

Interview

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THE ABSTRACTIONIST



LAUNCH GALLERY »

ABOVE: CLAUDIA COMTE IN BERLIN, NOVEMBER 2014. PHOTOGRAPHY: MAXIME BALLESTEROS.

At the mountaintop outdoor show "Elevation 1049" in Gstaad, Switzerland last winter, artist Claudia Comte brought the village's hockey rink into her playful world of 3D geometric abstractions. The sheet of ice became a stage for a six-piece sculpture set titled *Tornado Kit*, made mostly of styrofoam squares,

triangles, and circles. Beneath the ice was a painting that mimicked a game board, using only primary and secondary colors, and each nearly life-size sculpture symbolized a human player. In a performance component, Comte directed Gstaad's local ice hockey team to hug each artwork and play in a determinedly artistic tournament.

Although the 31-year-old artist generally keeps things stationary, the all-encompassing characteristics of *Tornado Kit* exemplify her practice, which mainly involves geometrical abstractions of sculpture and painting. Comte's typical gallery installation combines painting, wall hangings, and sculptures and their plinths, with each given equal importance. She will generally plan one component so that dimensions and colors interplay with the other parts, and resonate within the space at large. Wood is almost always her medium of choice, because of its relation to nature and ties to her childhood home in the Swiss countryside.

The hint of playfulness injected in her work, which she feels necessary to give life to her sculptures, separates her practice from minimalism and abstraction movements of the past. For instance, an earlier show at BolteLand in Zürich titled "If I were a rabbit, where would I keep my gloves?" took its name from a line in Disney's 1951 *Alice in Wonderland* film, but it consisted mainly of abstract shapes with no cartoons. She has also been working on an abstract comic book, *Welcome to Colorful*, where characters-as-geometric constructs appear in adjacent rectangles. For an idea of what this is like, on one page, a parallelogram appears to be under attack, with the word "BAM" written six times in bubble letters, followed by the second frame, with a dramatic close-up of the parallelogram, and text reading, "IT'S COMING RIGHT AT YOU!"

In early 2015, the Swiss-born, Berlin-based artist will have her first solo show in New York at Gladstone Gallery. For the show, Comte charted the gallery's measurements to plan an installation that takes advantage of its height. Wall paintings will alternate with standing strips of burnt wood, from which Comte cut plinths to support the sculptures. The plinths and sculptures will be staggered at varying levels between the floor and ceiling. Through this, she aims to have the separate vertical sections instill the feeling of different rooms.

RACHEL SMALL: It looks like you focus on sculpture, but I know in the past you've focused on painting and other mediums as well.

CLAUDIA COMTE: So I started making sculptures with wood maybe seven years ago, while I was still in school in Laussane, Switzerland. Basically [in my practice], paintings and sculptures are equally important. I'm trying to create an environment for my sculpture with my painting, even as everything is equal. I'm really inspired by and am trying to reactivate aspects of modern art: My paintings are abstract, as they have been for a while, and I play a lot with patterns and colors. I'm really inspired by Op art as well. For each project, each installation, each work, I give myself rules. So I have criteria and rules that help me create the piece.

SMALL: What types of rules do you mean?

COMTE: It's more about the measurements. For example, if I choose a measurement for the line, then I will apply this measurement to everything. So, with the size of the plinth, I will cut plinth from a board of wood, and this will be indicative of the lines I draw on the wood. Let's say I choose a line of five centimeters—each time you have a line, it's five centimeters. Then the length of the plinth should play within five centimeters, like it could be 50, or 10, 15, 20, etcetera. For the sculpture, I love to find new techniques to create shapes. So, to carve the wood with the blade of the chainsaw, I create a grid inside the wood then take the wood away with this new technique that I developed for the wood. It's the same for the painting; I also try new techniques to apply the paint, like with masking tape. With a zigzag wall painting, everything is organized on a grid, so it's about measurements. You have to be systematic to create the work. I also work with rules and a system to be able to produce the work. You put down the tape

and work inside this grid. It saves time. I like to have a system each time I create something new.

SMALL: So these rules or criteria you apply to pieces or installations, how do you choose them?

COMTE: I choose them because of the work I want to produce. If it's a sculpture then I have to look for the right wood. Usually, first comes an idea and then I choose what's best to produce this idea, to create it.

SMALL: It looks like you were interested in cartoons and animation in art school.

COMTE: Yes. In my comic book, *Welcome to Colorful*, I show a totally abstract story, so they are speaking about nothing, actually. *[laughs]* You just see a circle or a square or a line moving, and they are inside the rectangles. And there are lines of movement. I really like those simple effects. It makes all the difference. I like those funny, tiny things that change everything.

