The Taste of Nothing, the Smell of Mars

BY AMY SERAFIN

EVEN an artist who likes to fool around with spatial-temporal dimensions can get stressed out by a deadline. Last month technicians were working day and night to prepare for the opening of Loris Gréaud’s “Cellar Door” project at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, but Mr. Gréaud was visibly anxious that it would not be ready on time. The strain was understandable. Mr. Gréaud, barely 29, is the first artist to take over all 45,000 square feet of this prestigious contemporary-art center. He has devoted two years to the realization of his exhibition, and the budget for the project has turned out to be double what any other show there had cost.

The director, Marc-Olivier Wahler, admitted it was an “all-out gamble” to give carte blanche to such a young and relatively inexperienced artist. Yet when the two started planning the undertaking, Mr. Wahler said, “it became clear that his project was so large and encompassed so many different systems, he had to have the whole space.” (Mr. Gréaud, his gallery, and the filmmaker Claude Barret, who bought backruntb, helped defray the costs.)

What Mr. Gréaud has done with it is both enchanting and mind-blowingly conceptual. Like Alice down the rabbit hole, visitors enter through a black door that guides open automatically as they approach. Once inside they wander through the space, a dark universe, divided into various attractions called bubbles.

A vending machine sells candies that can shoot a gas, a passage leads under a crumpled resin ceiling that was molded from earth after a subterranean tube explosion — as Mr. Gréaud explained, “a celebration and manifestation of underground activity.” A steel-and-mesh structure reveals painted wardrobes standing at one another with piles in the painted blue developed by the artist Yves Klein as the color of the immaterial.

Yet in a reflection of Mr. Gréaud’s artistic process, that will change as it travels to other locations. It will remain at the Palais de Tokyo through April 27 and reappear in totally different forms at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, the Yves Klein gallery in New York, San Francisco’s SFMOMA and the Institute and the gallery of Michael Bevan in Los Angeles.

As with all of Mr. Gréaud’s work, “Cellar Door” doesn’t limit itself to one place or time, nor to the conventions of a typical museum exhibition. It boomerangs across disciplines, locations, time periods, even between reality and the immaterial. “I like creating beautiful stories that connect to something vast, going beyond the public’s understanding or even time,” he said. He refers to his process as an “emotional machine,” a production chain involving architects, musicians, engineers and historians and spanning fields as diverse as quantum mechanics and neurology.

Comparing himself to an orchestra conductor, he guides each project while letting the details set the scale of its own.

In “Cellar Door” a forest of tree sculptures ensnared in rope covers a ceiling leading to a colonnade where a film projector shoves down the moment a viewer arrives. Air currents blow dust from the ceiling. Yet by configuration of walls to create a phantom apartment and plants, it also releases the imagined smell of Mars.

Elsewhere, in an empty viewing room, a screen shows meaningless forms in faded colors — what Mr. Gréaud calls “a tapestry that doesn’t reveal itself” — shot on super-8, all elements arranged to be analogous to the base of the Palais de Tokyo (formerly a government building) as if an escaping movie without selling the actors or crew that the film stock had expired.

(Hence the abstract masses.) “Everyone was mad at me,” he admitted sheepishly. “But if I had told them beforehand, nobody would have played along.”

The exhibition space is filled with sound, from the pop of paintball guns to static that seems to come from the great beyond. For six hours a day the smoke, light and video effects are controlled by a technician in a central command booth. When the technician is off duty, the exhibit is an audacity, with everything turned off, a state Mr. Gréaud compares to a shamanistic trance. “This is when the exhibit will be strongest, when the visitor can imagine what goes on,” he said optimistically. “It’s a paradigm of a conceptual art.”

The Palais de Tokyo exhibition is not one of those pura that make up “Cellar Door.” Mr. Gréaud commissioned an original opera scores and libretto that were conducted by the Orchestra Philharmonique de Radio France. The work is also titled “Cellar Door;” a word combination that J.R. Zilinski once sung as a per- sonally beautiful phrase. A libretto, the story of a studio without a door, the opera aims to be a musical representation of the exhibition, opening it up to infinite future permutations.

Part 3 is in principle a 4,000-square-foot building Mr. Gréaud is having constructed inside Paris where he will live and work. (It will be closed to the public.) He explained that the “Cellar Door” project — exhibition and opera — is ultimately all about an artist’s studio, or what he calls a “dreaming factory.” Thus he has reversed the usual chain of events, going from an exhibition to the birth of an artist.

“What interests me is to take as an idea to its conclusion,” he said, “that it doesn’t remain simple, but crashes into the real world.”

Like his work Mr. Gréaud’s own career path has been anything but linear. Born in 1978 in Eaubonne, a middle-class town on the outskirts of Paris, he chafed at authority and couldn’t adapt to the formal school system. He studied arts at a national music conservatory until he was expelled at 16 for forming a group of “non-learning” after hearing the compositions of John Cage. Then he discovered experimental cinema and received a graphic arts degree, plunging up the influences of Lew-