

Middlemarch

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Episode 1 : JEAN-BAPTISTE BERNADET, BENOIT PLATÉUS
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Interview with Virginie Devillez

VD You organized your residency in New York yourselves, outside of any specific program, spending three months there from April to June 2011. How did you chose New York?

JBB A few months earlier, in November and December 2010, I completed a residency in Marfa, Texas, hosted by the Chinati Foundation. I've been visiting New York regularly for the past few years, and have made some connections there. My idea was to follow my time in a very remote part of the U.S. with a residency in one of the international art world's busiest capitals, both in order to discover new opportunities there, but also to visit as many exhibits as possible and meeting artists.

VD Jean-Baptiste, your application for a residency in Marfa was motivated by the connection you felt existed between your work and American culture, in terms of painting, music, or even literature. Did your experience in Marfa allow you to forge a connection to the American collective unconscious - a connection that is felt by many, despite having never lived in the country?

JBB American culture is an important source of inspiration for me. Most of the artists that interest me, who have produced work during the past sixty years, are American (from Guston to Josh Smith, including Warhol, Oldenburg, Judd, Lewitt, and Gonzalez-Torres); others, for instance a number of German artists, are largely inspired by works produced by Americans. The same goes with cinema and literature. For me, the goal of these residencies was to allow me to spend time in the U.S., to work there and find my place within its particular context. I thought my work fit in there, even the U.S. is not my native, cultural or educational environment. These residencies thus allowed me to finally confirm - or not - this hypothesis. I've learned two lessons from these experiences: first, I realized that my work did fit within American culture. It garnered positive responses, both from fellow artists and from curators. Obtaining the approval of people whose approach to art is similar to my own has always been of the utmost important to me. Additionally, and rather oddly, the experience also served to tie me more closely to my roots. I am now more aware, even if this feeling remains rather vague and abstract, of identifying as European, if not French. It's difficult for me to explain, but after spending five months in the U.S., I feel more strongly that my work fits within a European narrative. One of the strengths of American art, that explains its hegemony until recent times, is its ability to simplify, to render art more intelligible, more communicative, unifying. These characteristics are accompanied by a certain production power: art there is bigger and heavier, it is produced more rapidly and in larger

quantities. I'd say that after looking for this "power," I can now focus on the more intimate, introspective, pared-down dimension of my work.

VD Benoit, do you feel that a similar link exists between your work and American culture?

BP No, I don't think so. I leapt at this opportunity, initiated by Jean-Baptiste. Thanks to the Artist Pension Trust, to which we both belong, we were able to find a studio at a reasonable price for New York. There are also a large number of American artists that I admire. The energy of New York, and the opportunity to meet certain people, were both attractive to me.

VD You are less accustomed than Jean-Baptiste to participating in residency programs. This was the first time that you worked for such a prolonged period of time in a foreign country. Rhythm and tranquility are important to you. How did you manage to change your work environment, to get your bearings and work in a new space, all within a few weeks that culminated with your show at Karma?

BP It's true that I don't love to travel, but in this case the conditions were ideal: we had the time and the space to greet friends, an apartment and a studio. Your relationship to the city changes over time. Initially, I dreaded this three-month period, which felt uncomfortably both long and brief. I told myself that, in New York, I would continue to develop a project I'd started in Belgium, such that I wouldn't lose too much time. However, once I arrived, I felt motivated to undertake new work, to adopt a new approach to my creative process.

VD For some time now, you've been considering the idea of embarking on a new line of work using video. With that in mind, you brought a camera with you to New York. What do you plan on doing with the footage you took?

BP I hope to develop a project using the rushes I brought home from New York. The images I obtained are all tied to the geography of the city. I'm very interested in New York's geographical location: it's an extremely urban setting, situated on the edge of the ocean and organized as if it were an archipelago. The city constantly provides you with views of itself, thanks to its grid layout and to the bodies of water that surround it. Each time you cross the water from Brooklyn to Manhattan, or vice-versa, you get a view of the location you've just left. It's a very dense city, but it's also very aerated, thanks to the broad corridors formed by the avenues and the vast expanses created by the water. You're always both contemplating and participating in a landscape: it's cinematographically very appealing.

VD On the other hand, Jean-Baptiste, you've said that your painting becomes almost a journal or diary: accidents, mistakes, fresh starts and repetitions all hold an important place in your work. While in Marfa, you spoke of the importance of the Texan light, which had a direct impact on the lighter, brighter colors you used there. Did your move from Marfa to New York prompt another development in your work?

