On Saturday 1 April 2017, shortly before midday, I met Lionel Sabatté in front of Lausanne railway station, and we set off by scooter towards Ouchy, on the shores of Lake Geneva. Once we'd ordered our coffees, the landscape roundabout looked at ease, all in blue. Blue sky, blue mountains and blue water. A setting at once hackneyed and sublime.

What does that do for you, Lionel?

LS: I love it. I could spend hours looking at it. As soon as there's sky and water you're connected with very big things. For the last eight months, in Le Pré-St-Gervais in the northeastern suburbs of Paris, beside my studio I can see the sky from my balcony, and that's a treat. It's extremely soothing. I didn't have that when I was living in Paris; and because I lived there for a very long time, I grew fond of seeing little things, fragments, narrow streets, no skyline.

FG: Now that you're seeing the sky more, will it become a subject in your work?

LS: I think of painting when I look at the sky, it's moving; slow movements of clouds, always changing. In a way it's my painting that decides, with me, how it will be positioned on the canvas, the effects it will produce, and the mixtures of colours. I'm actually rediscovering something about the sky and water, in any event elements and forms which appear in nature.
There are also mountains. During my residency in the Vercors, not far from Grenoble, I was facing them, and certain pieces came about from the way my eye looked at that landscape.

FG: Which pieces, for example?

LS: Pieces called "Le Fragment de Vercors". During that residency, I heated the place with firewood and at a certain moment I realized that the remains of the wood fire had the same shape as the mountains. It's disturbing to see something that's small and hot inside a chalet which actually looks like something large and frozen like mountains. That prompted me to produce pieces in which I recycled those remains of the fire. I piled them up like small mountains and constructed small figures with my nail clippings, like tiny mountaineers; what I found really great was that those pieces actually came into being in that particular place. I wouldn't have made them in Paris.
To make those pieces, I had to be very close to those small bits of wood, when I placed my little figures ready to fall into the void. I sometimes had a physical

sensation of dizziness. I like seeing that you can project yourself intensely into a small world.

FG: The spirit of places passes through you, and that upsets you!

LS: Yes, absolutely!

FG: We were just talking about the Paris sky which you have access to today. Did the Los Angeles sky also have an effect on your work?

LS: The Los Angeles sky, well, yes it did… That magnificent sky, almost too much, the light and then the city in general, because in Los Angeles everything is new for me. All the same, it's a special city, I've never known anything like it anywhere else. It's a huge, huge sprawl, and for me it conjures up the countryside. You come across trees, and raccoons in the streets, and humming-birds. But what strikes me most in Los Angeles is the river, a whole symbol. Trapped between low concrete walls, it's also an ecological aberration. Nature in the wild state trapped in a concrete straitjacket. For me that's a bit what Los Angeles is about.

FG: So are you more into painting or sculpture in Los Angeles?

LS: Both. It helps my sculpture to develop a lot. When I arrived there, I was in the process of making pieces using cement, and concrete, and in fact the concrete there is very colourful. It has a different type of presence than in Europe and I think the latest concrete pieces I've made are now tinged with those pigments. Those works resulted from my relation with that city. Likewise with the characters and human figures which I gravitated around for a while, as sculptures. In Los Angeles I started to make larger figures, more than six feet tall, and they were really born in that city.

FG: Why did you choose Los Angeles?

LS: Los Angeles was chance. I went to visit a girlfriend who was living there, I liked the place a lot, and I was lucky enough to have a project right away. I stayed there for a couple of weeks, during which I produced a few paintings. I met Brian Luy (?), who runs the Fadé (?) gallery. He saw my paintings and offered to put on a show. So I went back there to prepare it and had some

wonderful opportunities over there. For me it really is a place of discoveries; and because I don't speak English it's also a discovery of language, and the discovery of a very different art scene. Other ways of behaving, and other attitudes. The people aren't at all like Parisians. In Los Angeles everyone is calm.

FG: No aggressiveness?

