

Interview with Aurélie Voltz

TREES

Aurélie Voltz *When visitors enter the museum, the first thing they see in the entrance hall is a tree, a chestnut tree that comes from the Saint-Étienne area. Trees have featured in your oeuvre for some time. When did you start to use them in your work?*

Lionel Sabatté If you're referring to plants — which I think is a more precise term — my first experiment was with a dried rose that I dipped in cement and whose flower I reproduced using my own 'skins'. It took me some time to finish this object — around six months — before I could find the right 'skins'. The flower was presented lying on its side, like a cut rose placed on the ground, and I believe that that was the first time I used plants in my work, back in 2012.

Then I acquired a small bonsai tree, the kind sold in shops that has a relatively short lifespan. This tree died in the spring of 2013, but I decided to 'reflower' it and extend its 'life'. This first tree was the instigator for a long series of similar projects. Almost every year, in the springtime, I induced a 'flowering': pollarded ash trees from the Poitevin marshlands; olive trees that had died during the winter of 1954; trees of an undetermined species that had died in the fires on Mont Sainte-Victoire; a mulberry tree from Lyon and now, in 2021, a chestnut tree from Saint-Étienne.

A.V. *Was it important to place a tree in the exhibition space?*

L.S. To tell the truth, I didn't think about it at first, because the first tree that I wanted to 'reflower' was an olive tree. I was determined to obtain one of these trees that symbolise peace and longevity—a royal tree. I was forced to abandon this quest, because it's really hard to find dead olive trees due to their incredible lifespan. So I decided at the time to opt for pollarded ash trees, which were the trees native to the region in which I was intending to hold the exhibition, in the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle in La Rochelle.

I thought it was important that the trees should have a connection with the region, because they are the kinds of plants that create links. A tree is also a force that connects the ground to the sky, with the energy of the light from the sun linked to the earth's organic energy. Trees generate oxygen for the rest of the living

world, and they are also places around which people can gather. At Saint-Étienne, Monsieur Thibaudet from the Office National des Forêts recommended chestnut trees, a species that I had never 'reflowered'. These trees come from the Château de la Perrotière, which is well-known to the residents of Saint-Étienne because the site is often visited by pupils who attend nature classes. These chestnut trees are linked to the life of the town, responding to the seasonal cycles, and to our own cycles. These ailing and doomed chestnut trees are also indicators of drought and global warming.

ECOLOGY AND BIOLOGY

A.V. *We've just spoken about the important role plants play in your work. Is your plastic approach influenced by ecological considerations?*

L.S. There's definitely a connection. I'm interested in all living things; we've talked about plants, but there's also the question of humans and animals, and forms of life that are known or unknown that may be part of a whole. The environment is clearly an issue when you explore the living world, because it creates the very conditions for its existence.

There's also the fundamental question of the emergence of life. How can a material that is inanimate become something that can be worn, be reproduced, perish, and disappear, that is to say the three characteristics of living beings in biology? Living beings are fundamentally extremely fragile and dependent on environmental conditions. I'm interested in the idea of the limit between a thing defined as living and that which is not, because in fact everything is transformed and everything is connected, and ecological disasters underline the extent to which we are all interconnected.

TIMELESSNESS

A.V. *The exhibition in itself could be an environment from which different cosmogonies emerge in the different rooms. There's an impression of something that's completely timeless—was that intentional?*

L.S. Yes, that's right. I'm very interested in the idea of coming away from time or existing in a different kind of time. Artistic works are like small vessels that enable one to travel through time. 'Artistic time' is just as much that of an Aurignacian from 35,000 years ago or that of a Homo Deus, a future human, like a new, enhanced Homo sapiens. Works of art are vehicles that enable these different humanities to dialogue with one another within an exhibition, like that of the museum, which I see as a tremendous testing ground. I decided to use different

mediums and forms of life within an itinerary, which would begin with the blooming of a tree, move on to an original cave, and proceed from room to room.

At the moment, we're in the studio, and time spent in the studio is truly separated from our usual notion of time, time experienced in the outside world. This is exacerbated by the period we're living through, because we've been forced to come away from our usual activities, and go out and travel less. The modifications of time we are experiencing contrast with time spent in the studio, which has stayed the same, unchanged, a stable refuge, which I've managed to preserve in my life. I hope this time dilation is conveyed in the exhibition.

