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### SWEETGERANIUM BY NICOLAS PARTY, INTERVIEW BY ELSIE LAMMER

by Elsie Lammer

**Elise Lammer: Nicolas, You are a Swiss artist from Lausanne living in Glasgow since 2007. Although you are mainly a painter, you are also a curator, a technician, a gallerist and sometimes even an editor... but rumour has it you are going to create furniture. How do you position yourself under all these different hats?**

Nicolas Party: I don't think I'm any of these things. I am an artist and that is my first prerogative. And like many artists, I do various things and I'm always up for experimenting. Historically, artists have never been limited to one particular media. They have often done applied arts for example. Many are writers or art dealers. Ruben was also a distinguished diplomat while Chardin was responsible for the disposition and the scenography of painting exhibitions. Some people might think that having different hats is very contemporary. Personally I think it very conventional. If I define myself as an artist it's because I have studied art and made it my job. The term "artist" is very broad and allows me to have all these different facets.

**But during our last interview, you were insisting on your quality as a painter!**

It's true but only through the way I see my work. I do consider myself a painter. It's simple: we can define painting as the act of disposing colour on a surface and that's mostly what I do. The idea of transforming the nature of something by covering it with colour is very exciting to me. The best example is the white sheet of paper that transforms itself into something extraordinary with simply a few brush strokes. I like the simplicity of this act and the reflection that follows. This makes me think of the theorist Alberti's idea that inspires me - "painting is like an open window to the world". To me this concept is much more simple than it appears to be. I see it as a basic idea: when you dispose paint on a surface, that surface opens, like a window into another dimension.

How does this interest translate into your work? By applying paint on many different surfaces such as paper, canvas, objects, walls, floors and ceilings. Recently I conducted a series of wall paintings mixing charcoal and spray. With this project I wanted to observe how the surface reacted to these two techniques. The spray would cover the wall with a uniform solid colour whereas the charcoal leaves the nature of the wall apparent. Another example is the 'painting on rocks' project achieved with the Blakam collective. The rocks are painted in such a way that they create an illusion of various foods. The simple fact of disposing colour on these rocks transforms them into fruit, pieces of meat or cheese. I love these kinds of tricks. You must surely know about the story of the painter Zeuxis of ancient Greece who painted grapes so realistically that the birds would peck them!

**Surfaces are one thing, but we would love to know more about what you represent in your drawings and paintings. What are your subjects?**

I have several subjects on which I work and I think they all have a precise function in my occupation. When I paint pots, it's the fact of representing an object that contains something you can't see that interests me. You have to imagine it. Pots, vases, cups and other teapots are objects that have a function to contain something. When you wander around a history museum, the object you can see from the beginning to the end is the pot; the container which was been used to contain a thousand and one things. Do you remember that scene

from the film «Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade», when at the end of the movie he must choose the right cup? He is faced with all these pots of different shapes and he must choose one, depending on its shape. In this case, it isn't the content that has a magical power, but the pot.

**But like Morandi you don't only represent pots?**

No, I have other grounds that form the small family with whom I work. There are sausages and other foods too. It's always fun to represent an apple and to think that its form hasn't fundamentally changed during the last century. When Chardin painted an apple, he was confronted with the same object as me. It's not the same as painting a car, a topic that by the way doesn't interest painters much. I like to paint things that have long existed, whose form and function have not really changed and have been shown a million times in the past. Novelty and progress fascinates me.

**After studying art at l'Ecal from 2001 to 2004, you left in 2007 to study a master's degree at the Glasgow School of Art. Is it true that you left Switzerland because of debts related to graffiti? More precisely, can you tell me about your decision to settle down in Glasgow?**

What debts? I have no debts! I went to Glasgow because I felt the need to confront my life and my work in another culture. At the time, the little information I had on this city had convinced me that something interesting was about to happen there, something I wanted to join. I wanted to live in Glasgow to change my work, my way of doing things and my way of thinking, and that's just what happened.

**So how is Glasgow?**

Glasgow is a very exciting city! The austerity of the climate or the fact that the city is a bit eccentric gives it a very strong character. It's a very physical and maybe a little heavy place but like the buildings of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, it's also a city strangely elegant and intelligently funny. In Glasgow, there is something very simple and straightforward at first and all the complexity comes in later, like a good whiskey ... Obviously art plays an important role in the identity of the city. Karla Black's work is representative of these contrasts; her facilities are literally visual and physical, very pictorial, but also very fragile and a little clumsy. Glasgow is also a fairly traditionalist city as a whole; among artists are found mainly painters and sculptors and a keen interest in crafts, which suits me fine!

