

CATALOGUE RESIDENCE SAINT ANGE

TEXTE ENGLISH

LIONEL SABATTÉ, Tectonique des mutations

Conversation between Lionel Sabatté and Inge Linder Gaillard, at the Saint-Ange Résidency, July 12th 2016.

PROJECT

Inge Linder-Gaillard : *You have just spent a number of months at the Saint-Ange Artist residency in Seyssins, near Grenoble, at the foot of the Vercors. Did you have an idea for a particular project, inspired in some way by the place?*

Lionel Sabatté : When I originally discovered the place, the summer before the residency, I said to myself that this studio would be a wonderful place to indulge in some painting. It is quite a large space. In particular, the building is built like a tower that provides superb views of the mountain on each floor. It is a place devoted to viewing and seeing that favours contemplation. I had decided thus to embark on a painting that would take a very intuitive, fundamentally receptive approach. I know through experience that each time I work in a particular space, my painting absorbs what is happening around it. In an obvious manner, my original idea was to paint large canvasses. As I was facing mountains, I had even planned to paint the largest canvas that I had ever painted, a large 3 by 4 metres format, a piece that is exhibited at the moment at the Par vis in Tarbes (also at the foot of a mountain!). In the end I had to resign myself to displaying it in the gallery of the ESAD, where the residency exhibition took place, as it was too big to fit through the doorway of the school! I had planned then, as is often the case with my practice, to create a sculpture and some drawings at the same time. I wanted to adopt a position that was the most open possible. I am currently in a period where I work more with cement in the creation of imaginary creatures. I said to myself that I could perhaps start with this. Finally that is not what happened. I changed, or to be more specific, things changed along the way, through the experience of daily life within the very particular place that is this residency. An unexpected activity grew to be of great interest to me: setting the fires that would heat the residency. This activity, which did not take much time, brought me great pleasure. So, I quickly began working with the remains of the fires. Two elements came to encounter each other over time: these mountains that I could see from the windows, this vast landscape that unfolded before me, and something quite interior that was the fact of providing heat for the living space and the studio, more or less closed if not completely private. Formally, the inside and outside, at heart, the interior and exterior and combined to produce what I called the Fragments du Vercors. These are pieces that could not have thrived anywhere else other than this residency. They were really born from the crossover of the mountain views and the activity of heating the space. They are found between hot and cold, between the minuscule and the immense... These pieces were surprising to me, as they were in no way planned.

SHIFT

ILG : *The inside-outside relationship can be seen in different aspects of your practice. With this new series of paintings done during the residency, an idea of duality also appears. We have spoken of cosmology, of biology: things in space that we can see using a telescope, but also what we can see inside bodies using a microscope. Though there naturally may be a number of possible readings of the artworks, these two strangely converging perspectives hold a strong attraction. This memory of fire, the wood that enters the residence, that is then transformed and combined with elements that come from the body, the body that comes to the artwork in a slightly off centred way, in an unexpected fashion... One must spend time with the work to understand what is happening in terms of materiality. One is quite surprised when one discovers what the sculptures are made of.*

LS : For these sculptures the figures are made up of fingernails, with the remains of dead skin that is for the most part my own. In effect I call upon a relationship with time along with a body that is in the process of disappearing, or at least transforming. It is no different to paintings, being for me forms of life that emerge in unknown places, that can exist on faraway planets, in gaseous or solid states. These forms remain elusive to the extent that their appearance changes constantly. In perpetual renewal, they develop and settle in painting through a process or through a view that is a dialogue with the master painter. Using dead skin and fingernails, playing with the remains of things, the remains of fires, and also the tiny elements found near to the residence while walking, results effectively in the mixing and fusion of corporeal elements within the backdrop. I had in mind, when I painted these mountains that remind me of Chinese paintings with a taoist influence, the principle of fusion: the painter is supposed to be one with the thing being painted, and become the mountain, become the tree, become the leaf and the veins of the leaf. The elements of Artist, painter and teacher at the ESAD, Grenoble since 2007 the finger that points, embodied by the fingernail and the flakes of dead skin, becomes a walker on the mountain. A walker generated also from the traces of fire. A walker who has not necessarily become the mountain, rather a becoming-mountain, who has entered into a process of fusion...

ILG : *Wood can change, it is an organic material, just like fingernails. We may ask ourselves if these pieces will change with time. When it comes to painting, we can imagine that the material will remain stable; yet here again there seems to be a cycle of appearances and disappearances. It is this that questions, these snapshots of moments of instability. In the end, this moment where things shift, could this be the basic principle?*

LS : Yes, and particularly in painting. Because otherwise fingernails are very solid materials. Fingernails and dead skin are made of keratin; being a material that is stable over time. They are materials that evoke instability in our minds as they are pieces of our body that we remove on a regular basis, and yet ultimately they are materials that provide a high level of resistance, we even find them on the bodies of mummies. In the end they resist much better than most other things! Nevertheless they evoke for us, on a very deep level, this idea of disappearance or, in any case, of transformation and change. In the paintings, I am searching for this state of change in the vibrato between the recognition of a form that can be identified, and the fact of it escaping. I'm interested in the living. I try to pay tribute to it. Often through a back and forth between something that is permanently being destroyed and rebuilt. Forms escape... We have barely seized one when we find another and lose the former. For me, they are truly living because they are constantly changing.

