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conversation with **CLÉMENTINE BRUNO**
FEBRUARY 2024

N° 70



“White Sands ATS-3”, Exhibition view, Baleno International, Roma, Italy, 2024.
Photographer: Luana Rigolli.



Private Space, Aluminum, led, cotton, 40 × 40 × 30 cm, 2023.
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CAMILLE HOUZÉ *in conversation with*
CLÉMENTINE BRUNO

CH We both did our BA at Goldsmiths at the same time between 2014 and 2017—you in joint honours Fine Art/History of Art, and me in History of Art—, so I think I can say I’ve been following your work since the very beginning. You know I don’t have such a strong interest in biography when it comes to art writing but while I was preparing this interview I realised I never asked you what you were producing before that, if anything, and further, what made you become an artist?

CB My grandfather influenced my way of looking at things, and in response to this I had many questions. I grew up in an environment where language, was everywhere, introduced to the intellectual movements that shaped French theory, such as structuralism and post-structuralism. This is how I started to work, I began to consider language as a form of production. Recently my research has also delved into maquettes, which



have shaped my interest in the idea of montage. Maquettes are symbolic image that initiated the historical movements of the future, and as a machine transforming the subjectivities of those who use it. This fascination with maquettes and models has to do with ideas around the mutual transformation of humans, the natural world, and the structure of the imagination. These ideas both old and new, recent and past personal history, have shaped my relationship to art.

CH

How would you now define your practice?

CB

My practice originates from interests in notions of authenticity and authorship. I work primarily with painting, reproducing techniques ‘as they were’ to think about and undermine the notion of the original.

I work from models, archetypes, museum collections, things that I have seen. There is a diaristic accumulation that is used to access an oblique meaning, one that arrives through a push and pull between divination and analysis. Once presented as an exhibition, I see my work as becoming part of the greater capitalist system, providing a window into what they advertise. They serve as thresholds and engage the viewer in a contractual relationship.

CH

I think a good point of departure to discuss your work is your relationship with painting. I always considered you as a painter first and foremost, but it seems to me that you often need to get outside of painting to paint, using modalities that are exterior to painting per se to talk about painting. How did you choose to work with this medium and how do you consider your forays into other disciplines?

CB

I became interested in painting because it is an allegorical way to communicate. It’s a very synthetic experience with hopeless confusion behind but it nevertheless survived for such a long time.



TOTAL, Oil, traditional gesso on wood, transfer, 70 × 104 × 3.5 cm, 2023.

I'm also particularly interested in the medium's relationship with the notion of belief. For me, the allegorical is what constantly proffers and defers a promise of meaning, that solicits and frustrates our desire, as images are transparent to their signification. I think this is what attracted me to this medium.

In a way, I work with something that is both a subtraction and an addition, as well as a replacement. It takes the place of an earlier meaning, which is thereby effaced or obscured, but the new image is allowed a newly constructed meaning that takes the place of an earlier one, and so on. It is the most conceptual thing I can think of, but also a very simple gesture if we think about it.

If I take an example, Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square* may be synonymous with a kind of non-objective, reductionist, geometric abstraction, but we can completely see it as a mimetic representation of a black sky at night.

CH

When you talk about belief, are you thinking about the idea of believing in images, the function of painting as a 'make-believe'?

CB

It's just something that lingers in painting no matter what. Because there is a didactical, or as you say a functional dimension in this medium, and this function is that it is made to secularise ideas and, historically, to educate people in a way I think cannot be replaced, as it is able to address and convey something the language of words cannot reach.

This is a very general way to talk about painting and there are, of course, so many other ways to think about it. One is that it is something you work with. But there's also this idea that painting is related to the institution; and when you think about painting, you generally think



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about modernism, you think about masterpieces, and there's this idea that something has been made and becomes prohibited so it encourages you to go against it. Going back to the idea of belief, painting is about building an image for the viewer to experience physically, so it has to do with modes of being, the here and now. It is a technological ability, you are layering meaning through time; it produces at the same time as it erases something.

CH

Speaking about physically building up and experiencing images, one thing that particularly interests me in your work is your relationship with materials. You seem to be one of these painters for whom it is the nature of the employed material that determines the final composition, rather than an a priori defined subject that defines the use of this or that material. Within this framework, I think a key moment in your career was the discovery of *gesso*, which in a way materially encapsulates a number of ideas we discussed already, such as the notion of absence and erasure. Can you tell me more about how you make your decisions about materials, and how did you come up with the idea of using *gesso*?

