Claudia Comte

Un carreau de vallée

Julien Fronsacq : *What relationship do you have with Nature?*

Claudia Comte : For my final thesis at the Ecole Cantonale d'Art de Lausanne, I did a series of interviews around the theme of artists' representations of the mountains. Even though I decided on a serious title - "The Mountains: Nature's Monuments" - the theme was actually a pretext for me to meet people to whom I wanted to speak. I got the opportunity to eat spaghetti and sausage at Jean-Frederic Schnyder's place in Zug. There is a superb work in his front room; a human scale, wooden rendering of the armchair and table which one sees in every episode of The Simpsons television cartoon. I also interviewed Fischli and Weiss at their Zurich gallery and I met Freddy Buache, founding member of the Swiss Cineclub, in Lausanne. I also met with Pietro Sarto, an artist/engraver whose works focus on the Lake Geneva region and the Alps. I had previously taken a course in etching with him. I had a discussion with Valentin Carron in a bar - an interview which lasted several hours! As a logical conclusion to the various interviews I had done, I chose to interview myself. I concluded the thesis with these words, "[that] there was finally an analogy between the subject of thesis and the form of the talks: a romantic road movie in a purely 19th Century spirit."

JF : *In an interview with Fabrice Stroun, Valentin Carron evokes his regional cultural environment, namely the Swiss canton of Valais: « (…) a region meant to incarnate a romantic, natural and wild Switzerland. A land of traditions. But this 'traditionalism' was actually entirely fabricated at the end of the 19th Century. » Before this investigation into the relationship between these artists and the mountains, had you organised an exhibit?*

CC : I organised an exhibit in Morges, a lake-side town near Lausanne, at a castle that currently houses the Musée Militaire Vaudois. I'm very fond of that castle. There are thousands of tiny figurines reconstituting historic battles, along with suits of armour, swords, rifles, cannons and a torture chamber…I went there often as a child and I worked in the museum's reception area on a regular basis for ten years. In creating this exhibit, I invited my friends there and we found our source of inspiration in the strong historic and architectural context of the place itself. Our exhibition space was a large room with a vaulted ceiling as well as the castle's interior and exterior courtyards. At the opening of the show, I made a speech standing on a podium with a Swiss flag painted on it. It was really funny.

JF : *What works did you create for this occasion?*

CC : Large works on a grand scale. A banner with chariots transformed into flying saucers, wooden pikes planted in the gardens at the museum entrance and warlike onomatopoeias from comic strips on flags hung from the roof of the interior courtyard.

JF : *What was the title of the exhibit?*

CC : «Morgenstern» or «Morning Star» in English. It has different meanings. In the first place, it is a barbaric weapon that was used during the Middle Ages and the French Revolution. There are several examples in the château; it's simply a club tipped with metal spikes. We chose the title because we liked the disparity between the soft, poetic meaning of the words and the harsh reality of the object. And we liked the ring of it as well.

JF : *I believe that the Musée de Morges is a historical museum. I'm assuming that the figurines you refer to are part of dioramas, artificially reconstituted landscapes which contain a scene, such as a battle, a campgrounds, etc. Between the Musée de Morges and the diorama theme, we aren't far from folklore museums; eco-museums (open air, ethnological museums mixing reconstitutions and heritage). Isn't there something in the sum of your works that resembles a diorama – landscape, reconstitution and documentary?*

CC : Yes, that's true; I like installations that can foster strong feelings as well as having a forceful visual effect. As a matter of fact, I like that type of impact so much that I use paintings or burnt-wood etchings to create environments for my own sculptures.

JF : *The 19th Century already came up twice in the course of this interview; I can't help but be reminded of the importance of Swiss mountain landscapes in French gardens. It's a fabulous example of the productive dialectic between authenticity and artifice. In 1867, a mountain landscape was installed in the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont in Paris. A few years later, a chalet was erected at the edge of the Paris World's Fair. As Michel Vernes said: « the*

mountain chalet is viewed as proof of our original innocence. Transplanted, it becomes providential(…) ». (Excerpted from « The Unfaithful Chalet… » in A Review of 20th Century History, 2006, n.32). There must be some part of artificiality in some of the forms you produce; can you talk about that a bit?

