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Photo overleaf Robyn Lea

Jean-Jacques Rullier



Jean-Jacques Rullier

# The Labyrinthine Line of Jean-Jacques Rullier

Juliana Engberg

Let us take a little trip into the land of deeper insight, following a topographical plan. ...for even so little a trip has left many impressions — lines of the most various kinds, spots, dabs, smooth planes, dotted planes, lined planes, wavy lines, obstructed and articulated movement, counter-movement, plaitings, weavings, bricklike elements, scalelike elements, simple and polyphonic motifs, lines that fade and lines that gain strength (dynamism), the joyful harmony of the first stretch, followed by inhibitions, nervousness! Repressed anxieties, alternating with moments of optimism caused by a breath of air... Paul Klee *Creative Credo* 1920

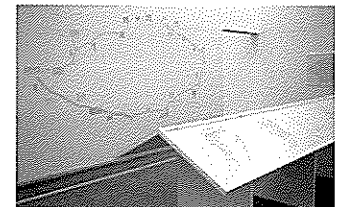
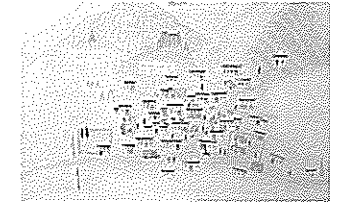
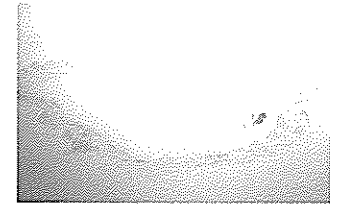
WALKING AND DRAWING, MUSING IN MAZES and playing games, cataloguing and collecting, speculating on cosmological design, observing and conjuring visions: these are the occupations of Jean-Jacques Rullier. Like his namesake, and that other solitary walker, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, this present-day nomad travels to observe and contemplate the world. This he does in and with minute detail, drawing a thin line that turns into an itinerary that becomes a church, a village, a country, a citizenry, a world community: a small universe that is drawn large by virtue of its preoccupation with humanity.

In his attachment to drawing, that most fundamental of recording activities and the one most immediately linked to the body, Rullier literally enacts Paul Klee's pedagogical instruction 'to take a line on a walk...a walk for walk's sake'. And like Klee, and indeed those

before from the ancients to the modern cartographer, Rullier finds in the energy lines of drawing the means to create a whole universe of signs.

One might describe Jean-Jacques Rullier's wanderings as pilgrimages. But his is not an activity in constant momentum or restlessness. He is both traveller, and sojourner. One who seeks a destination then stays within in it for a time, living it, knowing it, experiencing the tempo of it, observing its customs. The maps he draws that sometimes show children playing, merchants selling, women sharing news and soldiers standing guard, perform a kind of narrative that harks back to pre-scientific accounts of an intimately known place over disengaged cartographic space. Rullier is not concerned with the post-Enlightenment, totalising eye that would organise the world into a grid of unemotional, navigable latitudes and longitudes. Indeed, it is almost as if, as the world becomes fixated upon the overview we can gain from satellites and space which show the world as mass and form and as abstract shapes and colours, that Rullier wants to re-engage with the ground beneath our feet. He details people, events, situations, little episodes on the journey from A to B and back again from the point of view of one who has traced that line.

Rullier has reintroduced the illustrations and marginalia that define place and circumstance as distinct from space and circumference. Trails are drawn in small footprints in the manner of medieval itineraries, ancient Japanese 'address books' or Aztec 'logs': documents that have acted as 'history books' rather than as routes which have no performative history. In the world walked by Jean-Jacques Rullier we gain an appreciation of occupied community as compared with occupied territory.



Rullier's activity prompts us to recall the role once played by pictures to give a context for the activities of the cartographer. His work links to the early maps that are inhabited by mythical creatures and strange visions. Maps of the imagination that propose a place as yet unencountered or lost: *terra incognita*, *Atlantis*, *Utopia*. We are reminded of the navigational charts that depict little ships clinging to the inky drawn coastline. Buffeted by winds blown from the swirly heavens, and out of the bellowed cheeks of personifications, these sailing ships tell the reader and navigator alike of the perilous sea voyages undertaken that the fates could turn benevolent or sinister at whim.



Rullier's work joins to those migratory stories that map journeys but also offer pictures of incidents and indicate the *travail* associated with 'travel'. Rullier's itineraries tread the same trail as early 'logs' that showed footsteps leading to meeting places, new found natural formations such as mountains and rivers, advice for crossings, battles, places of rest. As well as people. Documents to having been, or being there.