JBB I'm not completely sure that it was the light that brightened my paintings. I just unwrapped the works I completed in Marfa, then in New York. I need more detachment from them; I haven't yet had the time to compare the paintings I made there with the ones I've completed in Brussels. Generally speaking, I've noticed during my residencies a feeling

of acceleration, accompanied by an increase in concentration, that stems from my desire to exhibit in a given place the work that I've produced there: both in New York and Marfa, the end of my residencies was to be marked by an exhibit. The residency encourages me to work very rapidly, with great focus. For these reasons, rather than discussing my new use of lighter colors, I would say that I acquire new tools during a residency more rapidly than if I'd remained in Brussels. I can't pinpoint the precise reason for the change in my color palette, towards brighter, "cleaner" colors. It could be attributed to the change in landscape, to new acquaintances, to renewed concentration - or could be merely the result of switching to different manufacturers of paint, paint thinner, brushes, canvases, to different levels of humidity and thus to different drying times, or to spending the winter in the sun...

VD Benoit, you mostly got around the city on a bike, and took photographs and videos. But you also made an series using colorful canisters...

BP Yes, I continued working with the canisters used in photo labs to store chemical products, photo developer and fixer, ... I used them as moulds: I fill them with urethane, which allows me to duplicate their shape. Strangely, even though the canisters I used in New York are practically identical to those found here, I obtained different results. I focused on colors, and on mixing. I like the way different abstract effects appear in the canisters, as if these were still in the midst of a transformation. At the beginning, the work seems entirely abstract. But by mixing different colors within the different densities of the urethane, I produce a transitory image, similar to those produced during chemical or photographic processes, when "something" reveals itself.

JBB Benoit's comment about this potentiality is very important to me. This notion interests me too, it's even at the heart of my practice: I consider that my paintings are always transforming, are never completely finished, because the more recent ones add something to the older ones. I adopt different formats and techniques, and I would almost go so far as to say, different ambitions: my work contains this potential of painting, as Benoit's canisters contain the potential of photography. I see in both the same share of absence, of incompleteness, of possibility. This became clear to me when we showed our work side by side during our exhibit, and presented it together in the Karma publication. This connection had already become apparent while I watched Benoit work. This is another advantage of a shared residency: understanding how others approach their work.

VD In New York, Benoit also made small books, drawings, photographs... Why did you chose ultimately to show only the canisters?

JBB We decided to show Benoit's canisters with my paintings after considering the best way to articulate our work during the exhibit. It is most likely the part of his work in which this idea of potentiality is the most obvious, it's almost embodied in the object itself. It was also easier to have a clear, distinct separation between objects and paintings, resting on the floor or mounted on the wall.

VD Karma is simultaneously a bookstore, a gallery, and a publisher. How did your collaboration with them begin in New York?

JBB From the very beginning of our residency, we wanted to show our work together at the end of our stay.

BP Yes, almost to concretize the work we'd done there. We wanted to commemorate our experience with a show and a publication.

JBB We wanted to make an artists' book together and have it printed in the U.S., where printers work well, rapidly, and often at a lesser cost than at home. The papers and formats are different, which made the object into a kind of souvenir.

VD Ultimately, how did your collaboration with Karma become official?

JBB Through mutual friends, I got in touch with Brendan Dugan. He runs a graphic design firm, An Art Service, which is connected to a small storefront gallery-cum-bookstore, Karma. He came to visit our studio; half an hour later, he offered us a show for the following week. We already had a mock-up for the publication, but since he usually makes artist books himself, he chose to send us his own photographer. The idea was very simple: alternate a painting, a canister, another painting, another canister, ... We met again a few days later to discuss the choice of paper and the design of the cover.

BP Brendan chose to organize the publication in this manner because he wanted to duplicate the way he'd encountered our work in our studio. He liked the simplicity of our mode of presentation.

VD The exhibit currently on display in Brussels will later be shown in Paris and in other locations, but won't be presented in exactly the same way as it was in New York. Why?

JBB Because what matters most to us is showing our work together in a simple, light manner, rather than in a museum or gallery. The book launch is an excuse for us to keep this duo going. Some of the works presented in the book are now being shown in different places, in different shows. But the principle remains the same, no matter which works are on display. The publication, like the exhibit, are two instances where this dialog operates.

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Translation Madeleine Compagnon