CB

It is linked to an obsession really. It is used in restoration and I encountered traditional *gesso* while I was working with a conservator. What attracted me is that it is a ready-made material, and in relation to what I was saying earlier, it is also a way to think about the idea of ownership and the original, as the technique has barely changed since the 14th century.

Gesso also implies the laborious application of numerous layers, like a succession of veils; then sanding the surface, so removing information, and then adding up again. The other day I was also thinking that *gesso* is like a prototype, as it is something seen as 'authentic'. To me it is like a catalyst that does two things at the same time:



“White Sands ATS-3”, Exhibition view, Baleno International, Roma, Italy, 2024.
Photographer: Luana Rigolli.

the question of representing and representation, it bears the attribution to authenticity and conjures a moment of quasi-absence of modelisation.

CH

Using *gesso* links your work to the history of paintings in material terms. In terms of subjects, you also made a number of works that directly reference classical paintings—such as the *TOTAL* series (2022), inspired by El Greco's *The Adoration of the Name of Jesus* (1577–79), or 10 to 16 (2020), which is based on Bruegel's grisaille *Christ and The Woman Taken In Adultery* (1565). Can you tell us about your relationship to art history and how it informs your work?

CB

I work both with and against the history of painting and what I call the institutional, which gives a form of solidity to images. These references deal with the historicity of great tellers, and express the dichotomy of narration and description, story versus scene, event versus presence, or destiny versus affect. The series about El Greco you are mentioning refers to a traditional gothic scene (the gothic as an allegorical form too), borrowing the theme of assumption and resurrection.

The *TOTAL* series is formed of anemic remakes in which the composition is dehydrated and diluted. It reflects upon the construction of academism and proposes an ulterior perspective on that story. In these works I investigate the influence of masters as crushing, totalising figures, but through themes of assumptions and annunciation. There is also a reference to modernism that lingers, and the use of green and black backgrounds performs that historicity. Here, the method is to borrow and copy these references, making direct or indirect references to these paintings, which the viewer can or can not recognise.



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Photographer: Luana Rigolli.



Private Space, Aluminum, led, cotton, 40 × 40 × 30 cm, 2023.
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CH

These series works inevitably reflect a concern with the opposition between the copy and the original, and points to one of the recurring concerns in your work, which is the question of reproduction, reproducibility, and repetition. There's this story I love by Borges, in which he writes about Pierre Ménard, a fictional author who 're-creates' a version of Don Quixote, which is line-for-line identical to the original but infinitely "richer". It's a curious idea but it raises interesting questions on the nature of authorship and authenticity, as if the copy was that which grants the original its status as 'original' because it is worth being copied. You never exactly copy older works but I'd like to know what's your relationship with the idea of reproduction and reproducibility and how it manifests in your work.

CB

Here we could talk about my work *Private Space* (2023), a suspended ceiling light I presented in the exhibition "White Sands ATS-3", curated by Caroline Drevait and Estelle Marois at Baleno International in Rome, with Parker Ito and Christophe de Rohan Chabeau.

The idea of this work came along through a conversation I had with one of my teachers at the Slade. Coming from Goldsmiths, I sometimes had the impression that no one could understand what I had in my mind at the time. As you know they have a tendency to work against the idea of production because of its integration as something intelligible, and I was once told by a teacher that if I was to make a briefcase then at least it would make sense, so I started making sculptures that I conceive as press-releases, full of intention.

Going back to *Private Space*, the work was displayed at the entrance of the show, as a lead image, in a corner. It was voluntarily placed on the ceiling to avoid adherence with the rest of the exhibited works. It is a manufactured lamp, that incorporates elements of proximity, diffe-



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rence and repetition, always altering its functionality. This work was shown as part of a collaborative research project delving into ideas of absence, desire and in/completeness. It was seeking to explore the notion of distance between a subject and their desired object, the motives behind the will to possess, and the dialectics of satisfaction and frustration, as Estelle Marois describes it as part of the curatorial research.

I guess it was mostly a show about dead things; iconic and figurative processes, namely the embedding and workings of desire within contemporary imagery, interrogating the distinction between the original and the copy, and the notion of ownership.

In this context, the installation evoked performed or repeated mundane activities, and the lamps were like documentation that captured the unsettling of the ordinary and the repetitive in a mechanical sense. As an architectural intervention, they became visible only by being put in relation with something else.

