

Michel François

Rotopaintings and Yawning Stones

12 February — 25 April 2026

Press Release

Resisting a fixed style, Michel François's practice unfolds through a sustained engagement with process, material behaviour, and transformation. Spanning sculpture, installation, and—more recently—painting, the works in this exhibition are formally diverse yet connected by recurring concerns: the tension between control and spontaneity, the experience of time and duration, and processes of change, repetition, and contingency.

Often emerging from simple gestures—folding, cutting, casting, dripping or bending—François allows chance, instability and impermanence to actively shape his work. He frequently works with utilitarian or industrial materials, including sand, rubber, metal, paper, glass, wax and found objects. In François's practice, small interventions or adjustments will trigger significant—often transformative—effects that can generate complex meanings. Painting is a relatively new pursuit, one that connects to his late father, an amateur artist who repeatedly painted the same landscape. Reflecting on this act of repetition over time led François to develop his 'rōto' technique as a reverse response to the endeavour: fast, mechanical, and non-observational, with a horizon endlessly replicated—always the same, yet subtly different; mechanical in process, yet still guided by the artist's hand.

The *Rotopaintings* are created using a fast-moving machine of the artist's own design, fitted with industrial sandpaper belts. Unlike conventional painting, where the canvas is static and the artist moves, here the opposite occurs: the surface rotates at high speed, while François remains largely still, briefly touching a stick of oil pigment to the moving surface. Friction produces horizontal bands of colour that accumulate in strata, evoking landscapes and distant horizons, but also bands of static interference. Classical in appearance, the works are generated through relentless motion and erosion: the sandpaper rapidly grinds down the oil stick, visibly consuming the pigment as the image comes into being. Trimmed diagonally along the cutting lines of the industrial sheets, the paintings take the form of parallelograms. Lines—both controlled and uncontrolled—recur throughout François's oeuvre, and the title *Rotopaintings* subtly situates the works within a tradition of artists who have used mechanical processes to question authorship, perception and the primacy of the hand, such as Marcel Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs* or Piero Manzoni's *Linee*.

The *Rotopaintings* find a material counterpart in *To erode (Sand)* (2013-2026), the latest iteration in a series of works in which form emerges through erosion and loss. Through a minimal intervention—pushing a compacted cube of sand (itself an anomaly) across the ground—François activates erosion as an inevitable process. Edges soften, matter diminishes, and the geometric, three-dimensional block gradually disintegrates into flat, organic patterns on the floor.

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The *Scribble Lamp*—an example of an uncontrolled line—transforms an involuntary form into spatial presence: electrical cabling that spools and coils as it falls, evoking both speed and movement, as well as off-the-cuff drawings or scribbles. Its capricious shape stands in sharp contrast to the geometry of the cube and the parallelogram. Here, the arrest of motion creates a subtle doubling: the cable is both the source of the form and literally at its core, running through the hollow plaster from power source to bulb.

Involuntary forces are also at play in the *Yawning Stones* (2025), a collaboration between Michel François and the Brussels-based British artist Douglas Eynon (b. 1989). These sculptures take the form of boulders with gaping, mouth-like openings. Partly inspired by *Yawning Man* (c. 1563), a painting attributed to Pieter Bruegel the Elder in the collection of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (KMSKB), the works also resonate with a long art-historical lineage of yawners, from Messerschmidt and Joseph Ducreux's *Self-Portrait, Yawning* (1783) to Degas's *Women Ironing* (1884-86). Here, a physiological automatism—the yawn—is translated into an enduring mineral form. Typically lasting only a few seconds, the involuntary gesture is petrified, quite literally, as if arrested mid-motion. Stripped of expression, the yawn becomes a void: an opening that suggests fatigue, boredom and a momentary collapse of agency. The motif has long preoccupied François, who also explored it in the early 1990s in a black-and-white photographic wallpaper. Still not fully understood scientifically, yawning is also cloaked in superstition, largely because it is reflexive, contagious and momentarily unsettling—a brief loss of control that cultures have sought to explain, ward off or ritualise.

Across the exhibition, François consistently draws attention to moments where agency gives way to automatism, form emerges through loss, and images arise from contact rather than control. Movement operates as both a visible and invisible force—simultaneously method and result. It may be fast and vital, as in the *Rotopaintings* and the 'scribble' lamp, or slow, as in a yawn or a block of sand pushed across the floor. A subtle irony ripples throughout the exhibition, particularly where speed or stillness generate opposing dynamics. Stone yawns, sand erodes, pigment disappears. Through these processes, the artist invites contemplation of vitality and enervation, duration, and the transformations—both fleeting and protracted—that shape bodies and matter alike.

Michel François (b. 1956, Saint-Trond, Belgium) lives and works in Brussels. In 1999, he represented Belgium at the 48th Venice Biennale with Ann Veronica Janssens. Recent museum exhibitions include *Contre Nature*, BOZAR, Brussels (2023); *Panopticon*, Yarat Contemporary Art Centre, Baku (2022); *Pièce à conviction*, Middelheim Museum, Antwerp (2016); *Nineteen thousand posters. 1994-2016*, Mac's Grand Hornu (2011) and Frac Ile-de-France (2016); *Plans d'évasion*, SMAK, Ghent and Iac Vileurbanne (2009-10); *Salon Intermédiaire*, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2002); *La Plante en nous*, Haus der Kunst, Munich (2000); Kunsthalle Bern (2000) and Documenta IX (1992).

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