



Masks, Flowers & Pots : the serenade (Masques, Fleurs & Pots : la sérénade), 2017, oil painting on canvas, 230 x 130 & 195 x 132 cm, studio view



Masks, Flowers & Pots : the meeting at the tavern (Masques, Fleurs & Pots : la rencontre à la taverne), 2017, oil painting on canvas, 212 x 186 & 195 x 132 cm, studio view

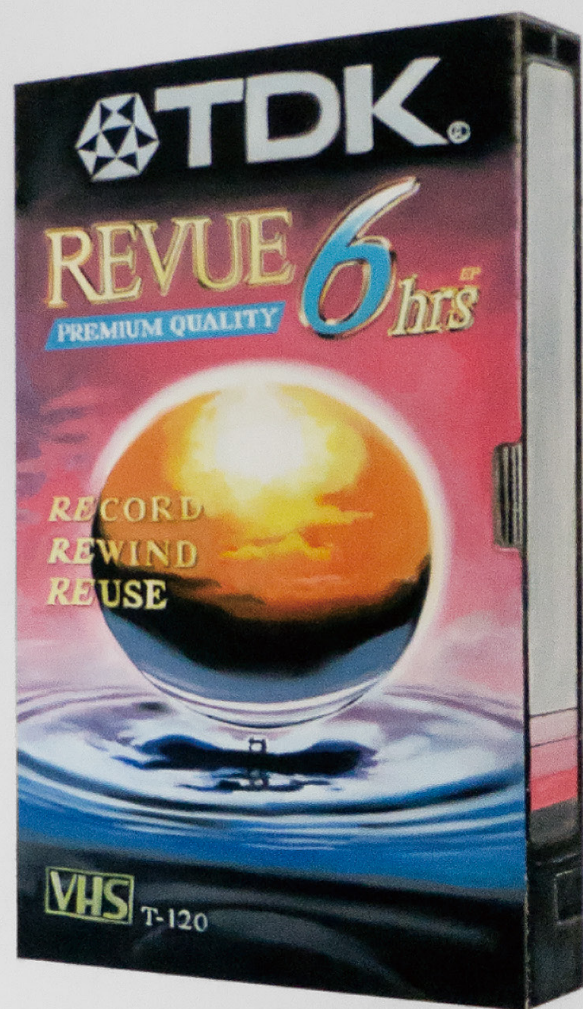
MAPS GALLERY | Interviewed by
Kim Kieun

Renaud Bézy | From Paris,
France

**"I'd like my paintings to be
dancefloors."**



Portrait of the Artist's Daughter (Portrait de la Fille de l'Artiste), in progress, charcoal, oil and acrylic on canvas, 200 x 130 cm, studio view with the artist



Please introduce yourself.

My name is Renaud Bézy, I'm an artist living and working in Paris, France. I define myself as a painter, although I do also films and other stuff, but painting is really important for me. It's at the core of my artistic process: everything comes from it and eventually returns to it. What else there is to say? An important thing for me is that I have been studying at Goldsmiths College in London; those years abroad had a lasting influence on my art practice.

I could see that you repeat the motif of the vase in your work, both in a figurative, but also in a symbolic way. What does this leitmotif mean to you?

Yes, vases but also flowers are important in my work. They are tropes, almost stereotypes in painting. People doing amateur painting will automatically turn to those kind of "themes": the flower pot. For me, it all started with a series of 20 small flower pot paintings that I did around 2009. I painted those from the vague memory and imagination of a forgotten moment of French art history: Montmartre paintings from the 1950's. It is a postwar moment when miserabilism was "the thing" and France and Europe were completely losing their artistic leadership. The most famous artist of that period was Bernard Buffet, but my paintings were made using many styles. Nobody wants to look at this kind of art anymore now, but I was interested to force the viewer to look not knowing how to look. That was the reason why I had to paint those small, depressed, painting with sincerity, with a sense of honesty. They had to have the quality of a painting (not a joke), to look like they were made sixty years ago and I had just bought them from the flea market. What do you make of art when there is no more theoretical framework to look at? I guess that was part of my interrogations and it's connected with my ongoing personal interest for the overlooked, the vernacular, the rustic, the outdated. Eventually the bad taste is always the taste of the others. After that I decided to stick to this flower pot motif and see if I could get it somewhere else, to a level of celebration and joy. A lot of my work is indeed about performing the stereotype – a stereotype is a dead form

– so I guess my work is like revitalizing stereotypes, giving them a second birth. It's also very comfortable to use those forms that have been painted by so many artists: there's a great sense of liberty there, it's like you got a passport to enter the history of Western painting... and then it's your playground, you can do whatever you want.