RESISTANCE

ILG : *The forms, and as a consequence the pieces created, do not lend themselves to an easy reading. They also enter into resonance with the spirit of the place where they are. The Vercors has its own natural history, this incredible plateau raised up between the plains and the mountains of the Alps. These places are also marked by a social history, by a resistance. It was one of the principle areas of the Resistance during the Second World War. This notion of resistance, along with that of resilience, this capacity for continuing to go on living despite the horror of a crushing domination, reveal themselves to be very present in the spirit of the Vercors. Perhaps this is present on a subconscious level in the work here?*

LS : That's quite accurate. I'm happy that you've raised that idea. These are aspects that I haven't linked directly to the pieces, that are nonetheless unquestionably quite present. This is how I function with regard to my work. To some extent, I am happy to accept the letting go that generates subconscious sequences, similar to an association of ideas: let us take the example of the genesis of sculptures that have also come to us through painting, due to the fact that at the same time that I was setting fires, my paintings were beginning to deal with ice and fire, something that was then synthesized into these tiny sculptures. It is true that the small figures made from fingernail clippings do indeed resist. Tiny fragments of things that stand proudly and give the idea of landscapes, of new lives, of new worlds. This reminds me of another mountain on which I stayed, a year before the residency. It was on the Island of Mauritius that I came up with the piece that celebrates the end of slavery. It was at the foot of the mountain called the Morne. This is the mountain where fleeing slaves would hide, slaves that were called "marrons". I chose a boulder that was at the foot of the mountain, volcanic rock that we were invited to sculpt. I created a bird from this rock, as if the boulder wished to fly back to the top of the mountain from where it had fallen, seeing both sea and mountain at the same time. The small figures have a connection with this story of escaping to freedom. Ultimately there is a kind of echo of what I had experienced the year before. I hadn't thought of it at all. The moment where one does manual work places all thinking on standby. Now, thanks to this discussion, I can link these two mountains that, one year apart, speak of freedom, of the action of freeing oneself and of the mountain as a place between escape and genesis, as a place of purity and construction.

PARENTHESIS

ILG : *Do residencies provide a certain break, where one can remove oneself from the world?*

LS : Residencies are also experiments with a blank page. I have enjoyed my own studio for almost ten years now. It is of course quite filled with things that I have had the opportunity to create during that time. Thus, when I work in new spaces, they pull me towards new worlds. They are indeed moments where I find myself removed from the world. My studio is in Paris. Much of my work is linked to the city, or uses the dust that settles there. There is something of the intensely urban. In the Saint-Ange residency, even though we are not really deep in the countryside or far from the world, we find ourselves in a place that is close to nature and natural elements, and so the idea of a break is quite appropriate. We could extend this idea of a break, of an idea that can be extracted from a sentence, speaking of punctuation in general, of full stops placed like an exclamation mark, or like a comma, a point. All of these elements of punctuation can characterise these moments in the residency, and particularly this one. The length of the time in the residency is defined, and is relatively brief, we know that it is a time that will come to an end. If we

pursue our punctuation thread, it could be points of suspension, these moments of residency. Thus, they are extremely precious moments that are to be savoured.

SAINT-ANGE

LS : As soon as I arrived at the Saint-Ange residency, I completely disconnected from what I had been doing elsewhere. The space is perfect for that. The time it takes to get here, walking through the garden that belongs to Colette, then entering the building that is like a kind of boat. The studio below where we can light a fire would be the engine room. This is where we heat the rest of the space... Afterwards, the different floors would be the different levels on a boat. Everyday we find ourselves on a voyage, sometimes a walk, other times a cruise.

ILG : *The building brings to mind a submarine with its periscope.*

LS : The submarine of the mountains! Navigating around a vaguely aquatic universe and a world between. The residency is two minutes away from a bustling shopping centre and yet here we are completely surrounded by trees and mountains. You described it perfectly when you spoke of the Vercors. We float between prairie, mountain and sky. It is really like a tiny bubble wherein we voyage. This residency has been superbly thought out for that. With the presence of the older property and its historical character, and the fact that we have to pass through it to enter or leave the residency. Made from stone, dating back to the eleventh century if I'm not mistaken...

The residency itself is a wooden structure¹. So, I don't believe that my use of wood is all that accidental. I was bathed in this interior atmosphere given off by the wood. A number of other elements that are present, such as coal, gave rise to artworks, almost in spite of me. Very quickly there was an attraction for fire and ice, two primordial elements, and wood of course, all things that can be found easily here. And so, today we find ourselves inside, while outside it is raining, the trees are dripping, and we are warm and sheltered while still participating in what is happening outside. It is this place that creates that.

