

Press release

Sylvie Selig

River of no Return

8 March -

7 July 2024

MAC LYON



Sylvie Selig's studio, 2023
Photo: Zlata Teplyshova

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The macLYON is proud to host the first museum exhibition of artist Sylvie Selig, discovered during her participation in the 16th Lyon Biennale, in 2022.

Over an entire floor, the exhibition at the macLYON will be built around *River of no Return*, the immense canvas measuring 140 metres which the macLYON just purchased with the support of a crowdfunding campaign on KissKissBankBank, launched mid-October 2023. This is a dual event: the first ever public presentation of this monumental work, and the first time that Sylvie Selig will see it in its entirety.

The exhibition will also highlight many of the artist's other productions, thus illustrating the diversity of her practice: embroidery on textiles, paintings, drawings, and sculptures, including the mannequins Sylvie Selig refers to as her *Weird Family*...

Curator:

Isabelle Bertolotti, Director of macLYON

French artist Sylvie Selig was over eighty when her work was presented by curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath at the 16th Biennale of Contemporary Art in Lyon. Her sudden arrival on the scene at that great age was every bit as surprising as her artistic output. She had been persuaded by Inga Sempé, a designer friend, to display her work on Instagram; this immediately brought her to the notice of the two curators, who decided to include a 50-metre long painting with the title *State/less* in the Biennale, as well as several embroidered drawings and a series of sculptures that the artist calls her “Weird Family”. These sculptures are whimsical figures, most of them made using mannequins adorned with a multitude of bric-a-brac objects. What was exhibited was only a small part of her prolific output, which is preserved with great care in her amazing studio in the Pigalle district of Paris. Not a day passes in the studio without her painting, drawing and embroidering on canvases large and small, and all the while continuing to work on her “family”.

Born in Nice in 1941, Sylvie Selig left France in her early teens to move with her mother to Australia. Not particularly enthusiastic about school, she regularly slipped out of class to draw and paint in secret, most of the time under the benevolent eye of her art teacher. By the age of 15, she had won several painting prizes, which were immediately reported in the local press. At the age of 18, her mother sent her to England to continue her studies. She didn’t stay long in London, however, but moved on to Paris and New York for new adventures. She became closely involved in artistic and intellectual circles and produced a lot of illustrations for women’s magazines. As soon as she arrived in New York, she was helped by French illustrator Tomi Ungerer, who put her in touch with magazine editors and publishing houses. It was during that period that Sylvie Selig turned to illustrating children’s books, which led her to take an interest in fairy tales, including Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, for which she created a pictorial world in which anthropomorphic animals played a key role. Returning to France in 1970, she continued illustrating for a further ten years, before switching back to a practice she felt was «more artistic and autonomous».

She had exhibitions in galleries – the Jean-Marie Cupillard gallery in Grenoble and Saint-Tropez – but did not garner the success she had hoped for, even though a handful of discerning collectors, mostly Americans, bought her paintings. In 1995, she and her husband moved to an old studio in Pigalle, which they completely renovated so that Sylvie could continue to paint. This marked the start of a remarkable run of large-scale canvases, the first of which was the 30-metre long *Route 66*, then *River of no Return*, which she worked on for almost three years. Narrative is very much present in her paintings, both in the way the story unfolds like a succession of scenes, and in texts written directly onto the canvas. These texts, which are always in English, are written out beforehand in the form of printed scripts to guide the artist through the production process. They act as both dialogue and commentary, punctuating the sequences and encouraging the viewer to follow the narrative.

The way in which Sylvie Selig has taken the situation of the viewer into account is particularly important. Bearing in mind the static position of someone reading a magazine or book, the face-on position of someone looking at a painting, or the comfortable seat of a cinema-goer watching a film, the artist anticipated a way for her huge canvases to be read, by drawing inspiration from the process of a film being wound from one reel to another. Using this principle, her idea was to set up a system whereby the painting would unroll on one side and roll up on the other. Although that system works for her low-height paintings – she had several prototypes made – it proved tricky for large formats.

