

**Julien Creuzet in conversation with
Vassilis Oikonomopoulos and Martin Guinard**

Arles, 2022

Vassilis
Oikonomopoulos: **Could you talk to us a bit about the exhibition title?**
*Orpheus was using upon braised words Under the light rain of a blazing fog
Snakes are deaf and dumb anyway Oblivion buried in the depths of insomnia*

Julien Creuzet: To my mind, it's important to create an imaginary as vast as a landscape to look at, to hear and to read. A title or a poem can be read and reread again and again. What's meaningful to me about this title is that it creates something vast for the shared imagination. I liked the notion of Orpheus embodying a certain conception of music, a certain idea of mythology. I also liked the idea to contrast with the sound of the lyre, which would become the sign of a drum, which has a much more distant history, ancestral and transgenerational. "Sous la pluie fine" (under the light rain) is also an expression that one could almost use in Creole when the rain is so "fine" that it would "fifine," meaning that there is a sprinkle of light rain. I appreciate the delicacy of this word. It's like the dew at daybreak. The sprinkle of fine rain is actually a description of dew. And then there's this fiery fog that right away makes me think of a certain type of volcanic eruption, like the one in Martinique on May 8, 1902. Incidentally, there was a commemoration of this event not long ago. The mountain didn't explode spitting lava but rather steaming like a pressure cooker. It released a fog so hot that it devastated everything in its path. There's something noble about this explosion. It was as if this fiery fog, this extremely hot fog, was a soft sprinkle of fine rain with all its poetry. The sulfurous heat flowed out like something soft, somewhat acidic, but soft. This anglicism, "anyway," toward the end, may also have something cynical about it, but it allowed for the rhyme with "muets" ("dumb").

Martin Guinard: **Why cynical?**

JC: Because all of a sudden there are these terms, almost like something from Jean-Claude Van Damme, that enter the French language, as if we were missing the vocabulary to write all this. Personally, I accept it. Like lots of other people who lose the poetry of the French language and amplify it like this with English, as if that added something . . . So I also felt like playing with this because it allowed me to emphasize something, a sentence that might seem to come out of the blue: "Snakes are deaf and dumb anyway." And, in fact, snakes don't hear. But, on the other hand, they sense vibrations, and when a volcano begins to have tremors, before it erupts, snakes vibrate. And, by the way, you have to walk with heavy steps to scare snakes away, to warn them that you're coming, so that they'll pick up the vibrations and flee instead of attacking. But for me, there's also something in this that is of the order of a very composite mythology, full of stories that are recreated in this way. And then there is this sentence, which is essential, which will serve as a kind of refrain in the exhibition, a nearly ceaseless refrain that sticks like a good pop refrain: "Oubli enfui au fin fond de l'insomnie" ("Oblivion buried in the depths of insomnia")—a sentence with so many assonances, it is

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almost hard to say. And in all this, between the explosions and the mythological past or a past in which we have a heritage of sorts, there's a search for depth: in an identity, a history, a way of defining oneself. Like things that have been forgotten that we find again without warning, because they will surface one fine day in a transgenerational way. For example, the hip-hop movement that appeared in the late seventies in Harlem is a transgenerational transmission of African culture, which reappeared thanks to an emerging cultural movement. A type of music, a way of bringing back a language, is combined to create new things. These ideas intrigue me greatly and I try to inject them into the immensity of a title.

VO: Poetry plays a significant role in your practice. What type of poetry in particular?

JC: Yes, poetry is important, but it exists all the time. It depends on how attentive we are to the present moment and how alert we are to discerning it in popular language, on a street corner, and so on. It is in how words and language are constantly being reinvented because they are traversed by energy flows, geographic flows, and then all this comes together to recreate a new form. That's how this anglicism (the word anyway) ended up in the French title. Poetry is also important because things can be said that are secret. Things that can only be formulated in a particular form, precisely because it avoids frontality, the kind of in-your-face directness one might have when speaking. And most of all, it allows me to approach with great freedom what an exhibition is and the many forms that populate what I propose to the public.

