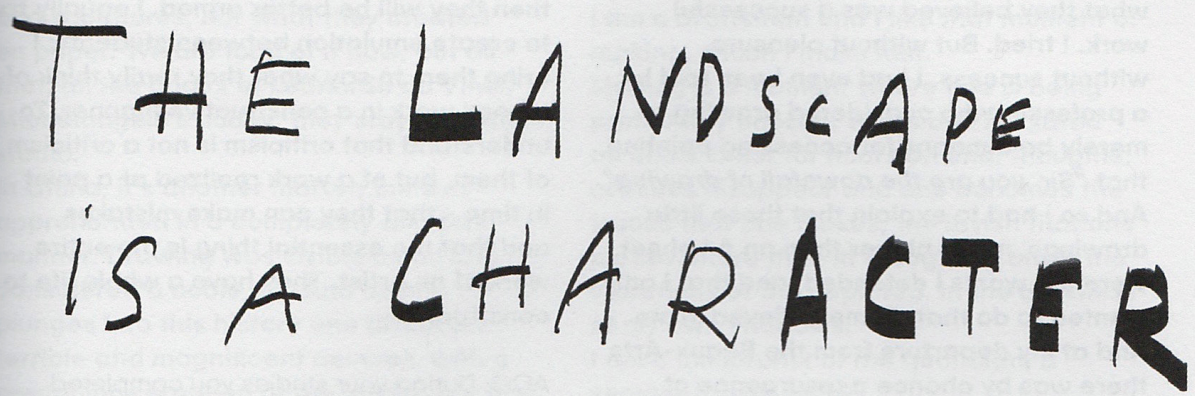
September 2016
FUKT
"Anne-Cécile Guitard in conversation with Fabien Mérelle"

Anne-Cécile Guitard in conversation with Fabien Mérelle



Anne-Cécile Guitard: Fabien Mérelle, you were in a course at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (ENSBA) of Paris and obtained your diploma in 2006 after having frequented the studio of Jean-Michel ALBEROLA. As a resident at the Casa Velasquez in 2007-08, you were additionally the first recipient of the Canson Prize in 2010; you are part of the Florence and Daniel Guerlain collection, an exceptional donation to the Centre Pompidou in 2012, followed by an exhibition in 2013. You are currently represented by prestigious galleries: Praz-Dellavalade in Paris, Art Bärtschi & Cie in Geneva, and Edouard Malingue in Hong Kong. How did drawing come to play such a major role in your journey, what is your 'story' with this medium?

Fabien Mérelle: My story with drawing dates back to those days when as a child I had the pleasure of discovering it. We have never left each other since. At the age when one learns how to write, drawing was still what permitted me to express myself the best. I invented an imaginary lover, of whom I did a portrait, to make my classmates believe that she truly existed elsewhere in the country. And as I grew up, I filled the margins of my history, Spanish and economics notebooks with scribbled drawings. Teachers let me be. Then I joined the Beaux-Arts where, for a while, I took myself seriously and lost the essence of drawing: the game. Then, I rediscovered my childhood drawings. I chose to draw on them, to complete them, to continue the stories buried 20 years prior. Drawing then once again became a way for me to express life; my materials are the reality, my tools are my body, the bodies, and the image of those who surround me.

ACG : You will be 35 years old this year. Your trajectory is brilliant. When you were at the Beaux-Arts you had to justify your choices as an artist, drawing not being legitimate. 10 years later, you teach at this same school. An irony of sorts? What do you wish to pass on to your students?

FM: I do not teach at the Beaux-Arts yet, but that may come about. When I was at that school, drawing was not yet considered as an end in itself. I was actively engaged in painting, to create what they believed was a successful work. I tried. But without pleasure, without success. I had even been told by a professor who considered drawing to merely be a means for accessing painting, that *"Sir, you are the downfall of drawing"*. And so I had to explain that those little drawings, never bigger than an A4 sheet, were the works I defended, and that I only wanted to do that. Some believed in me. And at my departure from the Beaux-Arts there was by chance a resurgence of drawing, a legitimacy of this medium. My work benefited from this revival.
I wish to teach; what I'd transmit to my students is the dimension of the game. A joyful or somber game, it does not matter. I will not constrain them to a single technique, I'd ask them to be honest, to not seek to resemble anyone else, to reveal themselves. I would be frank with them, which is rare in this world where one rarely tells the other what one is really thinking.

