

Baptiste Rabichon

M I would like to begin this interview by mentioning one of your editions, *Libraries*, an assembly of pages from art history books gleaned and scanned at the library of the Beaux-Arts de Lyon during your third year there. Do you feel that you composed this work to better understand your heritage, or was it simply a pretext for esthetic experimentation?

B I constructed this body of images in 2012, but the book was only published in 2015, by RVB Books. Beginning our conversation with this piece is a good way to start, because it was the first time I felt I accomplished something that resembled real work. It was joyous. Up until this project my influences were poorly digested, and paradoxically it was in using a photocopier that I had the impression of getting away from copying, of freeing myself of everything I'd soaked in during my first years at the Beaux-Arts.

M Over 500 pages you guide us through a rare walk through a museum, in which portraits of the Virgin Mary, for instance, stand side by side with the tortured faces of Francis Bacon. It's more of an "art novel" than an art history, a fiction without a plot, other than the one established by your arrangements. For that matter, were these arrangements the result of chance, an intimate association of ideas, or did they arise from a particular order?

B A little of all three at the same time. I spent weeks in the library leafing through hundreds of books. A page would catch my attention, and I'd continue leafing through until a page from another book seemed to me to connect with the first. When this initial work was done, I initiated the process again to complete the double pages that contain the "pieces" from four different books.

M Are you familiar with Kenneth Goldsmith's expression "uncreative writing"? The poet and founder of the extraordinary online library, UbuWeb, advocates a "writing without writing," in short an art of plagiarism. He believes that the moment a choice is made as to what to reproduce, the content is inevitably reappropriated. The act of copying does not curtail our subjectivity, it can even reveal it.

B These questions were at the heart of my work at the time. My practice changed greatly after that edition. These reflections are no doubt still present, for instance in certain series such as *Les discrètes*, but more discreetly, if you will. The gesture in *Libraries* was impulsive. I told myself "copy them once and for all," and that produced something that seemed right to me.

M We see very few references to cubism in *Libraries*. It's surprising given how much your way of decomposing an object or space draws on this movement.

B Series such as *Braquages*, *Les discrètes*, and *La Voyante* were born later, when I began to combine analog and digital within the same medium. I felt that the questions that arose for me (the coexistence of multiple representations of the same thing, the friction between two opposites...) were similar to those that drove cubism, and so I alluded to it in enigmatic images.

M We do indeed see a cubist anatomy, spherical bodies, conical cutouts, and other cylindrical variations. And either in homage or as a hold-up, the titles you choose, *La Guitare* or *La Partition* [The Score] for instance, confirm this influence. You pilfer Braque's subjects, palette, and technique, and reappropriate them for the digital era.

B In these first *Braquages*, there was always the desire to mix artifice and real clues. Entirely digital textures stand next to photograms, or materials scanned in high definition. That's also an element in the approach used by the cubists: real objects rub shoulders with painting. And that's also why I leave visible the trace of the image's construction (such as magnets or tape), for they contribute to the eruption of reality within the heart of the artificial.

M It's a process you used very early on. The series *Tout se délitait en partie* [Everything Went to Pieces], which mixes traditional photographs and photograms, borrowings and imprints, also allows its handiwork to show through. By virtue of this technique and the subjects represented (a photograph of a child, an unmade hotel bed), one feels a sense of false candor. Or false confidence? You dramatize your intimate memories, just as you dramatize the tricks of your trade, that is to say without revealing their mystery.