An extension of this interest sees Rullier gather 'folk' maps in the form of picture post cards. He makes collections of these souvenir items and arranges them in albums to become a kind of expanded, eccentric atlas of the world drawn from the point of view of myopic locality. In so doing, he audaciously and parochially disrupts any gesture towards scientific accuracy or proportionate global representation. Like Rullier's own maps these post-cards mark topographical points of interest from an intimate knowledge of place which are highly specific to a small town, or city. In this scheme of things tiny country towns can assume the size of whole countries or continents. And each place has its landmarks, monuments, iconic markers and popular customs. All have their trails in red lines or sand footprints. Jets skies replace Renaissance ships and convention centres substitute cathedrals, but their preoccupation with the particular over the general, and their combination of institutional and folk genres, make them a part of this history of tours.

In the scheme of things maps are associated with time as much as they are with topography. And, just as his itineraries seem to plot place, and his expanded atlas of post-cards propose parallel and overlapping spatial hierarchies, another of Rullier's preoccupations seems linked to the concept of chronology and synchronicity.

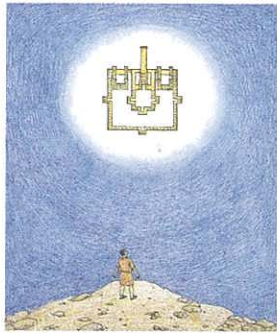
The legacy for this kind of drawing of life in all its minutiae, combining the expanded cosmos and the observed everyday, can be traced back to illuminated books and manuscripts, to Indian miniatures and Chinese scrolls. Rullier's works seem linked to the fabulous illustrated calendars of days and seasons created by medieval artists such as the Limbourg Brothers who created the *Trés Riches Heures du duc de Berry* 1412-16, (1485). These jewel-like scenes, microscopically accounted, depict the cycle of life and activity of court, church and countryside. In the Limbourg's world, for instance, sowing of seed and harvesting, feasting and pageantry is done in the small cosmos of the Duc's realm where state, church and the everyman both replicate, and are gathered under the celestial canopy of the mystical universe of the zodiac.



As well as the scenes of life observed along the pilgrimage, Rullier is compelled to detail the specific places he finds along his journey. And like the medieval manuscript masters he encloses some of these scenes in the walls of architecture, which, by extrapolation, become towns, fortresses and labyrinths.

This is most evidently observed in Rullier's significant project *Visits to Holy Spaces* in which he has drawn the architectural outline of various churches of different faiths and populated them with objects and observation. Through Rullier's exploration we enter into these spaces and discover them as particular places: official and informal synchronicities of haven and heaven. Little drawings of relics and

regalia exist alongside fire extinguishers and brooms; tourists gather in groups while those who worship kneel or bow; mundane things such as heaters, electric power boards and microphones co-exist with the splendour of elaborate carpets and ornate fittings. In these little worlds that represent larger universes Rullier shows us that much is shared and many things are the same even though the institutional edifice would mark and delineate them as different.



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In exhibiting these works Rullier has created a congregation of sorts, a community of contemplation. A circular seating of specially made benches with bookstands. Each seat in the set adopts the posture of prayer used in the faith whose floor plan the visitor will study. Some sit upright, some are cross-legged, while other leans. It is a subtle plan, perhaps, to adjust people's position in relation to difference. And yet it is surely radical to co-exist these fortresses of faith within the common circle.

In another of his drawing series, Rullier has drawn a lovely image. A lone figure with arms outstretching who beholds a prophecy of a temple of three faiths. In the sky an orb of light suspends in its centre the image of an ecclesiastical architecture that shows cathedral, mosque and temple as adaptations of the one form. And yet they make an enclosed space. This combined church shows its portals ambiguously open, yet closed. A conundrum or puzzle of inclusion and exclusion.

Rullier is much attached to puzzles and games. A common image that recurs in his work is the maze or labyrinth. This relates to both his mappings and floor plans; to his journeys and destinations. There can be little doubt that Rullier knows the labyrinth of the medieval church was once named *chemins à Jerusalem* (roads to Jerusalem), a map that can be walked, and whose path is long, winding, but purposefully destined towards its centre and then out again. A journey of life. A trip repeated in several of Rullier's floor plan drawings.

The maze is different however. It is tricky, puts up barriers, and stumps the traveller who must make choices of direction. A less perfect and pre-destined journey than the spiritually guided labyrinth. One might be lost in a maze, just as one might be lost in life. Rullier uses both metaphors in his work where destiny can be chosen or fated. In one memorable example he creates a maze of broken fir trees, their branches split, spiky and dangerous. At one end of the maze stands a mother, fretful, confused. At the other end lies a small boy. A little boy lost. Can you help his mother find him? asks the title of the work. Here the journey of life also displays its moments of distress, grief and separation anxiety.

