

MO.CO. PANACÉE
21.06. → 28.09.2025

LA CINQUIÈME ESSENCE

AN ALCHEMICAL JOURNEY INTO JEAN-MARIE APPRIOU'S WORK

To walk through the exhibition *La cinquième essence* is to immerse oneself into a world of moving forms, silent metamorphoses and suspended stories. It is to walk along the temporal caves, to cross paths with ancestral or stellar figures, to listen to the murmur of materials.

In this universe of echoes and resonances, Jean-Marie Appriou's work acts as an alchemical mirror: it reflects as much as it transforms. Moving through the elements water, earth, air, and fire, it guides us toward the invisible substance — the fifth essence — that is ether, an invisible and immaterial principle which connects, enfolds and transcends. This is the essence the exhibition pays tribute to.

Sculpture, in Appriou's work, is a sensitive body. It breathes, sweats, and is consumed. Drawing from myths, archaic tales and futuristic fantasies, his work animates matter, making it vibrant, alive and ever-changing.

This journey is comprised of five stages, in which each space is made to resonate with one of the elements. This sensory and symbolic progression invites us to move through an evolving world and to explore forms as if they were vestiges of a dream or fragments of a ritual to come.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue, featuring texts by Donatien Grau and Caroline Chabrand, as well as an interview between Numa Hambursin and Jean-Marie Appriou. Graphic design is by Amélie du Petit Thouars.

MO.CO. would like to thank all the lenders and galleries for their trust and support:

La Fondation Vuitton,

Jan Kaps,
MASSIMODECARLO,
Perrotin,
Galerie Eva Presenhuber.

MO.CO. warmly thanks TANK Shanghai (China) for their partnership in the touring of the exhibition in November 2025, as well as in the production of the catalogue.

WATER

As a native of Brittany, Jean-Marie Appriou sees the nurturing yet untameable ocean as the origin of life and the source of all forms. “The cradle of humanity is made of salt, foam, horizons and tempests”, he explains.

In *Ressac* (2025), a wave surges forth like an ancient breath. It precedes our entry into the three *Caves of Time* (2018) — *tectonique, mystique, mythologique* —, which evoke the many strata of time and imagination. These caves, poised between nature and architecture, act as portals: they call forth the artist’s parallel worlds, spanning art history, founding myths and science fiction.

The exhibition is designed to take us on a journey through a fluctuating world where materials begin to blur.

The tutelary and archetypal figure of *The Lighthouse Keeper* (2024) echoes the Sphinx or the Lighthouse of Alexandria. Standing in an aluminium boat that seems suspended in mid-air, a bronze figure gazes toward the horizon, toward what lies ahead.

In *Event Horizon (primordial vessel)* (2024), a primitive boat sails on mirrored waters. Its reflection doesn’t mirror reality, but its spectral double. A second bas-relief prolongs the story: mythical silhouettes land on uncertain yet strangely hospitable shores. Hybrid brambles rooted in the sea spring up in the exhibition space. Irreducible beauty persists, even through ambiguity and flux.

EARTH

For Jean-Marie Appriou, earth is both a material and a motif. It retains traces, gestures and stories. It is memory and metamorphosis.

The artist uses earth, clay, and the moulds that stiffen his models as primordial matrices.

By mastering foundry techniques and involving himself physically in every step of the production, the artist imbues his sculptures with a visceral presence. Metal becomes skin, bark, or a shell. His vocabulary of fantasy seems to emerge from a mutating world forged by elemental forces and the stories they convey.

In *Crossing the Parallel Worlds* (2018), the earth is hollowed out, explored, traversed. It hosts organic, vegetal, mineral or human forms. The piece evokes culture in the literal sense of the term: a nurturing bond between a human being and their world. Here, faces appear as if emerging from a dream, between dream and awakening, at the intersection of fantasy and materiality.

These works conjure up a telluric, archaic world, which evokes a mutating nature subjected to the cycles of life. This dialogue with the element of earth extends to the history of lost civilisations and to cosmogonic myths. Appriou summons glassy-eyed figures, *The Orphans of the Sun* (2018–2025) and *The Breath of the Suns* (2018), as if blinded by light, or awaiting passage across the River Styx. Earth thus becomes a threshold: a pathway between memory and matter, between the visible and the invisible.

AIR

The third phase of the journey is that of air.

As the element of sky, spirits, and winged messengers, air breathes an ascending movement into the sculptures. Some pieces even seem on the verge of taking flight. They are infused with subtle, suspended energy.

The exhibition explores the sky as a symbolic territory inhabited by twelve animal constellations from Eastern and Western astrological traditions. These zodiacal figures serve as narrative fragments: a celestial bestiary in which each animal makes its own trail.