CC : Naturally, I'm very fond of the decorative styles one finds in amusement parks like Disneyland and in Las Vegas hotels. I still use the photos I took when I was about ten years old on a family holiday in the Western United States. That trip was very important to me - National Parks like the Grand Canyon, Sequoia, Yellowstone and Monument Valley – all of them had 'Welcome!' signs and holiday bungalows. The landscapes there gave me the same kind of feeling I get when I walk in the mountains, the forest and the fields in Switzerland.

JF : *Memory is important to you, can you remember the first painting you did and cite which of your works that you continue to find yourself the most attached to today?*

CC : Yes, I remember it well. It's a black and white acrylic painting on canvas. I had done a few little paintings on wood before, but this one was the first I did "properly" on wood-framed canvas. At least that was what I thought at the time; I was really painting at last!
It's also the first in a series called "Our Best Years" that I did based on photographs that I found in my family albums. Images that appealed to me because of the way they were shot; subject, context, colours, etc. They generally depict family events, like parties and holidays.

That first 'real' painting was of my father at twenty years of age, sitting (in a boat) wearing a life-jacket, shorts and sunglasses on his forehead. He was staring fixedly at the person behind the camera, probably my mother…I recall feeling very satisfied when I had finished the painting, I enjoyed working on particular parts of it as well as working in black and white. Now that I think about it, that painting still hangs in my old room at my parents' house. It's a bit strange.

Some time later I made one of my first sculptures, « My Dove », depicting the home in the form of a pipe shaped as a howl which has been in my family for a long time. It's the type of object that's been lying on the mantelpiece for years. The sculpture is carved out of polystyrene and is about 1 cubic metre in size. It is an enlargement of a piece of craftwork, which can be turn into a type of incense-burning alter.

JF : *From familial to familiar?*

CC : I have a feeling that I started off with the familiar in order to better distance myself from it and go on to other things. I feel much further away from this type of painting in terms of subject and technique now. I wouldn't enjoy painting that way any more. I don't think I'd want to repeat something that's already been done, to visually recreate – abstractly or figuratively - something in particular.

JF : *I get the feeling that you don't take that many photographs but yet I feel that they are important to your method?*

CC : I always have my camera with me and I take photos every day; photos of details, motifs, scenery and installations. It's a bit like taking notes for future reference. Sometimes they become works themselves like The Fox, which is a photograph of a frozen fox I found near my village. It was on a December 31st and night was falling, so I had to use a flash. The lake looks like the Milky Way. There are also the ones I took at Disneyland, Los Angeles of a huge, open-mouthed whale who looks ready to swallow the crowds floating around its pool on logs. I would have loved to make sculpture like that.

JF : *On the subject of your work as a whole, I can't help but think of the Valet de Carreau, a muscovite pictorial movement of the 1910s. It seems to me that the eclecticism of your œuvre partially echoes this movement. In this way you would be the heiress to the group's two women. Alexandra Exter and Nathalie Gontcharova both of whom were engaged in an all-enveloping abstraction applied to theatre and in a type of art inspired by popular and pastoral forms (icons, chromos, artisanal signage, etc.). A simple question, Abstraction or decorative?*

CC : My abstract paintings are comprised of decorative motifs that I then translate into a pictorial language. Nevertheless this latter can also take on a new decorative aspect in relation to the space in which they are exhibited.

JF : *Here you evoke the phenomenon of moving a motif out of its original context, to the exhibition space, going through the motif of the work itself. What of the principle of movement in your wooden sculptures? You don't have recourse to film decor like Valentin Carron for example, another French-speaking Swiss artist who has strong ties to the vernacular imaginary. You make them yourself with a chain-saw, on the original site where the tree trunk was found. They demand a very physical and personal investment in an often rural environment.*

CC : I negotiate and trade with forest rangers or woodcutters; they are always nice, practical minded people. I like the idea of working with a noble material in its natural context. For practical reasons, I work in the forest. To my mind, it is an environment conducive to creativity and I feel good there. My wooden sculptures are kind of modern totem-poles, composed of stacked, abstract forms which I create intuitively. I always start with a drawing or a dirt model before making them on a more or less human scale. Then, I transport the work to the space where it will be shown. Once it is in an exhibit, people like the smell of the wood and enjoy touching the sculpture. I like this type of physical rapport with the work too.