LANDSCAPES AND TRAVELS

A.V. *The first exhibition room invites the visitors to embark on a 'journey' when they view the metal plates that have undergone various oxidation processes. Shimmering ripples, erosion, and green and gilded abrasive streaks map out the continents. Is this landscape internal and cavernous, or is it open, as though seen from the sky?*

L.S. These landscapes can be quite varied: cavernous, watery, celestial, geological, and organic. Some of them are plant-orientated, others more animal — I'm thinking of animal fur. These are pathways that developed from dialogues with the transformations of this material. These steel plates were originally designed for the transport industry, to make cars and planes. My journey with these materials involves the transformation and oxidation connected with the modification of steel. These landscapes are also linked to my inner state, a little like the relation that Chinese or Taoist painters have with nature: they themselves become the object of their paintings—a distance is established from the representation. They don't attempt to merely represent a tree, a hill, or a mountain, but rather to be the mountain and convey its movement. I also try to be at one with the transformations that arise from these oxidations, which are gradually enriched. As far as the recipe goes, these are oxides that I have placed on this protected steel plate and they oxidise, giving the impression that it's the plate that's being transformed. Everything takes place on the surface, so it's a process that's very similar to painting. It's not really an alteration, but rather the idea of an alteration, which is a recurrent theme in my work. Things often appear to be accidental, fragile, repugnant... the material and its longevity is always a bit deceptive and this is where it's connected with time. For me, these plates are large movements, landscapes moving at a geological speed, which is different from ours, over much longer periods of time. I have striven to preserve these

oxidisation reactions and capture their processes, and slow down their evolution, which continues, like everything else, but over a much longer timeframe, which is also that of the conservation of the works; I see this as very important, as part of my desire to communicate with the future ...

CHANGES OF STATE

A.V. *This way of creating forms that emerge from the unknown, with changing states (chemical reactions that provoke these turning points), transforming inert elements into living materials, also recurs in most of your paintings.*

L.S. Yes, all the objects embody these changes of state that I make as visible as possible for me and any other human nervous system: by eye initially and eventually via the sense of touch.

The change in state is in fact movement, the mutability of each thing at each moment. The aim is to extend this mutation while enabling it to maintain its energy and intensity. This is where there's a paradox: slowing down a process that should be rapid and echoing the changes. For example, the series of drawings entitled *Quelque part entre poussin et œuf au plat (Somewhere Between Chicks and Fried Egg)* explores interaction in the capacity to perceive forms in a moving stain. When I look at these forms, I'm never sure of what they attempt to signify or what can be seen in them. Between suggestions of faces or birds, one never grasps instantly all the possible forms that attempt to emerge from these eggs. This is also what makes them very mutant, enhanced by the liquid aspect that creates the impression that the stain is still moving. I like moving between these two states of what can emerge from an egg: it can be fried and eaten, becoming a source of energy for someone else, or grow into a chick, and therefore a living creature.

ÉRIC CHEVILLARD AND THE BESTIARY

A.V. *We have just spoken about the book of drawings entitled *Quelque part entre poussin et œuf au plat (Somewhere Between Chicks and Fried Egg)* created together with the author Éric Chevillard. What brought you together?*

L.S. A mutual friend, the physicist David Quéré, introduced us. He knew our respective work and had the intuition that this meeting might produce something interesting. I share with Éric a love of small things, our way of capturing small elements that could be seen as secondary and making the most of them. I always think of the first book I read, *Du hérisson*, which relates how a hedgehog stops an author from writing at his desk: the entire novel is based on

these three elements, and the idea of creating a literary or pictural world from rules. Obviously there is a shared interest in nature, animals and living things, which have a vital role to play.

A.V. *I'd like to go back to the relation you both have with animals, the way you place animals on an equal footing with human beings. This hedgehog seems to be just a small object on his desk, but he has plenty of tricks up his sleeve. Your work features many animals, such as wolves, goats and birds: this bestiary almost takes precedence over human beings.*

L.S. The representation of animals by species produces archetypes. Wolves feature in so many stories—it's an extremely powerful image. What I find even more interesting is that when you put yourself in an animal's place you can see the world differently, according to different rules. It's clearly a way of addressing our own perceptions and our own relation with the world. In my case, animals are often evoked by a material. For example, the wolf is evoked by dust, or, in other words, this dust is brought to life in the form of a wolf. I think the animals that are most present are birds, which emerged later. As the last descendants of the dinosaurs, they represent an extremely archaic species. In fact, they've colonised a space that was the only one left free by mammals, that is to say the sky: the idea of finding refuge in the heavens ... what a wonderful image! Birds are strange creatures as they have such fragile bodies and light bones that contrast with the endurance and longevity of their species.