At the heart of this astral map, this cosmic clock, stands a suspended figure. Neither god nor hero, *Mitosis (cellular being)* (2023) hovers silently, a humble witness to the great tides of the cosmos. It embodies both an inner journey and a journey through space — a gateway between dimensions, a meditation on our place in the cosmos.

ETHER

In Antiquity, ether referred to the celestial substance, the fifth element which filled the universe beyond the terrestrial sphere. During this journey, ether distinguishes itself from the other element as an intangible, invisible bond between matter and mind. For Jean-Marie Appriou, it embodies a zone of resonance, of intuition, of cosmic vibration. Ether is what ties things together, what remains, what makes things possible.

In his series of large-scale engravings *Pink Moon, Old Moon, Thunder Moon, and Reeds Moon* (2019), prehistoric and marine creatures, human silhouettes, shells and strange plants spring forth. These images seem to float between planes, as if born of a silent vibration, from a place where the visible brushes against the invisible.

Ether takes shape as translucent and vibrant glass pieces. Figures and forms emerge from them, as if modelled by light itself.

In *The Keeper (Gravity)* (2024), a human pyramid rises up, like a mountain reaching toward the sky. On top, a glass ball contains the plaster head of the person, like a frozen silence. The pyramid symbolises both inner elevation and the cosmic quest. Its summit becomes a gateway, a pivotal point between the weight of the world and the call of the unknown.

Ether, in Appriou's work, is not a simple abstraction: it is the space of mystery, of transformation, of communion between the elements. It questions what connects us to the universe and what it means to exist — here, now — in the infinite.

FIRE

Bringing the journey to a close, fire embodies the energy of transformation. Fire melts wax, transmutes metal, consumes and transforms. It is central to the rite of foundry — an alchemical process during which matter changes states, between combustion and solidification. Fire, in Appriou's work, is not only a technique: it is a creative energy.

A large cast iron stoup composed of hybrid forms is held up by eels that almost seem alive. Activated for the opening of the show, this barbecue-like sculpture evokes ancient banquets and shared rituals. More than an object, it becomes a hearth, a space where we can gather together and share.

A bronze brazier placed inside the fountain acts as a luminous beacon, while the phosphorescent glass fireflies mark the path, and extend the flame's glow into the night. These twinkling presences connect the terrestrial to the celestial, and celebration to contemplation.

Through his use of fire, Appriou celebrates the power of the shared gaze. To watch together is to create community. Fire thus becomes more than an element: it is a collective experience, a space of perceptive attention and vivid memory.

Jean-Marie Appriou

Born in 1986 in Brest.

Lives and works in Paris.

Jean-Marie Appriou graduated from the École régionale des Beaux-Arts de Rennes in 2010, and has since developed a remarkable technical mastery of materials — aluminium, bronze, glass, clay, and wax — to bring to life imaginary worlds teeming with human, animal, and vegetal figures. Spanning from archaic eras to futuristic civilizations, and from dinosaurs to child astronauts, Appriou creates visions that verge on the psychedelic, blending pop culture with mythology — from Ancient Greece and Egypt to science fiction.

His works have been shown at the Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Fondation Lafayette Anticipations, Paris; Musée du Louvre, Paris; Fondation Vincent van Gogh, Arles; Musée des Abattoirs, Toulouse; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Consortium, Dijon; Villa Medici, Roma; Lyon Biennale; 7th edition of the Jing'an International Sculpture Project, Shanghai; and on the Giza plateau, Egypt.

He was invited by Public Art Fund to present a group of sculptures on the Doris C. Freedman Plaza, Central Park, New York, at the Central Wharf Park, Boston as well as at the Château de Versailles.

In 2023, he was selected by Donatien Grau to create an etching, the *Constellation du Louvre* (2023), the copper plate of which was added to the Louvre collections.

Jean-Marie Appriou has had solo exhibitions at Perrotin, Paris and Shanghai; Jan Kaps, Cologne; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich and Vienna; Kaikai Kiki, Tokyo; C L E A R I N G New York, Brussels and Los Angeles; and MASSIMODECARLO, London and Hong Kong.

He is represented by C L E A R I N G, Jan Kaps, MASSIMODECARLO, Perrotin and Galerie Eva Presenhuber.

Excerpt from a conversation between Numa Hambursin (co-curator of the exhibition) and Jean-Marie Appriou, held in April 2025 during the preparation of *La cinquième essence*.

The full conversation is published in the catalogue.

Numa Hambursin: What was it that drew you to sculpture — and therefore, matter — rather than to any other medium, as a student at the Beaux-Arts in Rennes? [...]