- B The title refers to a work from Hofmannsthal, "The Lord Chandos Letter," which says: "for me everything went to pieces, those pieces into other pieces, and nothing allowed itself to be defined by a concept anymore." This speaks to the stupefaction in the face of things, when they are no longer perceived by the filter of language, and seem to burst forth in all their strangeness and presence. *Tout se délitait en parties*, can also be understood as "everything becomes a subject," and this series is a succession of back-and-forths and cohabitations between my memories and my present, between images and objects, fantasy and reality. We can almost make everything out, and yet the fact that the signs of its making are present only reinforces its strangeness. Because in the end the mystery is elsewhere.
- M "Everything becomes subject." This affirmation characterizes your project *Papeteries* [Stationer's Shop] as well. Your approach is almost Dadaist: in the grip of intense collectionitis, you compulsively spirited away the sheets used to test pens from innumerable stationer's shops, and then scanned and enlarged some of them. It's almost your first collaboration. How many artists are on these sheets?
- B Hundreds, maybe thousands. "The greatest order in the world is like a heap of trash assembled by chance," Heraclitus asserted. A simultaneously fascinated and amused impression that there are abstract canvases by masters hidden in stationer's shops; instead of going there to buy supplies, all one has to do is collect the sheets.
- M Years later, you continue to use scanners, but you've tried ones of a different kind. For your recent series *Orly*, you were able to borrow airport scanners. Inside you place simple everyday objects, worthy of still lifes, and the result brings to mind Man Ray's photographs.
- B They're compositions of objects I photograph, but with an X-ray scanner, to see what happens. With first the pleasure of seeing the image on the scanner's control screen.
- M So you accept that sometimes you don't know what you'll find, like a good Prince of Serendip?
- B That could almost serve as a definition of art. No, I don't know what I'm going to find. But I adjust to what I learn as I go along (here, for example, how to assemble colors, connected to the density of the materials crossed by the X-rays). The scanner was built to survey the inside of our suitcases. In this series, I try on the contrary to use its poetic potential, and thereby to orient the questions it raises. Instead of stressing us out at the airport, this machine can also prompt us to ask more beautiful questions regarding our vision, our perception of an infinitesimally small part of the light spectrum.
- M Your way of observing your environment reminds me of the writing of Georges Perec and his interest in the infra-ordinary.
- B I don't believe that things are banal simply because they're woven into our everyday life. It's our gaze that cloaks them in banal indifference. This is inevitable, because otherwise we would be ceaselessly stupefied. I'm simply trying to make something of these instants, in which the gaze tears free of its usual torpor.
- M As an interpreter of the everyday and a skilled dreamer, you create brilliant constellations out of scans of Samsung screens. On your telephone, which is turned off and emptied of all its functions, our frenetic movements become stardust. The flat surface becomes deep, we enter into a new dimension. Comic and cosmic, your cerulean *Galaxy* opens up metaphysical reflections for us, as one feels an infinite dizziness before the network and the stars.
- B Yes the idea is fairly similar to *Papeteries*, although my gesture is slightly more present. We look at screens without seeing them, they're not just windows. If you look closely, they're much larger worlds. These pieces in which I transform the finger's gesture into a galaxy, or doodles into action painting, I constructed them before I discovered working in the laboratory; I think, with the limited world of my desk, I was trying to access another scale of the body or space.
- M And now that your equipment makes it possible, you even take us into space. I'm thinking of the photographs from *September 15*.
- B Which refers to the date when the Cassini probe entered Saturn's atmosphere.
- M A new esthetic territory to be conquered? First we're caught in a vortex of light, and then led into a ballet of flying saucers. But these images are not really identifiable, as though they're torn between two temporalities. They depict a future that's painted or cobbled together, as though we don't yet have the knowledge to describe it. Perhaps because they were produced in two stages?
- B The image includes artifacts I initially produced using a computer, which were created with the guidance tools generated by editing software when you deform images. Once printed, I worked on them with my hands drenched in chemicals and a bevy of light tools at my side, in order to create these pocket-sized spatial battles.
- M I've remarked that your more abstract works are paradoxically the most orchestrated.

B Yes they're often more "choreographed" than the others. Everything plays out through my gesture in the dark. Yet even though the composition is important, I always leave room for a genuine physical interaction with the world. This choreography is sometimes reduced to the extreme. In *30" de rayons X sur D610* [30" of X-rays on D610], I use a camera with its lens cover on to capture darkness during the 30 seconds it takes for it to cross through an X-ray scanner. I get great pleasure in producing totally abstract pieces, with no subject other than the photographic experience.