I sometimes see these animals as extensions of humans in the way one can visualise oneself through them. Éric Chevillard and I share the same tenderness, love and curiosity for animals, which above all represent the notion of the Other. Enabling them to express themselves or include them in one's creative world is primarily about stepping back, and my animals have a lot in common with me. I'm thinking about the birds I've drawn, these small traces of oxidation on paper that are reminiscent of the island where I grew up. They are birds, islands, memories and small areas of land seen from the sky: hence, animals are like small vehicles that enable one to move and change one's perspective ...

ELEVATION

A.V. *In the room devoted to what you call 'Les champs d'oiseaux', the visitors behold long totem poles at the end of which birds seem to emerge. It is amazing to see how much the exhibition focuses on figures and constructions in elevation. A few years ago, your wolves tended to crawl, with their heads down. Now, these animals have gradually raised up their heads, and are looking up at the sky.*

L.S. That's a good point ... the relation between the ground and elevation. This wasn't a conscious decision at the beginning, but looking at the pack of wolves, created over an eight-year period, I realised that the first wolf was recumbent, the second was moving, the third was getting up, and the last wolf was howling at the moon. Sometimes, other wolves return to the ground. The issue of verticality, of movement between the upper and the lower, and between the heavens and the earth, is connected with birds in their silent songs. This verticality is also linked to materials, such as bronze, which is extremely heavy and dense, and more connected with the ground, because it's cast at first in its liquid form before taking shape and perhaps rising. As I was creating these birds, I was thinking about plants, like small elements (from the oxidisation chamber in the preceding room) that are trying to grow ...

HUMAN FIGURES

A.V. *In the main room, there are fragmentary human figures made from tow and cement remains, which you bring to life as best as you can: the body element and the bust element often fit into one another in a fragile, hesitant way, which gives the impression that man has less of a place than animals.*

L.S. This is particularly evident in three dimensions, but less so in drawings, featuring many faces made from dust.

In three dimensions, the figures are more difficult to construct, especially in this last series. As a human being, I myself find it difficult to apprehend construction in the broad sense of humanity, especially at present: how a figure can be made to stand, or not, and how a figure can be positioned between the ground and the space intended for it. For me, these figures represent doubt and instability. They express a movement precisely within this instability, like dancers moving about. I have used choreographic elements here; for example, the movement between the ground and the air, as it can be taken to a leap; rhythmic changes; and the tensions between movements: limpness, rigidity, shaken rhythms, flowing forms ... This choreography is an attempt at being human. These figures need members, arms and hands, which are active elements in the world. This mobility brings them either to ruin or towards construction. Hence, before our eyes are the first figures that are 'roaming' in the studio, some of which are wriggling, and others completely disjointed.

A.V. *The postures adopted by these three-dimensional figures are relatively humble: they have one knee on the ground. Is this a submissive posture or an athletic one, as you mentioned earlier?*

L.S. I practised judo a lot when I was young and this is a posture that can in fact be quite powerful, an in-between posture. We spoke earlier about elevation. With one knee on the ground one is choosing between being on the ground and the upright position. In combat sports, like judo, this places the centre of gravity very low, in a position in which one can easily react, although it's a position difficult to deal with. In fact, you're not allowed to remain on one knee for too long, because it may bring the fight to a halt. I find this position interesting because it involves this point of selecting between two states. Back to your question: it's true that I often like to represent man developing, in his attempt to hold himself upright, even more so than other creatures.

THE WALL OF OPENINGS

A.V. *You've just talked about the dialogue between your fragmentary figures and this large work, a traversing wall, which you wanted to build in the large room. Would you like to tell us more about it?*

L.S. Indeed, I've been lucky enough to be able to build this construction in situ, in the exhibition space. My original intention was to create a wall (not as a separating object, but as a reason to establish an exchange between what happens on one side and the other). *The Wall of Openings* is a limit, a boundary that invites and enables motion in life. It's the skin, and these are all the cell membranes, everything that facilitates an exterior and interior milieu. I wanted to represent this by using construction materials from our contemporary world, that is cement and concrete reinforcing steel bars, while evoking various living forms: vegetal, geological, organic, and then perhaps archaeological forms. This *Wall of openings* represents an articulation between these different forms and enables one to create motion within the exhibition space.

The fragmentary figures will come and dance on various parts of the wall, in comparison with the figures made of the same material as this 'circulatory' mural membrane, which could well be their original milieu, from which they emerged. The more I observe these figures that attempt to develop and create a choreography, the more I think they are getting close to something grotesque, and tragic too.

The wall will reproduce the sensation of going into the studio, of a work that is underway. This room will be devoted to visitors' interaction. This construction also has political ramifications; I'm aware that using this wall to create openings is a powerful symbol ...