**I know you will not willingly see exhibitions of contemporary art, but you do go crazy for Natural History museums and pottery exhibitions at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. How do you explain this disdain for your peers and this fascination for the ancestors?**

I never despised my contemporaries! Contemporary art is what I see the most in the nature of things. All the people I work with are artists. Since there is no sorting in contemporary art and everything is thrown into the world without any control, much of it is uninteresting. Whereas there is a certain quality associated with sorting by time and operated by the choice of conservation in museums. This selection makes most things in a museum hold interest. It's technically impossible to see oriental art at the Victoria & Albert Museum and find that it sucks! These pieces of art acquire over time a kind of relevance that I would say is objectively interesting. Contemporary art, by definition «that is created now, « is subjective. This immediate side and non-selective is also what makes it exciting; you can find anything and everything!

**Your lifestyle makes me think of you as romantic painter. You sleep, eat and work in your studio apartment in Glasgow, still life is one of your favorite subjects and you speak willingly of historical references. Is it important for you to enrol in a continuity?**

Every artist is interested in art history, and for me as an artist it's important to keep making history and culture. I think it's necessary to look for people who, throughout time, have shared a passion for art. Romantic? If you must put a label on me, I prefer that than conventional or cynical!

**I remember your obsession with teapots that are very present in your still life artwork. For some time now, elephants have fascinated you. The recent exhibition in London at Woodmill and the work done for the exhibition 'Minipic, t'as cotté ton biclou' in New York last summer are proof of this. What will your next fixation be?**

When I look at my drawings from when I was a teenager, I noticed that my interests haven't changed over time. There are things that come back, it's like that, I don't know if it's because we don't change or maybe because change scares us and makes us return to the past as a sort of comforting nostalgia. So I have no new obsession. If I had to guess I would try to seek what seems ready to be reused from my past productions. I like the example of Philip Guston who at the end of his career started to paint subjects that he painted in his youth, as if to show the consistency of a lifetime.

**Can you tell me about the project 'Sweetgeranium'?**

'Sweetgeranium' began during the second year of my Masters in Glasgow. A period during which I turned my workshop into a gallery. This project was the logical continuation of work I had developed with the Blakam collective, with Charlotte and Stephan Herzig Devidal in Switzerland. With Blakam, we questioned the presentation of artwork through their productions. It was primarily designed for musical sets and for our respective paintings. With Sweetgeranium, the idea was to give the opportunity to other artists to be exposed. So I organised a series of seven exhibitions where I intervened at all levels of the presentation of artwork from guest artists. It began with the frame or base, then the walls and floor of the gallery, and ending with the exhibition poster. Subsequently, I wanted to continue working around the notion of presentation but with text as an object. I wanted to see how the presentation of a text, its materialisation, might influence visual reading. I do not know if you know the book «Jazz» by Matisse, it's an absolutely incredible work that inspired my new project.

**For this project, you commissioned texts from artists that you «put on stage» in two dimensions. The first part 'Dust' is a gigantic book of artists, an indefinable object halfway between a painting, a book and a sculpture. Tell me about this project.**

For Dust I worked with two artists from Glasgow, Joanne Tatham and Tom O'Sullivan. They subjected me to texts by five authors. The book was almost finished when I learned that these five authors were actually pseudonyms that Joanne and Tom had used to explore different sides of writing. All texts speak of entropy as a metaphor of time that inevitably alters things. The graphic design I created for «Dust» voluntarily prevents easy reading content, rather than the contrary. I tried to make reading difficult and I rewrote the texts with a brush and purposely left out some words. The edition itself is so big that you can hardly hold it with both hands. The book is completely done by serigraphy to fifty copies. The serigraphy gives the object a pictorial quality that is essential for me, the colour intensity increases the materiality of the object. With Dust, I try to imagine a design that doesn't serve the text but is in response to the latter, a true collaboration between these two entities.

**Is there any continuation of this project?**

I'm going to make six other books of the same size, always working with different people. Once all seven books are completed, I would like all participants to gather for a sort of reading performance. As I commissioned people from different backgrounds, I would like everyone to meet and read each book in their own way.

**For Novembre, I asked you to visually 're-interpret' this interview. How do you imagine**

## **the result?**

I want to create a visual specifically for Novembre. I will do illustrations of the work we talked about rather than using archival photos. I'm interested in how a work of art is reproduced and staged when it's in a magazine, on a website or in a catalogue. Before photography, artists reproduced their paintings with prints and the difference between the work and its reproduction was so obvious. Today it's not uncommon to think that one knows a piece of art having never actually seen it. How many times is one surprised or disappointed to see a true work after fantasising about it through a photographic reproduction? I think the new film by Werner Herzog about the prehistoric paintings of Ardèche illustrates this paradox: no one can see the original paintings, we must settle for a 3D movie to watch. I love the slogan: The Cave of Chauvet soon in 3D!