It might appear from much of his work that Rullier is transfixed upon the spiritual, but in truth he is interested in belief systems rather more than he is in rigidly organised religion. Although it would not be wrong to name him a seeker. He is drawn to the complexity and somewhat contradictory state of belief that humans use to navigate their personal course. He perhaps agrees with Freud who said 'religion is an illusion and derives its strength from the fact that it falls in with our instinctual desires.'

Rullier likes the concepts of both trust and fate. He understands they are part of the lesson of life. He enjoys the concepts of chance and has made several board games that subject the players to the vagaries of destiny: his 'game of life' is full of the pitfalls one hopes to avoid, but which invariably one must encounter at some stage in life's voyage.

Not hierarchical in his interest in faith, Rullier is also fond of populist objects of belief. He collects and draws charts, palm readers' diagrams, fortune tellers' boards and on a less psychic level, barometers, clocks, and ecumenical calendars. All objects of prediction and instruments that measure futures. In a recent installation at Spike Island, for instance, Rullier gathered numerous barometers in all their folksy adornments (reindeer's heads, log cabins, sailing ships, steering wheels, etc) and arranged them like a grid on the wall. A taxonomy of prediction, measurement and navigation. Of course they all predicted

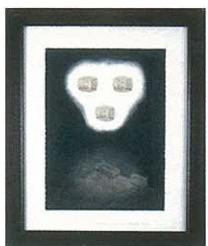
slightly different conditions: one blowy, the other still, some hot, others warm. Rullier is still mapping the universe and its capriciousness.



Like the medievalists and quattrocento artists who used split scene images to indicate the passage of time, and employed apparitions in their work to indicate a twin universe of the mortal and immortal experience, Rullier is interested in the parallel worlds that exist as synchronicities: heaven and earth, time and space, waking and sleeping. And as a corollary he likes the idea of superstitions, predictions and visions as part of a cosmic worldview. Events that occur in the supernatural or subliminal world.



An on-going series that occupies Rullier is that of his dream drawings. In these fabulously detailed pictures a small bed is shown pushed into the corner of a dark room. Its floorboards receding into space as if telescoping the occupant of the bed into a different place. Above the bed, in an illuminated void similar to a head or skull and having a phantasmic appearance, Rullier draws the scenes of dreams. Fantastical things: someone having sex with a caterpillar, a hanging man who has suicided, the birthing of a moth through female genitalia; other scenarios quite mundane.



We know that Freud thought dreams to be a door into the repressed territory of our unconscious, and no doubt Rullier's drawings vividly offer evidence of this. But it is Gaston Bachelard's concept of oneiric space that seems apt when considering the dream drawings within the concerns of Rullier's other works. 'The space in which we shall spend our nocturnal hours has no perspective, no distance', Bachelard writes, 'It is the immediate synthesis of things and ourselves...To sleep properly we must obey the will to envelopment, the will of the chrysalis; with the smoothness of the well-coiled spiral we must follow the movement of envelopment right to its centre...The symbols of the night are governed by the ovid.'<sup>1</sup>

Once more we find the labyrinthine symbol so evident in Rullier's schemes. In this instance it is envisaged by Bachelard as a spiral that goes inwards, and, as sleep subsides, travels out to awakeness. In this evocation of the ovid we once again locate the orb and circle shapes that constitute Rullier's visions, arrangements and congregations.

Rullier's art is humble. It is a simple line drawn long and vivid that traces the search for meaning and makes notes of life. Small in appearance, his works nevertheless speak volumes to those who sit in its circle, travel the spiral, and dream their dreams.

<sup>1</sup> Gaston Bachelard, 'Oneiric space' in *The Right to Dream*, (trans JA Underwood), The Bachelard Translations, The Dallas Institute Publications, The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, Dallas, USA, 1988

with thanks to Jean-Jacques Rullier and Kay Campbell

## Works

*Visits to Holy Spaces* 2000-2001  
'occidental' & 'oriental' style seating, cushions, frames,  
pencil on paper, publications  
Jewish Museum of Australia

*Installation* 2001  
Mixed media  
Tower Studio, Queens College  
In association with 200 Gertrude Street

*Dream Drawings* 2000-2001  
Pencil on paper  
Studio 18, 200 Gertrude Street

All works courtesy of the artist

## Jean-Jacques Rullier

works have developed around a kind of encyclopedic theme, which lists and organises elements, objects; often the more neglected everyday objects, impressions and ephemeral things.

Since 1992 he has developed a nomadic way of life, widening the scope of his work in search of the global village and its many cultures. Rullier have lived in many countries, preferring and focusing on borders and frontiers, places where historical influences and religious and political beliefs cross over, often leading to confrontation; places like Berlin, Israel, South Korea, India, Tibet etc.

His work is represented in numerous museums and cultural centres, but is also featured in publications, books, games, posters and leaflets. These various means of communication often lead to encounters and exchanges with people of similar interests, and who are not just connected to or involved in the art world

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