CONSTRUCTING THE RUINS

A.V. *The fragmentary figures and The Wall of Openings have been made from poor materials, which come from scraps and remains; on the other hand, concrete is not a noble material. It seems to me that it's just as much about construction as about ruins. Are you interested in this notion of ruins?*

L.S. Of course, just as I'm interested in time. I like the idea of ruins in construction, both sides coming together. What I'm looking for in concrete is the appearance of rubble, because cement is in reality dehydrated rock transformed into a powder, which can then be converted into a paste used to build walls. Once the walls are demolished they become rubble, stones, or rocks over time. As a child I found it difficult to distinguish stones from rubble. When I grasped their respective origins I was perturbed by this infinite cycle.

My figures have a lot to do with ruins, because rubble is rock turning into sand. The ultimate rubble is grains of sand that become a single powder. So the finality of rubble is the unification of a material: the sand becomes fluid, all the elements are interconnected and behave almost like liquids, like a living organism. I'm interested in rubble because the elements of one figure can go on another (they belong to every individual). The sculptures (that is, the fragmentary figures) can change their legs and their torsos. Ruins produce elements and change their state, and then one can reconstruct them. In a very ancient Chinese temple, none of the stones we now see is original, as it is rebuilt generation after generation. There is no cult of materials, but rather the cult of the energy that links together materials and this ensures that the temple always has the same form, even though none of the stones was placed there initially. In the West, an original stone would reflect everything that's happened and all the changes it has undergone, which I find fascinating.

A.V. *Are you talking about the memory of materials?*

L.S. Yes, because this cement, in the way I handle it, has a lot to do with cave walls. It reminds me in particular of the Bédouilh cave, where I spent some time sculpting figures. Certain parts of the cement have become something very geological, like a return to the earth.

THE FABRIC OF SKINS

A.V. *With regard to the exchange, circulation, and interconnection between living beings you have just spoken about, it seems to me that the most emblematic object is the fabric. The skins of thousands of individuals are combined to create a unique work, a whole new experience that you are*

experimenting with in this exhibition. Is its location right at the end of the exhibition symbolic?

L.S. Yes, it's important that this work is placed at the end of the exhibition, because I think it's an extremely positive object, almost the culmination of an elevation. It comprises fragments of skin recovered from podiatrists, which, placed end to end, constitute a large square fabric, which is suspended in front of a light that traverses it. These are in fact the same skins recovered from a process, the same material used for the flowers on the large tree at the start the exhibition. Like the notion of social fabric, this work is about bringing together bodies through foot treatments, in contact with the ground. This fabric is very much connected with the previous, sculptural works, because materially, it comprises fragments of bodies that are brought together, as well as disappeared bodies in ruins. These skins are translucent, and interact with light, so that the 'fabric' is a delicate receptacle of energy. Like the wall I mentioned earlier, skin is the element of interchange with the world, and between individuals. The shape is square because it's the very form of ideas par excellence. In China, the square represents the sky. The temple of the sky (Yang) is square, and the temple of the earth (Yin) is round. The sky is therefore the pure Yang, the energy that requires the earth to have a form. I like this way of seeing the circulation of energies that pass through this 'fabric'.

As the culmination of this exposition, it also perhaps foreshadows my subsequent work, because most of the works are new creations.

Another thing that interests me about this work is time, and the time it took to be created: more than a year. I see this as the fabric of an era, that of the Covid-19 epidemic, during which other people's bodies are kept at a distance. Here the bodies are brought together via the skin, in an intimate and hidden way. It's also about expectations, a fabric such as that woven by Penelope; it's not a return we are waiting for, but rather a new journey, a fresh start ...

CHROMATIC CHANGES

A.V. *Let's look at the exhibition from the perspective of the chromatic evolution of the works: it starts with earthy and golden tones and concludes with a very ethereal 'fabric' made of skin. Was this a deliberate development on your part?*

L.S. I didn't conceive things this way, but that's quite correct. It began with what for me is the original cauldron or magma, where it flames up and burns. This produced elements that were golden, and which rusted, changed, and oxidised until blues were attained that made me think of the southern seas, because that's

where I grew up. There is something sunny and uplifting in the original pieces, which have a really positive influence on my mood. We're at the end of the second lockdown during the winter of 2020 and yet I feel as though I've travelled a great deal, and been exposed to the sun, even though the studio is very cold. Something radiates from these telluric works. With the concrete of the sculptures, the colours gradually disappear during the exhibition and become skin. As for the fabric, it comes from an alchemical cauldron that generates pure energy, as it becomes light.