I think I'm trying to imbue a bit of humor in these really strict and minimal shapes. I try to give them a bit of life. Usually minimal art is very serious and kind of intellectual. It's not that I'm not serious about my work, but I think it's nice to play with this, to play with those shapes. But you were asking about the cartoons. Like lots of people, childhood was really important, and I still have a little in me. *[laughs]* Cartoons in general, I like them very much.

SMALL: It sounds like Neville Wakefield helped get your art noticed internationally with his inclusion of you in "Elevation 1049." When did you first meet each other?

COMTE: It was two or three years ago at Art Basel, initially for the show in Gstaad, which was a huge show, so it took some time to be realized. He proposed that I be included in the summer group show at Gladstone Gallery in 2013. Then we did a solo show in the Gladstone Brussels gallery a couple months later, then Gstaad. So we see each other quite often for these projects.

SMALL: What's it like working with him? What's the dialogue like?

COMTE: It's an exchange and I'm quite self-confident. *[laughs]* I think I arrive with an idea and he probably pushes it even more. It's something like Ping-Pong. He gives me the impulse to do even more.

SMALL: So, you met Gladstone Gallery through Neville, and now you have a solo show opening now there this winter, which is also your first solo show in New York. Can you tell me about it?

COMTE: For this show, I really used the height of the room *[and]* it was cool to experiment with an installation in this space. That was the starting point—the ceiling height—so of course I wanted to do a very big wall painting. I could show my sculptures differently—really high, or really low, but inside the space. Imagine you have wall paintings all over *[and]* about half the painting will be covered by burned wood boards, almost black. I think the contrast will be really nice—the wall painting is lines of light yellow, white, and green. I'll cut *[sections from burnt wood]* to create plinths with extractions *[for the sculptures]*. I've experimented with a lot of new things, and I'm really happy. I love so much to do those paintings. They're almost like my babies, in the sanding room. They are super. All the wood is coming from Switzerland, from the countryside, near my parent's place. It's really nice wood, like acacia, ear tree, cherry tree, and oak.

SMALL: Can you tell me in more detail about your rules for this show?

COMTE: It's really using the length and the height of the room. This is the first thing I thought about when I was thinking of the show. I wanted people to walk around, think about the sculptures, and see them from a different point of view. It's *[creating]* one big room with lots of smaller rooms. Even at the end if it's one big installation, everything is going to connect to each other. But you can walk in it and go to different rooms.

SMALL: It sounds like maybe a maze almost, or a complex.

COMTE: Yeah... actually it's more like a mixture between a video game and a wood cabin. *[laughs]*

SMALL: Can you tell me a little bit more about why you prefer working with wood?

COMTE: It's something we have around all the time, but I think we forget the importance of natural materials. I'm happy to work with this because I know it's grown for years and years. Most of the materials in the show have grown for more than 80 years. That's really something you think about when you work with it. I did a lot with plastic, resin, and synthetic materials before, and at some point I wanted to use something nobler. I grew up in a chalet next to the forest and I think it was quite important for me to try this material. The first time I tried it I was in love. It's so nice to find the wood and discover the structure inside.

Of course, now, when I look at the logs, I know how to see the eyes, or small problems inside the wood. But still, you cannot know everything. So you really discover, when you are working, the way the trunk grew; every trunk has a story. When I work with a material, if it cracks, it's because it's still alive. If wood is full of water, you have to let it dry. If water is coming out, it loses a bit of weight and then cracks start happening. I cannot control this; it happens depending on when the wood was cut. Whether the moon was up or down, when it was cut, which season, if the trunk was growing close to a river, or next to other trees like him, if he had enough water...then it gives you the trunk you are working with, and you discover what's inside. I like all of this, actually.

SMALL: Having the plinth as such an important part of your sculptures as a whole reminds me of Constantin Brâncuși. Have you thought about him at all?

COMTE: I really love his work. He's a kind of genius. The base is really important for me because I do a lot of totems and you never know where the sculpture starts or where the plinths start. For me, again, everything is equally important. The board of wood I cut to create the plinth is already the sculpture. Everything is connected. If I cut the board at a particular size, it's because of the sculpture. The sculpture is maybe three shapes on top of each other, and it creates one sculpture. I would love if the painting could always talk to the sculpture, with the plinth and the wall painting, but then there is reality. For me, the best is everything being stuck together and creating one big piece.

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