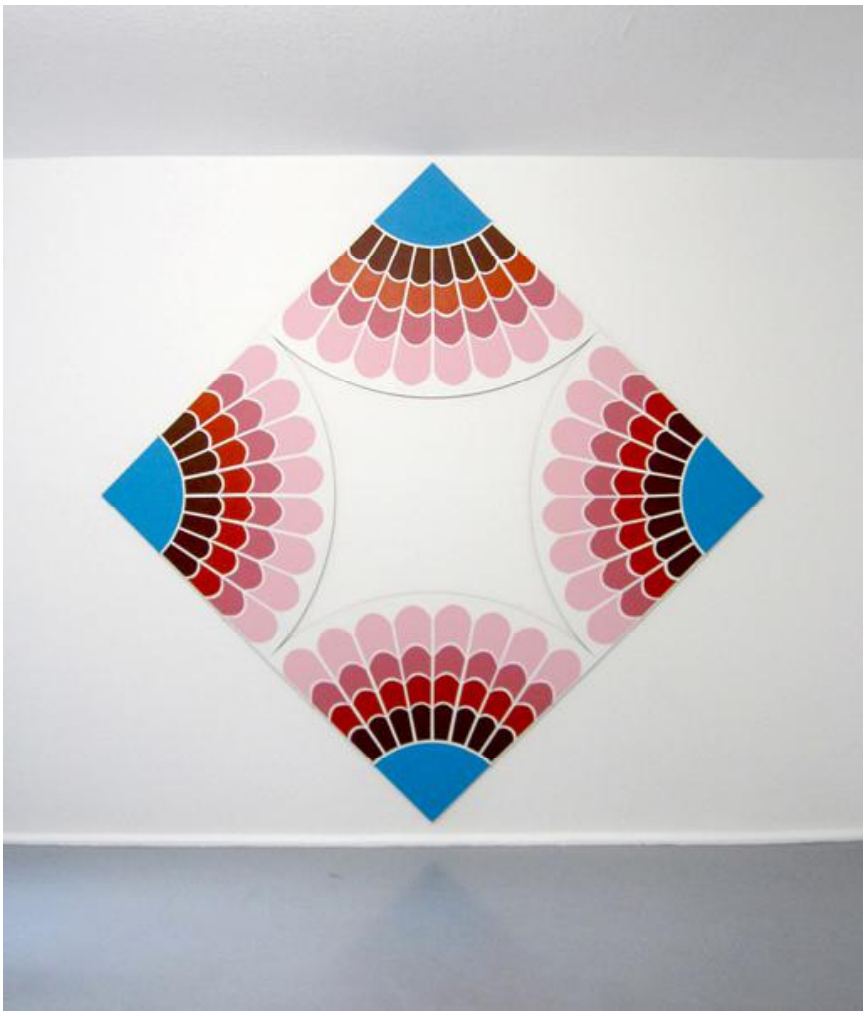
JF : *If your wooden sculptures are characterised by a strong presence, their forms are difficult to identify – modernism, garden art, comic strip decoration…*

CC : I don't really have an ultimate reference; the forms, as I said earlier, are rather intuitive. But I have, naturally, seen things that have stimulated me.

I would cite Brancusi in particular, whose work I adore, as well as Arp, Moore, Stahly - and then there are also the sculptures in the film Edward Scissorhands (directed by Tim Burton, 1990), the backdrops in the Roadrunner cartoons with Beep and Wiley Coyote as well as The

Walt Disney Productions by Lavier. Gradually the sculptures became characters. At the beginning they were entitled “Abstract Sculptures n°1, 2, 3,…”. Now they bear names related to the circumstances surrounding their creation; “Eva”, “JB”, etc.

Propos recueillis et mis en forme par Julien Fronsacq.
Julien Fronsacq est curateur au Palais de Tokyo à Paris et professeur à l’Ecole Cantonale d’art de Lausanne.



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