CH

You made other ceiling works as part of your recent project Citibox, at Halles Nord, Geneva (2023), which featured a series of sculptures made of folded aluminium that look like tiles you'd find in office spaces. The press release relates these works to an interest in exploring tensions of the 'visible and the hidden', as well as referencing 1960s conceptual art, from Donald Judd to *Arte Povera*. Can you tell us more about these works and how does the influence of conceptual art operates in your practice?

CB

These works are also linked to research cinema, and as said earlier, on dialectics of presence and absence, as well as erasure. For theoreticians like Laura Mulvey, cinema is both a system of the image and of radical dis-identification, inhabiting roles that are radically unfamiliar, or presenting



“Not before it has forgotten you”, Exhibition view, Nicoletti, London, United Kingdom, 2022. Photographer: Mark Blower.





Debris Rooms, Oil painting on traditional *gesso* (framed in white), 30 × 20 × 2.7 cm.
Photographer: Mark Blower.

the familiar as tropes/stereotypes. The works in Citibox are also ordinary objects that refer to the mundane and everyday life. But the ordinary can be understood as a shifting assemblage of things that are left behind, such as impulses, encounters and habits.

Although they are objects evoking a form of solidity, to me they also express frustration, the relation between a part and the whole, the reverential, the affective, the slippery or the fragmentary. If you think about it, it's about proximity, and these works were trying to exemplify the nothingness of the ready-made. This is where I'm interested in the conceptual art of the 1960s, which to me has to do with systems of identification that dealt with this play between presence and absence, and erasure.

CH This interest in the functionality of objects also translated into series of posters, including some on which you were printing texts taken from very early video games that were only made of texts. One of these games is *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1976), in which players explore a cave system thought to be filled with gold. Can you tell us more about this project and what interests you in video games?

CB *Colossal Cave Adventure* is the first textual game. Here I make an analogy with *gesso*, as I see this game as putting into light something hidden in the fable, an analogy with two hidden grounds: a comparison between the code source and a precise location that functions as a model description for a first version.

In the game, letters delimit a point of entry “where the limitation of each individual's perspective is exposed, so they determine a threshold, a starting point”. This is what interested me in this game. Each work carries with it the chains of association with previous developments that

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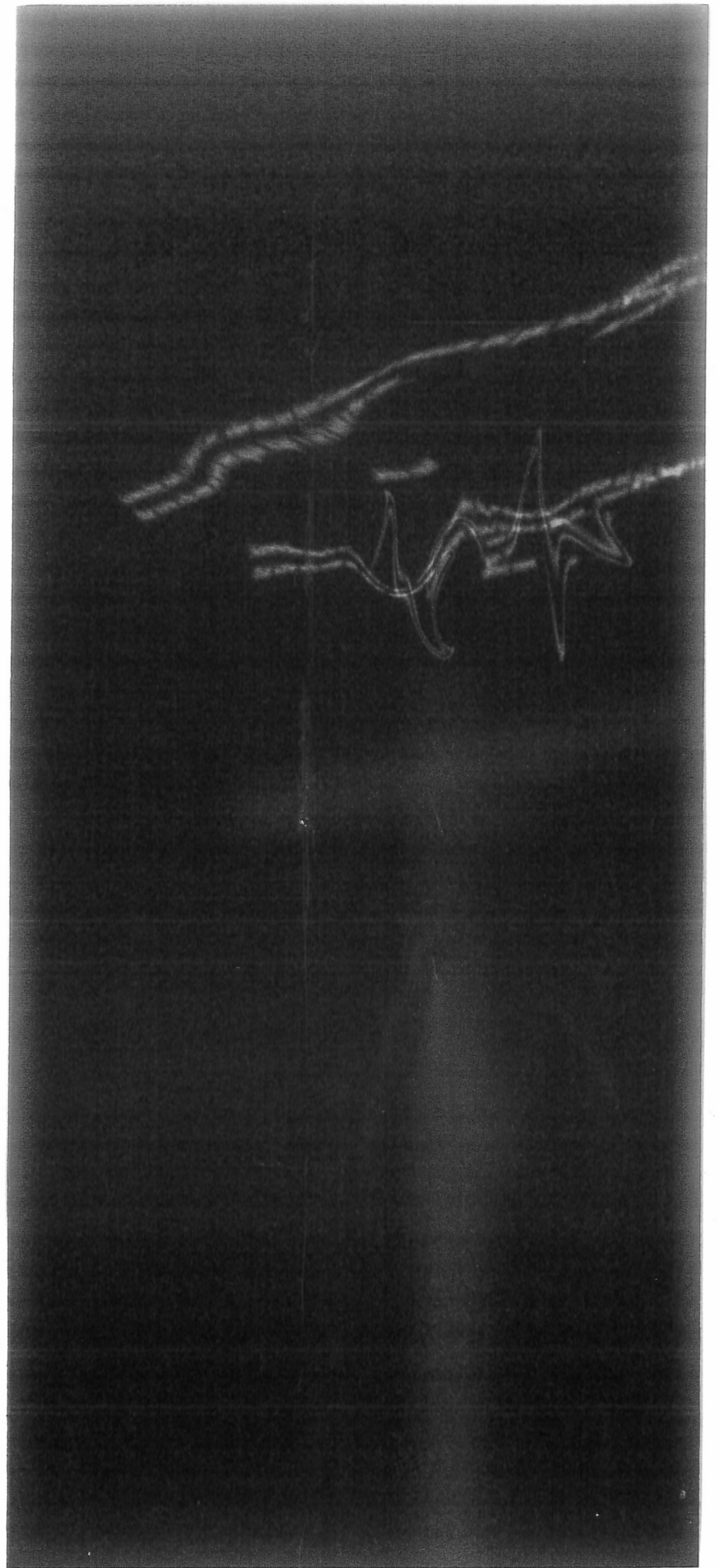
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X CLÉMENTINE BRUNO