ACG: But you hold workshops at the Beaux-Arts? What do those consist of?

FM: I was part of workshops at the Beaux-Arts in Angers, and at the heart of other schools, as well as in a conference at Pompidou Museum in the presence of the Director of the Beaux-Arts of Paris, Jean Marc Bustamante, and Laurent Grasso. The purposes of my interventions are often the same: they consist of describing my journey, and explaining what happened upon my exit from the Beaux-Arts.
I try to tell them everything that I did not hear at school, what there is to know, what awaits them at the end of their studies. Most of all, I try to get them to exercise the motions, to seriously ask the question of why and how. Why do they want to paint or sculpt, create videos or installations? What do they have that's so important to tell us? And how will they realize their projects? I push them to their limits because in the outside world they will not be handed any gifts. And if they have asked themselves these questions, to which they will evidently not have immediate answers, then they will be better armed. I equally try to create emulation between students; I bring them to say what they really think of others' work in a constructive manner. To understand that criticism is not a criticism of them, but of a work realized at a point in time - that they can make mistakes and that the essential thing is the entire work of an artist. They have a whole life to construct it.

ACG: During your studies you completed an exchange program with the Beaux-Arts School in Xi'An, China. How did this trip influence your practice?

FM: I left for a little less than four months to Xi'An. There I learnt, or at least was introduced to, what was traditional painting from the mountains. I especially discovered multiple ways of using ink. And I must say that my practice today is very poor in comparison to the diverse avenues one can follow with this medium.
It was a testing trip, it was new for them to greet a foreign student - I was the first and only one on campus. Communication was sometimes difficult; I was face-to-face with myself. And it was during this journey that my personage appeared, this projection of my body in my drawings.
I used it as a vehicle for my thoughts, a manner of understanding the world that surrounded me and in which my simple cocoon was not enough to express what I felt. China was in sorts the initial test.
I was committed to being far away from home to know what I was made of and it led to the birth of a double who still moves, lives and breathes through my work.

ACG: Would you say there is a 'culture' of drawing in China?

FM: There is without contestation a strong culture of drawing. What we call

traditional Chinese painting is a 2000 years old graphic history.
We've had masters in the West, but what they showed, what made them famous at the time, were their paintings and sculptures, not what they created on paper. We are fond of it now, but all that, all the codex of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo's nudes, they stayed in the studio.
In China, it's another matter; ink was apprehended in a completely different manner. Drawing was visible by all and considered a noble art. And as one plunges into this history one discovers terrible and magnificent oeuvres, with a precocious eruption of the landscape and its perspective. In Xi'An, each Monday, I was admitted, in one particular course, to the heart of the Beaux-Arts' collections: I was presented to gigantic, antique works on paper and silk – it permitted me to discover the richness of this heritage.

ACG: Obsession with detail, the minutiae, references to anatomical drawing, little production – several weeks are necessary to create certain drawings – there is with you this obsession of 'making' that harks back to a practice that one could qualify as 'artisanal'. Etymologically, art was first a technique; Ancient Greece did not make strict differences between the job of an artisan and the status of an artist. Art was above all considered as an ability, a method acquired by learning and relying on empirical knowledge. How do you position yourself? Technical prowess, the time and patience that it requires, do they characterize your artistic approach?

FM: I am the grandson of a farmer slash handyman. He invented his own tools and I grew up looking at him in his miniscule studio. His manner, which required him taking time to create something, profoundly marked me. He wrote poems with the same intensity. I think he's the artist I admire the most. To the rest of the world he was a peasant with all the nobility that word reflects. To me he was Gepetto and I was Pinocchio. Art is a status of affairs; I never had the ambition to become an artist. It just so happens that it is the position I occupy in society, and that suits me very well.
I am a draftsman and I like that moment of making, which I make last.
Making is a moment where one is being profoundly oneself. When one is fixated on one's sheet for hours on end, thoughts, artifices disappear and one becomes the traces that one makes, the lavish that one places. More than in thoughts, I am in the vibrations of the depicted, in the darkness of my own shadows.
I am a miniaturist of the quotidian, a secular Coptic monk.