River of no Return is 140 metres long, so how do you present it in a museum? Curators tend to give careful consideration nowadays to the place of the visitor in a museum and their relationship to the work. They take into account the visitor’s body and the potential for interaction, movement and stimulation of the senses. It seemed unthinkable to restrict access to this major work to face-on viewing alone. So macLYON and the artist have taken the slightly insane gamble of opening out the canvas in its entirety, hanging it, and letting it wind its way through the museum space as the story unfolds, which gives the public a chance to discover the work at their own pace, and perhaps even to retrace their steps occasionally to get a better sense of the wealth of material it contains. Taking advantage of the extraordinary adaptability of the rooms that architect Renzo Piano designed for our museum, *River of no Return* extends across the entire first floor of the building. To follow the story of the work, the public moves both in space and in time. They are physically drawn into the epic journey of the painting’s three protagonists. Like in an uninterrupted sequence shot in a movie, these characters take on the role of guides on the river that meanders through the history of twentieth-century art. The viewer just has to let themselves be carried along by the narrative and to recognise the 140 allusions to the artists, painters, sculptors, designers and architects who appear in this extraordinary contemporary odyssey.

Paintings and drawings, old ones, new ones, on textile, stone or paper, complete the tour. As a prelude, on the inside wall of the museum, the public after discovering some of the members of Sylvie Selig’s “weird family” – who look as if they might have escaped from the galleries upstairs – get their first glimpse of *Endless Drawing*, a work measuring over 25 m².

As its name suggests, this work is destined to grow; it is like a vast *cadavre-exquis* made up of multiple pieces of linen fabric which get sewn together as the drawing expands. Sylvie Selig’s works are gradually invading the museum and even intruding into the adjacent exhibitions. They stay in the visitor’s mind as they make their way through the museum.

Isabelle Bertolotti, Director of macLYON

The Musée d'Art Contemporain (macLYON) launched a major public fundraising campaign on the KissKissBankBank crowdfunding platform from 16 October to 22 December 2023, with an appeal to individual and corporate donors. Thanks to this campaign, the huge 140-metre long painting has now become part of the macLYON collection.

The list of all 275 donors can be found on [our website](#).

Sylvie Selig painted the work section by section, rolling it up as she went along. She has actually never seen it displayed in its entirety before. This exhibition is also the first time it has been fully unrolled and shown to the public!

River of no Return by Sylvie Selig

"IT'S THE RIVER ODYSSEY OF THREE CHARACTERS, TWO BOYS AND A GIRL, AND THEIR ENCOUNTER WITH CONTEMPORARY ART [...] BECAUSE OIL PAINT TAKES A VERY LONG TIME TO DRY IT TOOK ME THREE YEARS TO COMPLETE. [...] THERE ARE 140 REFERENCES TO CONTEMPORARY ART FOR 140 METRES OF CANVAS."

"*RIVER OF NO RETURN* IS A PAINTING ON CANVAS 140 METRES LONG BY 2M20 HIGH, A THREE-YEAR ADVENTURE THAT SERVES AS A SELECTIVE SUMMARY OF THE HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY ART SEEN THROUGH A QUASI-ETHNOLOGICAL LENS.

THE STORY IS PRESENTED IN A TONE THAT IS HALF IRONIC AND HALF SERIOUS, LIKE A TRAVEL DIARY. IT IS THE ODYSSEY OF THREE CHARACTERS ASPIRING TO THE UNATTAINABLE, WHO FIND THEMSELVES SAILING DOWN A RIVER SYMBOLISING THE JOURNEY OF LIFE. AS THEY MAKE THEIR WAY ALONG THE RIVER – A KIND OF INITIATION RITUAL – THEY KEEP CHANCING ACROSS THINGS. AS THEY DRIFT FROM ONE BANK OF THE RIVER TO THE OTHER, THEY ENTER A MAZE OF SCENES – IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER OR LOGIC, APART FROM THE ROUTE THEY HAVE TAKEN – FROM WORKS OF ART, EXPLICITLY REFERENCING A LARGE NUMBER OF CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS."

"Sylvie Selig's work was hugely popular at the last Lyon Biennale and, at a little over 80 years of age, the artist is now enjoying a belated but richly deserved success.

The presence of women artists in French collections is still very slight, despite the decisive actions taken over the last ten years by many museum directors in their exhibition programmes and recent acquisitions.