M Which is in a way always an internal experience, as expressed by Bataille: a moment between meditation and ecstasy.

B Yes, especially when I'm in the dark, and tensed between extreme concentration and gestural abandon. It's my favorite part of the work, despite being the most exhausting. As prints require very long exposure and few physical procedures, I sometimes lie down on the ground next to the image that's being made. It's something I never tire of. The magic of a print is always where you don't expect it. It can come the first time around, or be the result of persistence. Sometimes that also what's touching.

M It's a kind of patient hunt...

B Punctuated by moments of grace.

M You also seek these moments of grace in your daily life, during your walks. Your *Balcons* is one of the results. They offer themselves to us like bouquets, compositions with ornaments that are sometimes clear, and sometimes hazy; looking closely we discover each of the details, and even feel their textures. When I first saw the series I immediately thought of Manet's *Balcon*, a painting that sparked debate, because the painter was criticized for paying more attention to the details of the flowers than to certain faces.

B The balconies are most certainly among my most pictorial works, not in their making but in how I conceived them, seeking what I thought was the right way to render each detail. Classical photography "smooths" everything out. Firstly because it's an image (I can't escape that either), but also because the grain of the film or digital noise gives the same texture to everything that is represented. Reality is of course different, and that's what I tried to show for each balcony. The balustrade doesn't have the same texture as the flowerpot, the curtain, or the silhouette that traces them. It's rather surrealist or fantastical, but much closer to reality than appears. The attempt comes from the desire to retranscribe a moment of contemplation, as in *Albums*. For each balcony I tried to make the environment I felt when I observed it "for real." And this took place through the construction of all these details.

M So you preferred a description of the atmosphere of the balcony you captured to a realistic picture. It's through this play of strata and the relations created between them that you transmit to us your fiction-alized vision of the scene. We often invent narratives by observing people's inner lives, and it appears you went so far as to insert yourself within this. I believe I recognized your silhouette in one of the photographs.

B Yes, it's me again.

M For me the balcony is a prime place for voyeurism. It's a watchtower for the person who lives there, and for the stroller it's an entry into the intimacy of the unknown. The construction of your works adds to this dimension, in that it plays with the curtains and reflections, which cover and reveal. There is a constant movement of mirroring.

B Balconies are a perfect subject for my work, with what we see clearly on the outside, and what can barely be guessed at inside, that succession of shots echoing the way in which I juggle techniques, and work the image in layers.

M I have the impression that you're developing an *in situ* practice. Your work is not so much determined by a technique than by a predefined space. Sometimes you have fun frustrating the chief purpose of an airport scanner, and sometimes you take inspiration from the environment you are walking or traveling through. The work is thus imprinted with the spirit of the place, which means that when it's exhibited, it often preserves that mystery you mentioned earlier. We feel it particularly with the *Lodhi Garden Trees* series, with trees made out of dyes, motifs, and sequins inspired by your trip to India. A travel journal perhaps?

B What was extraordinary for me was that everything lives side by side. These trees no doubt show it indirectly, because what I constructed out of this trip, which was quite real, is most likely one of my most dream-like series.

M A visual joy emanates from these rhizomes, at the intersection between children's illustration and drug-induced hallucination.

B It's a little of what I felt in India. I went there for a residency in 2017 and gathered a bunch of things that I scanned while there, such as plants, or upon my return, such as fabrics, jewelry, trinkets for tourists. Then, based on representations of trees in Indian culture, I reconstructed them with images from what I'd brought back from this trip, trying to transcribe this feeling of immersion that is most likely shared by many people who visit there.

M You built yourself a kind of heterotopia, a physical space of utopia, as conceptualized by Foucault in 1966. The garden is one of these counter-spaces, a doorway toward elsewhere: "We mustn't forget that the garden, a striking creation that is now thousands of years old, had very deep and overlapping significations in the East. (...) The garden, it's the smallest parcel in the world, and also the whole of the world. Since the end of Antiquity, the garden has been a kind of happy and universalizing heterotopia."