ACG: In what way are you Coptic? You mean that your technique is accessible to all? You are a passersby?

FM: My technique is accessible to all. Ink, feathers, brushes, watercolors, paper and time passed. What I represent exists; little abstraction, little invention. Nature already offers me a myriad of unlimited possibilities. I am liable for trying to copy to the best of my ability what I decide to put on paper. Firstly, because the complexity of the forms touch me infinitely. Because that density, that proliferation, attracts me.
And then, I wish to get closer to reality with a precise aim in mind. Not to be faithful to it, but to divert from it. To render properly what is not, as in a dream. To go above and beyond reach, to reach my truth.

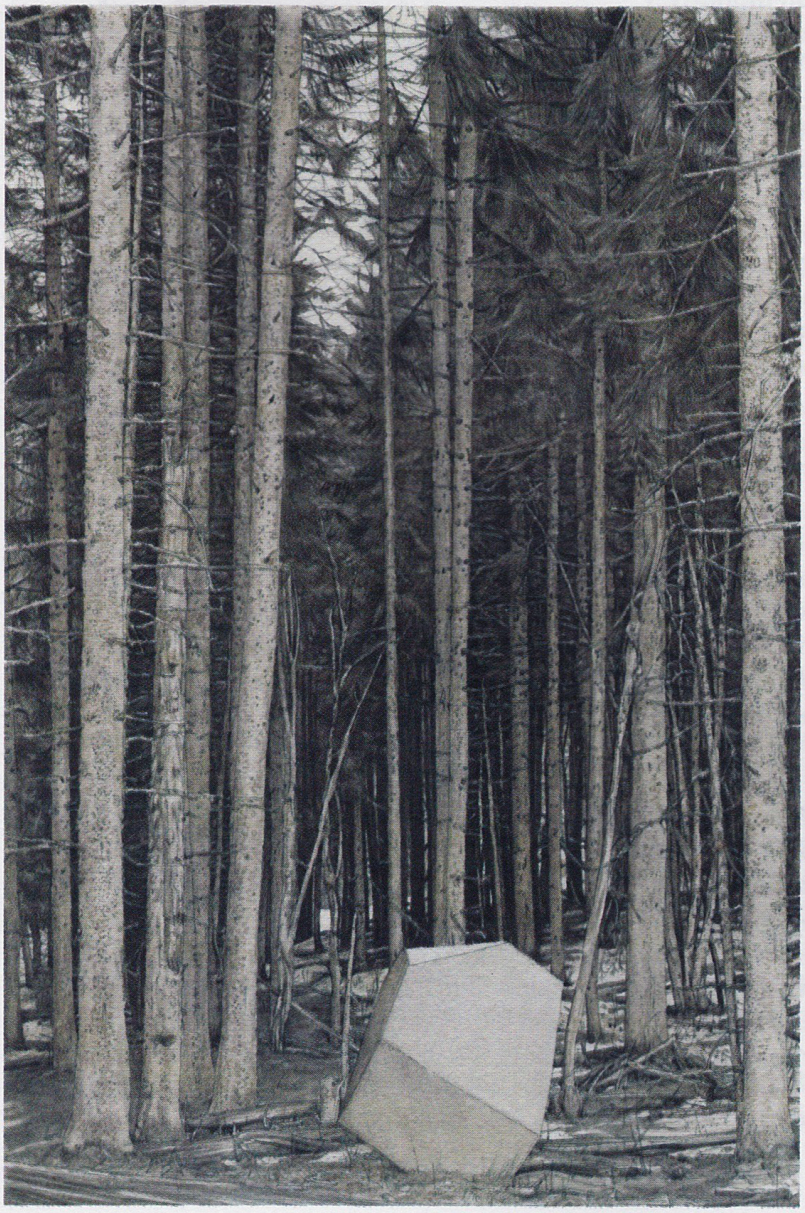
ACG: You live far away from Parisian frenéticism, surrounded by your wife and your young children, in Touraine. Your drawings relate to your everyday routine, your fears, your fantasies; you are not afraid of putting yourself on the scene, you practice nude placement in the figurative and literal sense, with lots of distance and irony. You speak about the world that surrounds you when you leave your Tourainian 'bubble', and the manner in which it affects you (I am think-