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enrich and encircle the new one, like a “ghost-like reverb”.

CH

Expanding on the idea of the cave, you also referred to horror movies such as *The Descent* (2005) in the image you made for the publication *Not before it has forgotten you*, a group exhibition at Nicoletti Contemporary, London (2023). In this film, directed by Neil Marshall, we follow six female friends who enter a cave system and struggle to survive against the humanoid creatures that lurk inside. This is only one of the many references to films in your work, and particularly horror films and Z movies. The aesthetic of these films is not something we would directly relate to your work so I’m curious to know more about the nature of your interest in cinema.

CB

For the poster you mentioned I used cinefoil, a thin aluminium sheet that is used on film sets to absorb light and make it disappear; it is also a material that keeps the mark of each touch made upon it, which is quite interesting in relation to the idea of the cave.

More broadly, I’m interested in Hollywood classics as ways to think about a mode of existence that is absolutely repetitive and predictable, like in a painting. For me, it is a way to desacralise representation. The poster you mention about *The Descent* was thinking about how the story of these six female characters gave an apprehension of reality as repetitive and predictable.

As I said earlier, cinema also interests me in terms of its relation to processes of identification and ideas around the familiar, but it also has to do with the notion of morality, the good and the bad, as well as fate. But I only think about painting in the end.

CH

My last question goes back to the beginning of your career, and the two exhibitions “Ironclad Contract” (2020) and “Then we are both satisfied” (2020), held at

Project Native Informant, London which began your representing gallery after your degree show at Slade School of Fine Art. I remember finding it curious that you took the idea of the contract as a conceptual framework for your first solo exhibition. The press release, written by Georgia Sowerby, describes the process of printing and signing a contract, with a line saying towards the end: “Perfect. Now I own you.” Later, I read that the title *Ironclad Contract* comes from Brian De Palma’s screenplay *Phantom of the Paradise*, which re-appropriates Faust’s story. These ideas around contracts, laws and what you call the ‘legal subject’ reoccurred in other series of works. Is it reflecting a real concern with signing a contract with a gallery, the idea of somewhat being owned, and, like in Faust, making a sort of pact with the devil?

CB

At the time I was thinking a lot about what self-possession meant, and how your freedom is often followed by a signature, by being owned. More importantly, I was trying to define what security meant. So no, I wasn’t thinking about the relationship between an artist and a gallery directly, more about what sort of subject position can be rehearsed.

A show is an invitation accepted by a non-innocent being. One thing I focus on is a form of existence as trading, something that you can also call the “legal subject”, who is a possessor of themselves, and whose freedom is linked to their self-possession. I was thinking about how something unique becomes secured by the act, the signature – the name. It is a manner to think about the subject through loss and commodification.



CITY BOX, Black and white print, 420 × 594 cm, 2023.
Photography in collaboration with Will Sheridan.

Clémentine Bruno, Figure Figure 2024
Courtesy of the artist.

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