Jean-Marie Appriou: I define myself as a sculptor and I like that word. I like the legacy it carries. I enjoy working with matter. [...] When I was a child, I wanted to be an Egyptologist. I was passionate about Ancient Egyptian art, fascinated by the expression on those faces, their eyes turned toward the horizon. [...]

I was curious about everything in my first year in art school. I wanted to try my hand at filmmaking, at animation. But sculpture is cinema made flesh. I assign a role to each figure — “You’ll be the child astronaut, you’ll be the beekeeper!”. [...] My works often have a contrasting front and back. The reverse side of the sculpture reveals the casting process. I often let the craftsmanship show, because that’s what embodiment means to me. The idea becomes embodied in matter. The gaze lingers. It isn’t simply matter.

NH: Could you tell us the story of this project at La Panacée and explain its title, *La cinquième essence*? How did you approach MO.CO. Panacée, a building whose identity is deeply rooted in Montpellier’s scientific history, since it used to be home to the college of medicine and later the college of pharmacy?

JM A: La Panacée [...] is a space that encourages pathway and reflection [...]. I love places that are steeped in history [...]. I wanted to work on alchemy, on the elements, and on this fifth essence because these were some of the subjects which were studied within these walls.

The exhibition is made to feel like a river, a circular perambulation. I am very interested in circular stories like Alejandro Jodorowsky’s, both in his filmic works or in the *L’Incal* comics that he created with Moebius. In fact, *La cinquième essence* is the title of one of the *L’Incal* volumes. In the series, the beginning loops back to the end, which therefore becomes the beginning again. You can circle through, drift through the exhibition in this same way. The idea is that one can glide from one element to the next.

NH: Could you tell us a little more about ether, the fifth essence?

JM A: I’m going to keep it rather vague because the moment you try to describe it, it vanishes. I work on small glass pieces, like crystals or figures made to appear like ghosts. Unlike painting, sculpture struggles to recreate a spectre. Luckily, we have glass, through which both gaze and light may pass. Transparency, the indescribable, ghostliness... The fifth essence might be a suspended world, an in-between. [...] Ether is the instant that allows us to understand, to grasp something, the moment in which an idea crystallises, becomes fixed. [...]

Quinta essentia

“... the essential — that is, the substance of the world — [...] enthrals me because it is simultaneously teaching me physics, geophysics and metaphysics.”

Jean-Marie Appriou, a veritable modern-day alchemist, seeks to uncover within matter an ancient secret, an ancestral knowledge. Alchemy, a mysterious science, evolved alongside many ancient civilisations — from China to Greece, from Egypt to Byzantium, and across the Arabian Peninsula. It consolidated through an ensemble of practices and speculations which aimed at understanding the transmutation of substances, at operating the transition from one state to another, or even from one element to another.

The substance — the primary material out of which everything is made, the subtle link between Humankind and the Cosmos — became the foundation of his creative and conceptual approach. By moulding the shapeless, the artist ponders over the eternal cycles of the Earth, Nature, History and the Sky.

In his atelier, he fashions the earth with his hands. Clay is kneaded, stretched, transformed under his fingers. He becomes one with the material, leaving his own imprint behind. His fingers mark materials as a record of the artist's intervention. This has been his approach from his early days at the Beaux-Arts de Rennes to his first studio in Brittany — and still today, in his current studio in La Courneuve. He follows the creative process until his artworks come out of the foundry, thus supervising every step.

Excerpt from the text of Caroline Chabrand, co-curator of the exhibition.

The full text is published in the catalogue.

Glossary

This glossary presents the notions, materials and techniques used in Jean-Marie Appriou's work and mentioned in the exhibition layout and in this leaflet.

The exhibition guides will be happy to answer any further questions you may have.

Aluminium: A metal often used in contemporary sculpture for its aesthetic, its malleability and its resistance to corrosion. Its lightness makes it highly versatile and allows for the creation of complex shapes. It has a low melting point (660°C), making it relatively easy to use.

Bronze: A metal alloy made out of mainly copper and tin, commonly used as a sculpting material since Antiquity. It produces sturdy and detailed works ranging from small objects to monumental sculptures. It has a high melting point (1,100°C), making it a difficult metal to work with.

Eau-forte: An engraving process in which the artist scratches their drawing onto a varnished copper plate with a pointed needle. The plate is then dipped in acid, which “bites” into the parts of the metal that are not protected by the varnish. Once cleaned, the surface of the plate is inked and printed on paper, producing an etching.

Pâte de verre: An artistic glassware technique consisting of making glass objects by hot moulding in a refractory mould, from glass blocks or granules. This paste is then heated on high temperature in an oven, enabling the glass to melt and to fit the shapes of the mould.