ing of the series that is part of the Florence and Daniel Guerlain Collection, where you present the homeless). Is drawing a catharsis? Could the ensemble of your drawings constitute a psychological or oneiric autobiography?

FM: The totality of my drawings is the journal of an average man. I try to present my everyday routine with its procession of happiness, fears and fantasies. I thought several years ago about mastering my subjects. I then understood that it was them who led the dance. I know that I need to apprehend the real, to draw them. It is my way of being in the world. Others need to write, to run, or do something else. For my part, drawing fits the contours, the patterns of my existence.
I chronicle my life to feel present in it.
I do not do it intentionally, I have always proceeded in this manner. Telling my children, my wife that I love them is not sufficient with words; these drawings are as much messages destined to them.

ACG: You then draw, before anything else, for you, for yours, out of love.

FM: Yes, drawing is to freeze things, it is a battle against passing time, it is to be a witness. Drawing is a line of life that I cling to in order to not fail.
I spend time on each work; to force myself to do this I must be certain that what I have to say is vital. Certain that the invented image is absolutely capital. And once I know that what I am telling will speak one day to those whom I love, I find the necessary energy to go to the end.



ACG: Animals and natural elements are omnipresent in your works, they devour you, squash you, you become hybrids. Through your staging one perceives a precarious, fragile humanity – man is an animal and as such, a prey amongst so many others. You said that drawing brought you back to your instincts. Do your drawings invoke a certain kind of animism, as one can find in Asia?

FM: Animism was present before Sacred Book religions and I believe it is present in each one of us.

Mélancolie 1, 2011

One just needs to observe children to realize this; they speak to animals, rocks, and trees. And then we grow up and create a distance between us humans, and the rest of the living. To me, there is no difference. We are a microscopic part of a whole. I think that the bursting of the animalistic in my work is my way of expressing this bestiality, at times restrained, at times exuberant, that lives within me.

Courtesy Edouard Malingue Gallery

ACG: Why are the reserves of white space so important in your drawings?

FM: The white space is the space one leaves for the other, the one who looks. What your brain goes to create in those blank spaces is stronger than what I would be able to draw. It is also by contrast that the white space will extract and make even more real the forms that I draw. A body that one paints surrounded by its decor tells another thing than a body surrounded by emptiness. It is as in music: silences have a limitless importance. They permit to make the notes essential that precede or follow them.

ACG: I'd like it if you spoke to me about the genesis of certain drawings where the space is contrarily saturated, such as the series *Mélancolie* (2011) or even *Leave my daughter out of your hate and madness* (2014), a drawing a bit distinct from the rest of your practice, but utterly gripping, and of which the title stirred my curiosity.

FM: There are drawings where the landscape is a character. And so it occupies all the space. The white that I do not put around is the emptiness of the wall on which I'd place them. Because they are dense, they evoke – from far away – black holes. In my stage designs these drawings are often alone on a wall sometimes too big for them. *Mélancolie*, it's an homage to Dürer, it's this facet of form that only a man can create on this level. What interested me was to describe that what would remain of us, humans, would be our bones, bevels, and our geometry. I wanted this scoria, those remains of us, to be this Mélancolie rock. It expresses this effort one makes to extract oneself from the world, the pain it procures us.
***Leave my daughter out of your hate and madness* was created during the Gaza bombardments by the Israeli government. I am catholic, I married a Jewish woman, my children are Jewish.**
In this drawing my daughter is trying to extract herself from a landscape devastated by flames.
I am against this violence, no matter where it comes from. To destroy has never brought peace, just given birth to men and women who wish to avenge the fallen. As soon as a fistful of men decide on such an action, it engages their responsibility and unfortunately some think it engages that of all the Jews. I am against this. And that is what the title means.