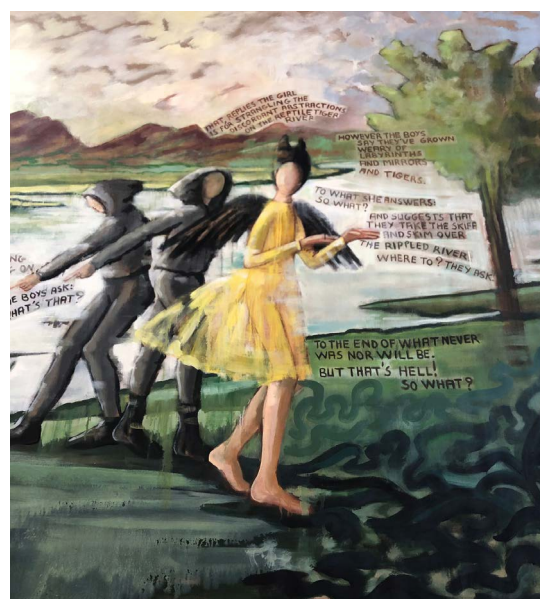
There is still a long way to go.

As Director of macLYON, I was keen to pay tribute to the artist Sylvie Selig with a retrospective exhibition in 2024, and to include in our collections her 140-metre painting *River of no Return*, which she created over a period of 3 years. It is the longest canvas ever painted by a woman! Thanks to a crowdfunding campaign that has enabled a wide range of people to play an active part in the project, as well as raising awareness of Sylvie Selig's work, *River of no Return* can now take its place in the macLYON collection as a major work by a woman artist."

Isabelle Bertolotti



Sylvie Selig painting *River of no Return*
Photos: Brigitte Bouillot



Detail from *River of no Return*
Photo: macLYON

Painting

Sylvie Selig's work combines a strong interest in art history and film with a fondness for old books and fairy tales. Her large-scale paintings, realised with sweeping gestures and light layers of, sometimes dripping, colour, extend across long canvases in narratives that teem with references. Like films, they recount stories in which the human world intersects with animals and anthropomorphic creatures.



Sylvie Selig, *Caged Birdie*, 2023
Photo: Zlata Teplyshova

Embroideries

In addition to the huge canvases, there are numerous drawings on textiles, both new and recycled (old tablecloths, shirts, sheets, etc.). They are drawn with felt-tip pens or ink and in various formats. They also feature a grotesque and fantastic bestiary evoking the terrors of childhood, as well as the haunting fantasies of Lewis Carroll. The artist embroiders over these motifs, overstitching and completing them with red, green, white and black thread. She reinforces some of the shapes, creates new ones and blends words with the images.



Sylvie Selig, *Daphné*, 2023
Photo: Zlata Teplyshova

Sculptures

Since 2016, the terrifying, magical world of Sylvie Selig's paintings and drawings has found its way into sculpture. The artist created the first of her 'monsters' then, and started work on what she calls her 'Weird Family'. Using dressmakers' dummies, papier-mâché and, above all, a multitude of items gleaned from here and there, she has created imaginary figures of varying sizes. Each sculpture has its own name, so that they add up to a proper family. There are now around thirty of these hybrid people-sculptures and the artist is still turning everyday life into a fable by producing new ones.



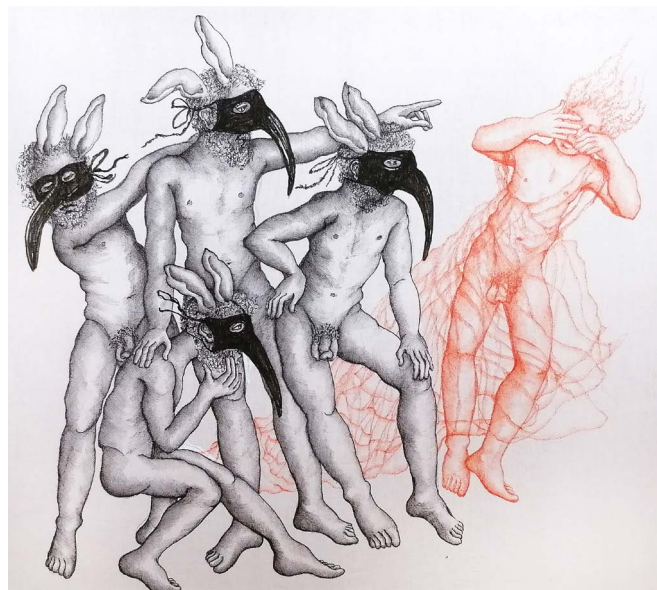
Sylvie Selig, *Miss Scissors*, 2023
Photo: Zlata Teplyshova