CARE

ILG : *The tiny humans in your sculptures bring Giacometti to mind, during the period after the war that signalled the end of his exile in Switzerland. He came back to France with the sculptures that he carried in his pockets. This was what he produced during the war, in miniature, that could be almost contained in matchboxes, tiny as they were.*

LS : I hadn't heard that story about Giacometti's work. I feel something like caring for these tiny sculptures, they have to be taken care of. A tiny sculpture is an object that must be cared for. They are fragile in nature. Even more fragile in the sense that they are made up of waste material that could give rise to disgust. The fingernail clippings could provoke disgust, the remains of fires less, but certain elements that I have collected, the old rusted piece of car exhaust for example, could be quite off putting. In my case, paying attention to this residual matter that comes from waste materials is an approach that is deeply anchored in an idea of care. I dedicate myself to it with great thoroughness. This concentration and the finesse of the work have a beneficial effect. They generate care as much for the object that is cared for as for the artist who treats his work with care; this action produces an extremely healing energy.

ILG : *The word "curator" comes from: "taking care of".*

LS : The question of care interests me greatly at the moment. The fingernail clippings come from manicures, it is beauty care, sometimes medical. I imagine that Giacometti, in that difficult time, was perhaps taking care of himself through his miniatures. It is obvious that the notion of care was important to him.

EXCHANGES

LS : In Grenoble, there is a very active group of art collectors that I know and like, and we have even become friends. The day of my arrival, Jean-Pascal Martin and Diane Bret organised a dinner with other collector friends. They had already bought one of my pieces, *L'Amant de la rosée*. It is a piece made from fingernail clippings that features a drosophila, one of these insects that allowed us to identify genes. They had put it inside a bell jar. I really liked this presentation and we spoke a lot about bell jars. It was the first evening of the residency. I had been there for two hours. The bell jars became a part of my work thanks to that exchange. I wanted to salute this private initiative by the collectors. We can see that they take a lot of care of artworks, as with the work of artists in general. Like those of Giacometti, in general my little sculptures fit in matchboxes or shoeboxes where ultimately they can't be seen... They are simply tidied away. Essentially, less cared for than my drosophila was when I discovered it in its bell jar., and so, we spoke about it for quite some time. Everyone had their own supplier of bell jars. Some of us opted for squares, cubes... It was my first exchange in Grenoble. It's not the same when the work is done. It is quite amusing, intrinsically linked to the fact that this is a residency that belongs to a collector. Colette Tornier is someone who doesn't hide her enthusiasm for living amongst artworks, being surrounded by them on a daily basis, showing them to her guests. These are relationships that differ from those that the creator has with the created piece. We have much to learn from the vision of collectors and from the relationship that they weave, being very passionate one. As artists and collectors we come together because we share a passion. I learn a great deal from looking at and speaking with them, seeing how they live with the pieces, how they take care of them as well; it's very beautiful.

ILG : *Another population that you have spent time with, and who will to a certain extent live with the exhibition, are the students from the art school. You have already met them because you've done workshops with them. For an artist whose practice is constantly developing and who is very active, how do you benefit from the exchanges that you have with young people like them?*

LS : I like these moments very much. In fact, I discovered the practice of teaching in Grenoble. According to my students, our first real exchanges began in Grenoble. Frédéric Léglise had invited me to the art school. At first for a mock jury, a moment when we discover artworks on their way to being finished. Followed by a workshop, a moment where we share and stimulate a creative approach. Teaching could be a vocation, almost like a variation of that of being an artist. Having real intensity, but on another level. Almost the other side of a piece. Because teaching is accompanying. One must be open to what the other is proposing, and this implies total receptivity. When we make art pieces, we follow the movement between reception and action, a dialogue between letting go and implementation. We call upon the same things, in a different, perhaps opposing, manner. The question deserves to be developed. What I did in Grenoble was over a short period of time, a workshop lasting a few days, a moment that was very intense. I proposed to the students to begin with materials with which they would dialogue, using their own vocabulary, syntax and style. This is similar to how I work, and so it is a moment of sharing. What I try to provide, is the pleasure that I experience when creating things. I try to

transmit this. Ultimately, it is a matter of creating the conditions for the appearance of something that comes from someone else, whereas in my own practice I create the conditions for the appearance of something that comes from me. When we were thinking about the where to exhibit the work, I immediately thought of the large room in the Grenoble Art School, a space that I find to be magnificent. I first used it as a teacher: then, once it was free, I brought the students participating in the workshop into it. We brought pieces that were being created into the large room because it makes everything that is brought into it sublime. Perhaps because it is a large space, bathed in light, like a cathedral...A space like this is a super tool for a school to have. It is the first place that I saw in Grenoble and I'm very happy that my artworks are hosted there.