Can you explain your experience in Tahiti? How did it impact your practice?

Being an artist means you always want to see what's going on around the world. In 2014 I was invited in Shanghai by Paul Devautour, an artist who created an experimental art school in China: the École Offshore. I also had a stipend to go to Tahiti, so I flew directly from Shanghai to Papeete. It's hard to imagine a more striking contrast, from the ultra modernity of Shanghai to the beautiful quietness of the Polynesian islands. I wanted to go to Tahiti because I was curious about Paul Gauguin and his quest for primitivism. But of course I was also very well aware that those islands are now fueled with mass tourism, the raw beauty that Gauguin was pursuing had been turned into a Disneyland cliché for infinite holidays. So I had these mixed feelings before going there... and the funny thing is that as soon as I set foot on the island, my reluctances disappeared completely. Of course there is a luxurious resorts for tourists and so on, but I was lucky enough to discover so many interesting people, individuals that decided to live their life the way they want; I was also quite moved by the personality of the Polynesians. Other aspects, specially for a painter, are the colors and light there. Again, it sounds like a cliché, but it's true – in Tahiti, the light is so strong that colors look like an hallucination, really. The shapes of flowers are crazy, too, very geometric. So I decided to try to catch this light and the colors, and put those into my paintings. When I unfolded the Tahitian paintings back in my Parisian studio, I was disappointed: the result was far below my visual experience. But this semi-failure had eventually a very positive effect on me because I then decided to stick to color, and

push it to its maximum by introducing fluorescent pigment in my paintings.

Looking back to your early works and coming toward the current ones, I could see you are interested in moving images as well. How does this switch function for you?

I did a series of films titled Barbarian Ballets. It's an ongoing project where I impersonate a painter, a different one each time, with different costumes. The costume is very important here, as well as the space where the action takes place. In most of my film I play with the myth of romanticism in painting using beautiful surroundings (i.e. great natural landscapes, Vasarely's Art Foundation, Moorea Island in the Pacific Ocean). There's also a sense of burlesque – I'm very influenced by the slapstick movies. My costume, the strangeness of the situations (a huge painting in a landscape) give a a humorous tone that gradually disappears. I try to confront the viewer with a sense of perplexity, starting with a laugh and then slowly not knowing what she/he is looking at anymore. The films are produced with very little money and the help of friends. And I want to keep it that way, with this DIY quality, slightly off-beat. The shooting is a joyful collective moment that forms a good balance for me with the work in the studio that requires endurance, consistency and solitude. In the films I paint without the burden of painting (laughs)! My last Barbarian Ballet is titled "a procession". It is slightly different from the previous ones as it's not a depiction of the act of painting. My new idea was to show an episode of a painter's life, so I decided to start with the end: the funeral. But it's a joyful film shot in the countryside, in the center of France with animal farms transporting paintings and the local village brass band in uniform playing "Stand by me". Anyway, the whole thing is also inspired by the funeral of the great Russian painter Malevich.



Angst Vor Der Angst (Fear of fear), 2015, installation by Renaud Bézy & Emilie Lamoine, paintings by Renaud Bézy, Film by Emilie Lamoine, Ooh la art, Shanghai, China (thanks to Kevin, Yellow and Paul Devaubour)



Barbarian Ballet 4 : a procession (Ballet Barbare 4 : une procession), 2017, sound video, HD, 12mn 48

I observed that in your painting you sometimes combine objects that are not really connected, that can even seem conflictual. How do you actually bring them together, what is the method that informs this process of objectual refinement?