B A very beautiful passage. Some of my series can be read in the same way, *Lodhi Garden Trees*, *Ranelagh*, 17^e [17th], among others. Even though it remains utopic, in my work there is an attempt to place pure mental constructs side by side with something real. These *Lodhi Garden Trees* appear to be completely frenzied, hallucinatory as you said, and yet absolutely everything of which they are made was taken from the real world.

M Your *Fleurs* [Flowers] also comes from the real world, but it's their excessive size that gives them a particular aura. We feel like Alice in Wonderland, very small compared to these delicate monsters that have turned into your daisies, among other growths. In 17^e, we actually meet Alice, your partner, whose opaline specter combines with incredible and multicolored flora, ranging from sea green-blue to amaranthine.

B Yes, 17^e or *Ranelagh* are like strange mirrors without silvering, in which we can distinguish everything by guessing at something else. My exhibition *Dame de cœur* [Queen of Hearts] is a reference to Lewis Carroll. Because Alice is at the center of works in 17^e, *Alice in bed*, *Still life with the queen of hearts*. When I created the latter work, either from chance or intuition, I inserted in my composition the reproduction of a queen of hearts, which a year later provided the meaning and title for this exhibition.

M The scale used propels our bodies and thoughts to the other side of the mirror. For that matter, you use enlargement as others use black and white. For instance with your pieces of candy, which look like precious stones when they're blown up. We savor them more than with the eyes.

B *Polka* is a very simple work, in which a few scraps of candy are excessively blown up, for they're projected on the paper by the light that crosses through them. The resulting image is thus very pure, without grain, and swarming with details. Even though it's technically very different, this series has connections with *Galaxy*, where an elsewhere bursts forth from the usual.

M And in *We're Beautiful like Diamonds in the Sky*, there are diamonds that shine in the space, like a *cri du cœur*. The work greatly enlarged these adamantine stones, and sets them in flight within the Fresnoy's hall. The work's title evokes a dance, which is also created by the colored burst of diffracted light. Did you want to prove something by blowing up these gems so extremely?

B Constructing a work that was a genuine technical challenge, based on the exhilaration of dance. I really like that song by Rihanna, and while dancing to it during a party in Roubaix, I had the idea for this cascade of diamonds. We had to build the equivalent of the film rolling systems inside cameras, but in a format that's 2m tall. It took five people five hours in total darkness just to expose the paper. It's one of my finest memories.

M It's almost like speleology. For that matter, your relation to photography is particularly physical. You go so far as scanning bodies, faces, skin, as though you needed to make your gestures visible. In *Chirals* [Chirals] especially, your hands give a sign of your presence, and confirm their importance in the construction of the image. We see you producing the painting at the same moment as you are scanning it.

B Chronologically, among my digital pieces, the series *Chirals* came right after what I call my desk pieces (*Libraries*, *Papeteries*, *Galaxy*), with which it is often compared. But scanning a telephone or a piece of paper the size of a metro ticket doesn't involve the body in the same way as wrangling with two open scanners brushed with paint, stuck between my knee and the table, with one hand embedded between the two machines, and the other handling the keyboards for two computers to activate them. I constructed this series right after my first photographs; in hindsight, I think I enjoyed transposing the gestural freedom won in the lab's darkness to the environment of my desk.

M The result reminds me of Clouzot's *The Mystery of Picasso*. One could even say it's a fairly general impression in your work. The artist who opens up, transparent, you've made that the heart of your work.

B I love that film. We may well see Picasso's gesture bustling about the canvas, see him touching up, appreciate his virtuosity, but the mystery is in no way dispelled. Because the mystery chiefly resides in thought.

To See:

Exhibition *À l'intérieur cet été*
Galerie Paris-Beijing - Paris
From January 24 to March 2

Exhibition *Double exposition*
Galerie Binome - Paris
From February 7 to March 16