reveals the indelible presence of the artist's hand.

However, through studying the breadth of Raguénès' oeuvre, it became clear to me his relationship to color was highly personal and perhaps one of the most significant facets of his style, even more so than the initial individual parameters he set down for himself. Color is for Raguénès what connects the disparate aspects of his painting practice and what binds them together. It is through his melancholic mixing of desaturated pallets, one begins to recognize and become acquainted with the quietude and poetics which define Raguénès' work.

Personally, I felt one of the defining achievements of Raguénès' exhibition *Only a Grain of Sand*, was the instance I realized his large wall mural. The mural is invisible at first, only revealing itself through the peripheral glance or play of light. It is made of binary pairs of circles one on top of the other, which appear to be the same size as the circles from his grid paintings. The circles were drawn directly onto the wall and painted an extremely pale tint of blue and pink tempera such that they are almost white. The first moment I realized Raguénès almost invisible wall painting was a pure revelation, it is an absolute artistic triumph and delivers exactly what I crave in art. The subtlety of the work defies capture in reproduction. The variation of sheens between the painting and the wall are such that the work is activated by movement of the viewer and is only evident via the elusive effects of reflected light. The circles are presented sometimes sparsely and other cases in dense clusters of archipelagoes. According to the galleries' director Martine Ma, the artist's estate provided a digital plan which was then executed by former members of his studio. The site situated aspect of this work and its relationship to the invisible lead me to consider Raguénès in relation to Robert Barry. Yet, it is in Raguénès' propensity to swing in directions contradictory to the terms of the aforementioned minimal or conceptual painters and his use of signs or mimetics as opposed to abstraction or a purely formalist approach to painting which ultimately distinguish and define him.

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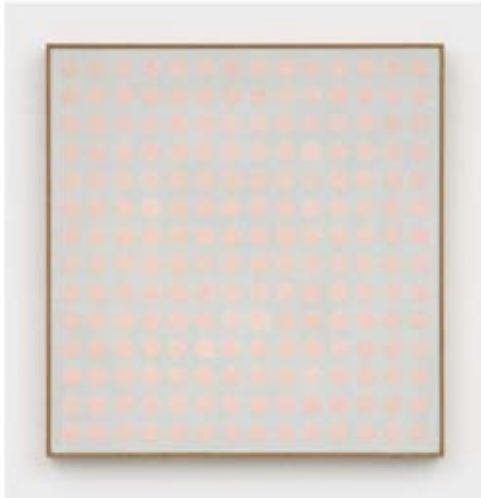


Loïc Raguénès, Pharmacy, 2016, Tempera on wood, 21 1/3 x 20 1/2 inches, 54 x 52 cm Courtesy of the Estate of Loïc Raguénès and CLEARING, NEW YORK

One of the most compelling aspects about Raguénès is his ability to reintroduce formal explorations of aesthetic concerns abandoned by contemporary painters. For example, normally artists would not touch the painterly vocabulary of the early Avant Garde, for the same reasons painting a realistic landscape or classical nude would seem irrelevant today. There is a precedent of linear stylistic development in which prior stylistic developments are considered currently irrelevant. However, Raguénès' ascetically inclusive approach to painting remains extremely viable to today's artists and audiences. Perhaps it is because, the barreling speed of modernist progression to quickly abandon large swathes of paintings' potential in favor of the driving demands for newness manufactured by the effects of capital on a modernist society. Raguénès distinguishes himself from conventional modernism with the addition of overt representation, whether symbolic or otherwise reduced. Historically speaking, the inclusion of a representational signifier would seem irreconcilable with the primary concerns of minimalist, hard edge, or formalist abstraction. Distinctly, Raguénès simultaneously is able to embrace both ends of the spectrum without denouncing one in favor of the other, thus positioning his work on a proverbial pendulum. Rather than self-imposing rigid stylistic adherence, Raguénès fluidly and elegantly swings through previously segregated aesthetic discourses, thus revealing the complexity and significance of his work and cementing him as a truly liminal artist.

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Loïc Raguénès, Candle In The Wind, 2016, Tempera on wood, 21 1/3 x 20 1/2 inches, 54 x 52 cm Courtesy of the Estate of Loïc Raguénès and CLEARING, NEW YORK



Loïc Raguénès, TBT wall painting, Dimensions variable, installation view, Courtesy of the Estate of Loïc Raguénès and CLEARING, NEW YORK

For example, chronologically following these paintings Raguénès painted *Pharmacy*, in which on the same size canvas as his grids, Raguénès painted a single yellow circle against a painterly ground of the most desaturated phthalo. Contrary to his previous grids, this painting evokes landscape. The circle appears as a sun and the ground the sea or sky. Conventionally artists contending with the terms Raguénès had previously engaged with would never reintroduce representation. This would lead one to believe perhaps we could perceive it as a pure abstraction exhibiting the push and pull of hard edge combined with painterly abstraction as seen with Hans Hoffman's rectangles of solid color over painterly courses. Although, the assertion Raguénès was engaging a mimetic depiction of a landscape (or more specifically a seascape) is reinforced by examining the next systemic framework Raguénès introduced into his oeuvre: *The Waves*.

From 2017 until his death in 2022 Raguénès would become known for his series of *Wave* paintings. Following a similar structural system as his grid paintings, both had a defined set of subjective terms which would serve as the boundaries for the artistic liberties taken in his execution. Raguénès wave paintings are made of linear bands of wave patterns set against a painterly ground. At first glance *The Wave Paintings* might seem to be situated amongst the sardonic efforts of so many of the postwar painters who employed a "Bad" or wonky type of figuration in their work. However, as in all his other series, the true significance and sophistication of Raguénès paintings lies not in the individual painting or body of work for that matter, but in the complexity, each brings to the totality of his oeuvre.

Following a similar approach of setting a structural form for the subject and allowing for artistic license to occur within this framework, Raguénès developed further bodies of work. He would paint scumbled fields of color, recalling the Color field painters of the 1950's, yet he would delicately punctuate these fields with two symmetrical binary pairs of circles of solid color. One circle matching the same size as from his previous paintings with the second being slightly smaller. Additionally, these paintings would frequently include subtle edge effects, which would migrate into other bodies of work, as can be seen in his more naturalistic depicted abstractions of the sea. Raguénès' final body of work would again include the specific circles he previously implemented, furthermore he added circles of different sizes, he would encircle one with a ring, and set them against a painterly field. The paintings clearly signify solar systems and evoke a cosmic concern in Raguénès' oeuvre, thus only adding to the complexities one could ascribe to the interpretations of his earlier grids of circles.