I guess you're talking about the big paintings in two parts that stand in the space like folding screens. This series was actually quite challenging, as the idea was to confront two kinds of motifs: Western still-life and African masks. But from your question I guess you're first pointing at the way I deal with space in the still-life. The principle here is to use a great variety of styles, and even to paint gestures that don't belong to the same historical periods or to the same types of images. So it's about heterogeneity: some elements come from the Internet (they have this photographic quality), others are painted from nature, and some are pure imagination, relying on Cubism or gestural abstraction. There is some kind of formal principle at stake in those paintings: I always start with the flowers. Buying them and painting them is my starting point; then, from that point on, I build the rest of the composition adding (and removing) elements, like a big collage made of paint. But the entire thing has to stay quite intuitive, with a lot of improvisations, phases of struggling and also phases of chaos. The way Cubism articulates empty shapes and forms with its visual push and pull is of great help for me in that process. Another model is the way you can play with images in photoshop. In order to make those heterogeneous elements work together on the canvas, I have to bring everything to a point of extreme tension, almost a point of collapse: like every object in the canvas is fighting against the others, every define space is in contradiction with the one next to it. In the diptych as a whole there's also a question of strong tensions between the still-life and the mask. It's not clear weather the mask is human or animal, but it's definitely alive. Somehow it resists because, unlike the still life, there's much more than mere commodification going on here. So if I come back to your question, I guess my answer would seem quite paradoxical: I connect elements by maintaining them apart. But this disconnection is dynamic and tensed, like two magnets repelling each other that you are forced to join in. Ultimately, for me painting is about tension because tension is what gives vibrations to a painting, what makes you want to look at it, maybe dance in front of it. I'd like my paintings to be dancefloors.

What kind of advantages and disadvantages do you have as an artist living in Paris?

Personally, I would say that one advantage of living in Paris is the quality of museum exhibitions: Beaubourg, le Louvre, Orsay, le Grand Palais and so on. I love making art, but I also love looking at art, art from many historical periods – I'm a true art lover. So for that Paris is fantastic. Another advantage for a contemporary artist living here is the institutional support you can get. In France you can receive grants in order to pursue your art projects, and in Paris, the Town Hall can provide you with a permanent low-rent artist studio. So this is a very concrete way of helping you in your daily artistic life. As I've been living abroad, I know that this is quite exceptional in Europe, and also worldwide. The downside of it is that the art scene here is very quiet, somehow too institutional. Again having lived in London in the 1990's, I can tell the difference. Another problem is that we don't have enough collectors, so eventually the institution is not only a key player of the french art world... it is the only player, so there's a lack of diversity. But I see that there is light, things are changing, mainly because of artists setting up their own project spaces and so on, which is a good sign.

What other projects are you preparing for the near future?

At the moment, I am working on full-length portraits of very close relatives: my partner, my daughter, a self portrait... This interest in the body is new for me, it comes from the African masks, I think. Each painting is based on a tension (again!) between an object, usually an obsolete technologic one, painted in a dull photorealistic way, and the body of the person represented. The portrait part is a drawing, made in gestural charcoal that has nothing to do with imitation (what you see) but has everything to do with the inner self (what I know about the person, how I picture her or him). Another thing I'm working on is my ongoing project called The Datcha 2 – it's a project in several acts that I initiated at the School Offshore in Shanghai. It's a work in progress that can take various forms (texts, sculptures, performances), even collaborative ones (workshops). The Datcha 2 is an extension in the form of a playful and festive replay of a painting entitled The Datcha painted in 1969 by Gilles Aillaud, Francis Biras, Lucio Fanti, Fabio Rieti, Nicky Rieti and Eduardo Arroyo and portraying French intellectuals (Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Barthes, Lacan, Althusser).



(Top) Barbarian Ballet 3 : the antipodes (Ballet Barbare 3 : les antipodes), 2014, sound video, HD, 8mn 45 (production : Centre National des Arts Plastiques / thanks to Andréas Dettloff & the Dettloff Foundation, Contemporary Art in Tahiti)
(Bottom) Barbarian Ballet : flowering (Ballet Barbare : la floraison), 2012, sound video, HD, 11mn 50 (production : Maisons Daura)



Pots, Flowers and other Jugs (Pots, Fleurs et autres Cruches), 2009/2012, 27 oils paintings & 19 ceramics, variable size, installation detail, exhibition «Lever une Carte», Maison des Arts Georges Pompidou, Cajarc, France. (photo Yohann Gozard)



The Dalcha 2 : the parabase, a properly staged show... (La Dalcha 2 : la parabase, un spectacle correctement mis en scène...), performance and masks, identity of participants, date and place kept secret [conv-art]



Masks, Flowers & Pots : the supper (Masques, Fleurs & Pots : le souper), 2016, oil painting on canvas, 230 x 140 & 195 x 116 cm, exhibition view Private Jokes, Gourvennec Ogor gallery, Marseille, France (photo Emilie Lamoine)