LS: No, but that doesn't mean I have an idyllic image of the city. I'm keenly aware of that two-tier society. My studio is south of downtown L.A. where there are a lot of homeless people. Because the weather's good, the poverty is less horrifying than the poverty you can see in cities like Paris. It's more "gentle", organized like a society, they dance, they argue…in a nutshell, there's a life going on, right! Which is a life of poverty…

FG: A life of poverty basking in amazing sunsets…

LS: There's that too. In Los Angeles I'm aware of all those contrasts which are nevertheless extremely disconcerting. But there you are, it's a place that interests me a lot, very rich for me, and for my work.

FG: What you're saying is interesting. In Europe, art and artistic expression have something tragic about them. In your works, one feels the power of tragedy throbbing; when we shift to Los Angeles, most works produced since the 1960s avoid the tragic factor, or in any event the sublime.

LS: Yes, That's a bit the impression I have, in any event among very young artists. Their works are usually very light, like them, very positive. It's very nice to be around.

FG: And as a result do you think your art will let itself be seduced by that warm, muggy air rather than by the cold sweat of tragedy and fragility?

LS: I don't know. My activities will decide. My painting isn't tragic, it's really a painting of pleasure which instantly captures the different kinds of light. So my painting was already like that, and over there it is radiant. At the same time, I know that those large figures, which are the most tragic things I've produced,

came into being over there. That's perhaps a counterpart to the positive aspect. We'll see over time.

FG: What type of tragedy do those characters, those giants, incarnate?

LS: It wasn't my intention to make something tragic. I wanted to prop human beings up with the help of urban construction materials: from iron to concrete and cement. Figures that are not necessarily finished, usually asexual, genderless, a very archaic human being existing before our humanity, or after it. But it's true that when you look at them through a different eye, you can see skeletons in them, things decomposing, carcasses, ruins. With hindsight, I also thought about the attacks in Paris… there are nine figures, they are people who might have suffered from those atrocities, but I didn't think about that when I was making them. When the attacks happened, and they affected me deeply, through my reaction to them, I tended to make incredibly positive pieces.

FG: You were saying just now that the absence of sky in Paris possibly made you look towards the ground, and steered your eye towards dust and scraps and waste. Where does your liking for waste come from? It's not ordinary.

LS: I'm not too sure. It wasn't a decision. To start with I was a draughtsman; I went to a School of Fine Arts, where everything was possible. I started to work with things that attracted me, and affected me; it just so happens that often—though it's not always the case—it's things that are scraps, things that have been abandoned, which people push aside, which touch me. This is often associated with the body too, nails, and dust, which are traces of passage. Nails for example are very interesting. When they are on a hand, they're seductive, and as soon as they're separated from the body, as clippings, they become really disgusting. Like hair. These really are things which deeply repel us, it's the body disappearing, and dying ,the body of the other which rubs against our body, and which thus collides with our boundaries.

FG: Does the fact of making use of these scraps run the risk of this becoming a procedure, or even a brand?

LS: That doesn't worry me. It's been very useful for me, and it's helped me to identify myself as an artist, above all because of the work titled *La Meute/The*

Pack, shown at the 2011 International Contemporary Art Fair [FIAC]. Now it's up to me not to let myself become a prisoner of that thing.

FG: …not doing a Lionel Sabatté number?

LS: Yes. And then keeping a freedom as far as materials are concerned. Because I've also been interested in materials which are not in the least bit off-putting: black tea, for example.

FG: Can you tell me a little bit more about tea?

LS: I like tea because of its relation to history. It's the most ancient beverage known for more than 10,000 years. Going back to origins… we were talking about this just now, with regard to old-fashioned figures; there's no waste in it, but there's this liking for origins and for that certain something which brings us together. And that's what tea is, it's linked to the whole of human history, colonization, economics, and the sacred. What's more, I don't really like tea… so that bothers me a bit: how that small plant put in contact with water and fire makes it possible to share something very deep and universal, that's what touches me.

FG: Here you're talking about time immemorial which can be represented by tea, those human beings from before the beginning of the world. Will your works last? Because they seem fragile.