- 1941: Sylvie Selig is born in Nice.
- 1955: Sylvie Selig moves to Australia with her mother, where she receives an English-speaking education. At the age of 15, she wins the Victorian Artists Society prize and first prize in the Sun Youth Art Show.
- 1958: She designs stage sets for a play by Barry Humphries. She also works as an assistant to photographer Helmut Newton.
- 1959: First solo exhibition at the Australian Galleries in Melbourne. Sylvie Selig returns to Europe – first to London and then to Paris.
- 1960: She works for 2 years as an illustrator for *Elle magazine*
- 1966: She creates the illustrations for *Le Petit Arbre*, which wins the prize for best book at the Bologna Children's Book Fair. She leaves for New York. Works as an illustrator for a number of publishers and also for American magazines.
- 1970: Back in Paris, she continues to work as an illustrator for English publisher Jonathan Cape.
- 80': Sylvie Selig gives up illustration to concentrate on art. She exhibits in galleries in France and sells her work mainly to American collectors.
- 1995: She moves to her Paris studio in the Pigalle district.
- 2009: She exhibits fifteen large portraits of film directors for *Screen of my Dreams* at the Espace Communes, Paris.
- 2009-2011: She creates her first very large oil painting *Route 66* (30 metres long by 1m70 high). To show it, she designs a prototype machine to scroll through the canvas, accompanied by a soundtrack telling the story.
- 2012-2015: She paints *River of no Return*. The long drying times required by oil painting make progress slow. Sylvie Selig has never seen this work in its entirety.
- 2016: The beginning of what she calls her *Weird Family*, characters made from dressmakers' dummies and bits and pieces gleaned from here and there. She posts her work on her Instagram account.
- 2015-2018: She paints *Stateless*, an oil painting 50 metres long and 2m20 high, which is exhibited at the Lyon Biennale, 2022.
- 2019: She exhibits with the Rizomi Arte gallery at the Bologna Art Fair and at the Salon D'Dessin, at the Atelier Richelieu, Paris. She begins *Loneliness*, a work still in progress, which is expected to be 80 metres long and 2m20 high.
- 2021: She exhibits *Senseless*, a story drawn in felt pen on 11 linen panels, at the Blu Gallery in Bologna. She also exhibits at the Galerie Métamorphoses, Paris. A book-catalogue *Inside Out Fairy Tales, Les Fables Cruelles de Sylvie Selig*, is published to accompany the exhibition, as well as an artist's book *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with a print run of 130 copies.
- 2022: Noticed on Instagram by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, curators of the Lyon Biennale d'Art Contemporain *Manifesto of Fragility*, her work is exhibited at macLYON and the Usines Fagor, where she makes an impact on the general public. The work *Stateless* is presented there for the first time. Sylvie Selig donates the work *Boys Don't Cry*, 2019 to macLYON at the end of the Lyon Biennale.
- 2023: Another exhibition at Galerie Métamorphoses, where she presents large drawings on canvas, embroidered drawings and a few paintings.

Sylvie Selig is currently represented by Mor Charpentier in Paris.



Sylvie Selig in her studio, 2023
Photo: Roland Beaufre



Sylvie Selig, *Boys Don't cry*, 2019
Collection macLYON

Disorders – Excerpts from the collection Antoine de Galbert

8 March - 7 July 2024

After *Une histoire de famille*, *Collection(s) Robelin* in 2022, the first ever exhibition at the macLYON dedicated to a private collection, the museum has invited collector Antoine de Galbert to exhibit a large selection of works from his personal collection over an entire floor of the museum.

Originally from the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region, Antoine de Galbert has been working for numerous years to promote and support contemporary art, mainly through the foundation he established in 2003. He was also the founder and president of *La maison rouge*, an exhibition space whose artistic programme marked the Parisian arts scene between 2004 and 2018. For over thirty years, Antoine de Galbert has been collecting contemporary art with a strong focus on Art Brut, as well as other forms of ethnological and/or folk art. His eclectic collection bears witness to his insatiable curiosity and the interest he has taken in both internationally recognized artists and young artists whose works are still little known. His self-taught yet confident sensibility has afforded him free rein in the selection of pieces, allowing him to bring together an independent collection freed from the traditional norms of art history. His commitment to the art world and the relationship he maintains with the artists in his collection make him a passionate and exciting collector.

Designed in close collaboration with Antoine de Galbert, this exhibition at the macLYON features over 200 works by over 150 artists showcasing the wealth and singularity of his collection.