ACG: The exhibition of Laura Hoptman that took place at the MoMA in New York in 2002 titled *'Drawing Now: Eight Propositions'*[1] – in homage to Bernice Rose – brought about a new look at the narrative possibilities of drawing, notably figuration. Its poetic potential, projective dimension (Yve-Alain Bois), were there at a level of

Drawing is a line of life that I cling to in order to not fail.

Tronçonné, 2011
Ink and watercolor on paper, 21 x 28,2 cm
Courtesy Edouard Malingue Gallery

honor, after having been kept at a distance from aesthetic questions, in full swing of conceptual and post structural movements[2]. It is probable that the emergence and recognition of artists who chose drawing as a favorite medium in the 90s, such as Raymond Pettibon or Robert Longo, permitted to 'democratize' this practice that up until then had remained rather confidential. It seems to me that you are part of this second artistic generation that knew to impose drawing as a veritable 'signature' (I am equally thinking of Abdelkader Benchamma).

FM: We profited from the light brought on works by artists as diverse as Robert Longo, Raymond Pettibon, Ernest Pignon-Ernet, and Kiki Smith. Today it is easier to say that one only does drawing.
When I was at the Beaux-Arts there was one artist that was often spoken about, and described to me as an example. I even believe that it permitted certain professors, such as Dider Semin, to encourage me in my practice. This artist was Abdelkader Benchamma. I met him last year – we were both exhibiting at the Drawing Center in New York. I got to meet in him and appreciate the same freshness and humanity that exists in his stroke. I am conscious of having been able to emerge in a particular moment of Western drawing history; it's an opportunity, now it is up to us to cultivate it and to show that we're up to the standard.

ACG: You quote Leonardo da Vinci or Brueghel amongst your sources of inspiration, but you are equally ecstatic in museums of natural history, where you've discovered certain affinities with the marvelous universe of cartoonist Winsor McCay, and his hero, Little Nemo. Which contemporary artists inspire and touch you?

FM: The works of Louise Bourgeois touches me. Amongst contemporaries, there are painters, from Gerhard Richter to Michaël Borremans or Neo Rauch. Amongst younger artists, less known, there are many and I think that I admire them even more. Antoine Roegiers, Belgian painter and videographer, Omar Bar, Sun Xun, one of the most talented Chinese draftsmen. I cannot say whether they inspire me, but what is certain is that they please me. What inspires me are the people, smells, colors, trees – but not artworks – unless they speak to me about all of that.

ACG: Gérard Garouste, president of the jury when you obtained the Prix Canson in 2010, said he appreciated your drawings because they were 'above and beyond fashions'. Is it a beautiful tribute for a young artist? A challenge?

FM: I hope that it is true. I take it as a tribute. I do not try to be fashionable and I do not think I would ever manage to be.
I do what I like to do, that is to use a medium as old as the world to describe ageless preoccupations.
I believe that one invents nothing, the only singularity that one has, is given to us at birth. What one is and what one brings is as vast as the universe.
When I am in a crowd I feel dizzy when I imagine that each one of us is a new earth. What I try to describe is the territory that is mine in the hopes that others will find themselves there sometimes.

1. Laura Hoptman, Drawing Now: Eight Propositions (New York, éd. The Museum of Modern Art, 2002)
2. Emma Dexter, 'Le Retour du refoulé', in Vitamin D, Nouvelles Perspectives en Dessin (Londres, éd. Phaidon, 2006), p.8.

Bouture, 2014,
ink and watercolor on paper, 36,8 x 24,8 cm
Courtesy Praz-Delavallade Gallery

John Actéon Deer, 2010
ink and watercolor on paper, 21 x 28,2 cm
Courtesy Edouard Malingue Gallery

Pentateuque, 2010
ink on paper, 28,2 x 21 cm
Courtesy Edouard Malingue Gallery

Ile, 2012
ink and watercolor on paper, 59 x 44 cm
Courtesy Edouard Malingue Gallery