LS: On the face of it, I do things in such a way that they'll last as long as possible. It's not the works which look the most fragile which are the most fragile. The dust sculptures are not fragile at all, actually. Because dust is a material which has already deteriorated, so it doesn't alter in time. What's more, these pieces don't break. They may fall, but they don't break. In fact they're very solid, easy to handle, and clean. I cleaned the dust like a taxidermist, I deep-froze it, and I used bioxide products which protect things, and I added varnish. The whole thing is glued onto a metal frame. The most fragile pieces are the billy goats made of tea. For the time being I haven't ever wanted to resin the tea. It's a very brittle material, fragile, and sensitive to humidity. So to make it more permanent it would have to be coated with resin, and maybe I'll do that. In fact I'm very keen that the pieces do last.

FG: Why this desire to conserve?

LS: I think it comes from the first things that touched me: cave art. I've seen drawings that are 25,000 years old. It's to do with transmission. Transmission also occurs in my work. I'd like to make something lasting and permanent. In fact nail clippingss and dead skin are very tough materials. Often, without realizing it, I've stumbled on virtually indestructible materials, but which nevertheless evoke fragility. This paradox exists with mummies.

FG: I really like the way you talk about the genesis of a work, the spirit of places, how everything finds its place. Do you also keep an eye on whom your pieces go to?

LS: Yes. Let me tell you the story with Laurent Fabius, which brings us back to tea. My interest in this material came about in China, during a residency at Beijing Alichouba (?), where I visited lots of Chinese artists' studios, and where I was always served tea with incredible rituals. Everyone had their tea table, with different teas, very very strong. I spent whole days drinking tea. It made me extremely jumpy and productive! I started using it and it just so happens that I exhibited my billy-goats made of tea in 2014 or 2015 in Beijing. Laurent Fabius passed by and bought several, one of which he offered to the Chinese prime minister for his birthday. As he gave it to him he said: 'Tea last 100 years, provided the friendship between our two countries lasts at least 100 years." I was very very happy about that, firstly because that tea is back in China, and there it is with a diplomatic role. What a wonderful destiny for me. I was really very happy.

FG: You can be very productive when in residence elsewhere in the world, but I think that your studio is an even more crucial place?

LS: My studio is a place I've been going to every day for years, it's a place where lots and lots of things happen. I'm a studio artist, I need activities to bring things into being; in my studios, there are always paintings, and sculptures, in the making. The drawings for their part come more in periods; just like that, they're like a catalyst. Studios are very important places.
At Le Pré-Saint- Gervais, I've got a large, very dilapidated studio, with no heating, so I'm a bit dependent on the seasons. There's no water, I collect rain

water which becomes precious; that's played a big part in my relation to the elements.

FG: In that studio you have to like making an effort.

LS: Yes, in the winter everything can come to a standstill because the water I've collected has frozen in the containers, so I can't use it. My studio in Los Angeles is very similar to the one in Le Pré-Saint-Gervais, but a whole lot warmer! Right now I've been in Europe for two months, and all my research being done in Los Angeles is on hold. When I go back, I know that I'll plunge back into it with a different eye, and that's extremely enriching, having this imposed waiting period.

FG: Do you have moments of no energy, when you no longer feel like doing anything, or you're blocked? I don't think that's the case, listening to you.

LS: That's never happened to me. Right now I haven't been to my studio for two weeks. There's lots going on, openings and things, meetings, and it's an important moment in time too, so I want to experience it. But I want just one thing, to get back to my studio. Since I've been making large figures, the animals are in the process of changing. So I'm saying to myself that I must create lots of animals, small pieces which I can produce in a more fluid way, to see how they are transformed. I'm also a bit of a spectator of what is produced in the studio, which is why I'm not afraid of things breaking. I'm always in a dynamic of pleasure. I started to make art because I derived huge pleasure from drawing, then I experienced the pleasure of painting and sculpting, and the pleasure of discovering new materials. Pleasure is the key. It's my most precious treasure.

Interview conducted by Florence Grivel.