Artists: Jane Alexander, Sara Bichão, Miriam Cahn, Marcel Dzama, John Isaacs, Richard Jackson, Mari Katayama, Annie Leibovitz, Christian Lhopital, Annette Messager, Boris Mikhailov, Kent Monkman, Zanele Muholi, Stéphane Pencreac'h, Raphaëlle Ricol, Mika Rottenberg, Thomas Schütte, Sylvie Selig, Agathe Snow, Stéphane Thidet, Alexander Tsikarishvili, Nobuko Tsuchiya, Erwin Wurm, Jérôme Zonder...



Thibault Scemama de Gialluly *Collectionneur d'emmaerdes*, 2016
Collection Antoine de Galbert, Paris

Friends in Love and War – L'Éloge des meilleur-es ennemi-es

Works from the collection of the
British Council and macLYON

8 March - 7 July 2024

The exhibition *Friends in Love and War – L'Éloge des meilleur-es ennemi-es*, a collaboration between Ikon and macLYON, presents a selection of works from British Council and Museum of Contemporary Art in Lyon on the theme of friendship.

Based on mutual trust and affection, friendships are among our most valued relationships. With friends we share life experiences, broaden our horizons and build collective futures – yet the nature of friendship is difficult to define. How do we choose our friends? How do society, politics, culture and social media influence friendships? As trusted critics, friends have the potential to hurt us. Do the secrets friends share make them natural enemies?

Taking place in the partner cities of Lyon and Birmingham, the exhibition also looks at diplomatic friendships, and how regional capitals and cultural institutions can create new ways of living and working together in a post-Brexit climate. The selection of works in the exhibition includes a variety of forms: paintings, drawings, photographs, engravings, films, sculptures...

It also features works by artists specially invited for the exhibition, who have longstanding links with Lyon and Birmingham

Artists: Kenneth Armitage, Sonia Boyce, Tereza Bušková, Pogus Caesar, Patrick Caulfield, Jimmie Durham, Tracey Emin, Marie-Anita Gaube, Lola González, Emma Hart, Lubaina Himid, Geraldine Kosiak, Delaine Le Bas, Markéta Luskacová, Rachel Maclean, Goshka Macuga, Madame Yevonde, Gordon Matta-Clark, Hetain Patel, Paula Rego, Luke Routledge, Niek van de Steeg, Lily van der Stokker, Francis Upritchard, Fabien Verschaere, Gillian Wearing, Bedwyr Williams, Rose Wylie, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye



Hetain Patel, *Don't Look at the Finger*, 2017
Coloured video, sound
Duration: 16'09"
British Council collection
Courtesy of the artist

Established in 1984 in a wing of the Palais Saint-Pierre, in 1995 the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon moved to the site of the Cité internationale, a vast architectural ensemble spread over one kilometre on the edges of the Parc de la Tête d'Or, in Lyon's 6th arrondissement. Entrusted to the architect Renzo Piano, who designed the entire site, the museum conserves the facade of the atrium of the Palais de la Foire, designed by Charles Meysson in the 1920s, on the park side.

The 6,000m2 museum is spread over several floors and presents modular spaces that are perfectly adapted to the needs of the different artistic projects welcomed by the museum, as well as new forms of contemporary expression. The macLYON focuses on current national and international art, in all its forms, offering exhibitions and a wide programme of transdisciplinary event.

Its collection includes over 1,600 works. A selection of these is shown in rotation at the macLYON as well as in several partner structures. Works of its collection are regularly loaned for exhibitions in France and all over the world. It consists mainly of monumental works and ensembles of works, dating from the 1940s to the current day, created by artists from all over the world, the majority for exhibitions at the museum or for the Biennales d'art contemporain de Lyon whose artistic direction is assured by the director of the macLYON.


Brought together in an arts pole with the Musée des beaux-arts since 2018, the two collections form a remarkable ensemble, both in France and in Europe.



View of the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon
Photo Lionel Rault

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OPENING HOURS
Wednesday to Sunday
[from 11am to 6pm]

ADMISSION
● Full: 9€
● Reduced: 6€
● Free for visitors under 18

ACCESS
● By bike
Several Vélo'v stations around the museum
Cycle lane from the Rhône's banks to the museum
● By bus
Stop Musée d'art contemporain
Bus C1, Gare Part-Dieu/Cuire
Bus C4, Jean Macé/Cité internationale
● Ridesharing
www.covoiturage-pour-sortir.fr
● By car
Along quai Charles de Gaulle, carpark
P0 and P2, reduced rate for our visitors