Patina: A finish applied to metal to alter its colour and aspect, or to protect the piece. Patina can occur naturally (by oxidation through exposure to air, humidity or time) or be added artificially (with the help of chemicals or heat). It is used to enhance visual effects, bring out reliefs, or give an aged look to the work.

Lost-wax casting: This process involves sculpting a wax model and encasing it in a heat-resistant material (clay, plaster, etc.). Once the model is dry, it is heated and the wax melts and runs out, leaving a negative space in which molten metal is cast.

Sand casting: A pattern is compacted into casting sand. Once removed, it leaves an imprint in the sand, forming a mould. Sprues are then added and molten metal poured through them into the mould.

Handblown glass: The glassblower collects a blob of glass on the end of their blowpipe and blow into it to form a bubble. They then proceed to shape the glass using rotation, gravity, various tools, their hands or a mould. The glass is then fired again.

Also on view...

EXHIBITION

21.06.25 → 02.11.2025

FRANÇOISE PÉTROVITCH

ON A BONE

Françoise Pérovitch's work straddles the border between dream and intimacy. Through drawing, painting, sculpture, and video, she explores childhood and adolescence, loneliness, metamorphosis and the relationship between the body and staging. Developed with the artist, this exhibition features nearly 130 works, including some produced especially for the exhibition at MO.CO..

Opening Saturday June 21st at 1pm.

MO.CO.

13, rue de la République – Montpellier

Tuesday to Sunday:

October to May → 11am to 6pm,

June to September → 11am to 7pm.

EXHIBITION

20.06.25 → 29.11.25

PHILIP BERG (GUEST: BAPTISTE AIMÉ),
CAMILLE CASTILLON, AURORE CLAVIER
ET JIAJING WANG

COMME UN WESTERN [LIKE A WESTERN]

As part of the “*Nos vœux les plus sincères*”
[Our most sincere wishes] program organized
by Frac Occitanie Montpellier and the region's
four art schools: ÉSAD Pyrénées, ésbān Nîmes,
isdaT Toulouse and MO.CO. Esba - École supérieure
des beaux-arts de Montpellier Contemporain.

Opening Thursday June 19th at 6pm.

FRAC Occitanie Montpellier

4-6 rue Rambaud – Montpellier

EXHIBITION

18.09.25 → 30.11.25

SOFIA LAUTREC

As part of the annual residency program
organized by MO.CO. Montpellier Contemporain
and Fontfroide Abbey, Narbonne.

Opening Tuesday October 14th at 3pm.

Fontfroide Abbey

Departmental road 613

Chemin de Fontfroide – Narbonne

EXHIBITION

25.01.25 → 30.06.2025

LÉO FOURDRINIER

LES HISTORIENS DU FUTUR

[HISTORIANS OF THE FUTURE]

As part of the annual artistic residency at Lattara
organized by MO.CO., Léo Fourdrinier, who draws
inspiration for his work from mythology, science,
and archaeology, displays new works produced
for the Henri Prades Archaeological Museum.

In partnership with MO.CO.

Montpellier Contemporain.

Lattara archaeological site, Musée Henri Prades
390 Route de Pérols – Lattes

Weekly events

Guided tour

Every day, a convivial tour
with a cultural mediator.

→ From Tuesday to Sunday at 4pm

MO.CO. (included in the ticket)

→ From Wednesday to Sunday at 4pm

MO.CO. Panacée (free)

Flash visit

At lunchtime, a 30-minute tour
with a selection of works from
the current exhibition.

Every Friday from 12.30pm to 1pm

MO.CO. (included in the ticket)

MO.CO. Panacée (free)

Family visit

A visit followed by a workshop for families.

For 3-6 year olds and 7-12 year olds.

Alternatively in both art centers.

Booking at mocoreservation@moco.art

Every Sunday from 11am to 12.30pm

MO.CO. (booking fees 3€)

MO.CO. Panacée (free)

Public department

The Public Department offers special tours
and creative workshops linked with the
programme for constituted groups from
institutions and associations. Custom
projects are also possible upon request.

Information and booking:

+ 33 (0)4 99 58 28 02

mocoreservation@moco.art

Find the complete agenda of the exhibition
events and cultural actions on the programme
of MO.CO. Montpellier Contemporain
and online www.moco.art

Practical informations

MO.CO. Panacée

14, rue de l'École de Pharmacie - Montpellier

Accessible to people with reduced mobility

Access

By tramway: Lines 1, 2, 4 - Corum station

By car: Préfecture and Corum parkings

Opening times

From Wednesday to Sunday

October to May → 11am to 6pm

June to September → 11am to 7pm

Online

www.moco.art

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