MG: Why does avoiding frontality matter so much to you?

JC: For one thing, for me it's essential not to make illustrations, not to illustrate history, or my story, my inner conflict, my negotiations, my investigations. I also don't want to act like an inquisitor, pointing an accusing finger at another. It's not about making the other feel guilty, but rather about finding a new form of language for conversing and sharing with the other about things that are difficult at times. It's in this respect that poetry or "non-frontality" is useful.

MG: You've often said in your studio, in speaking of your works, "Oh, this process is a secret; it must not be revealed." You've just brought up the subject, so let me ask you: what would be lost if the process behind your works were revealed?

JC: What's interesting to me is facing an artwork and really encountering it, it's for the work to enlighten the viewer and for a genuine encounter to take place. To my mind, how the work was made doesn't matter much. What's the point of such information? I think we've forgotten the reason for being of many artworks, the reason for their presence and why these works manage to resist over time. For me, a work of art is a true encounter. It's also something that will escape us.

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Not everything can be grasped. That's why I don't want to be engaged in a process of illustration. And if we were to go about revealing every secret, if we were to go to the depths of our being, what would be the point of creating works? A work of art should have a form of restraint or reserve, even a form of modesty. Because it mustn't be stripped bare. What's also interesting is the whole relationship that it will have with the other. So what happens in the studio is my business and that of the people I work with. I don't think it's anyone else's business. When artworks are consumed with such haste in exhibitions, what's left for us? If we reveal everything, nothing is left. In this regard, the question of the exhibition is key, and consequently we must defend a landscape that is complex to identify. Because it's at work in so many layers and transparencies, it resists us, and we have to take time to adjust our gaze so that we can discern the forms.

VO: Concerning the narrative forms that nurture the exhibition, you've spoken of André Breton's journey, but also of Martiniska, an island off the coast of Croatia mentioned by Aimé Césaire. What role do these different narratives play in the exhibition and in what way are they manifested in the different stories?

JC: One can imagine an intersecting quest, a crossroad, and it's a sort of nerve center, a central place that exists in a concrete space. Seldom do we actually stop there, and yet I think the exhibition is situated at this intersection. In my imagination, the crossroad is also a place where we can make more particular or intimate requests that concern spirituality, a place where we can make wishes. I believe the exhibition is situated in a complex place and I need for there to be several ways in and out. I need for it not to be tied to a single course, because it's not my job to be a specialist on a subject or to make an academic demonstration. I leave that to the social sciences and the humanities.

My job is to conjure the imagination, to activate it. For this purpose, I need to have the space to make different flows and energies come together . . . Breton can be a way in because he opens the door to Surrealism, an interesting historical movement. And also because the Surrealists sought a kind of "letting go." The expression is horrible, overused in 2022, but they sought to become primitive again. As a person from the West, the idea of reconnecting in a way with a form of primary creativity – not to say wild, where everything becomes primal – interests me.

It's a way in because . . . where I stand, I know where this exhibition will exist, I know, or at least I imagine, who will come to see it. And my great hope is that there will be people who surprise me, and not solely a public of contemporary art initiates who are familiar with its codes and its history. Then, there's this chapter by Breton that allows me to introduce the figure of Aimé Césaire, who's not so well known. And that's why Martinique: Snake Charmer is important to me, because when Breton was stuck in Martinique (around 1941), he came into contact with

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Aimé Césaire’s poetry. How sad it is to have to resort to André Breton in order to legitimate Césaire’s poetry. It also allows me to reconnect with an imaginary story, even a legend, according to which Aimé Césaire wrote Notebook of a Return to the Native Land in Dalmatia (Croatia). Opening a window, he caught a glimpse of an island and asked his friend, “What island is that?” “It’s Martiniska” was the reply. To which he responded, “Oh, so here’s Martinique! I came all this way to find Martinique.” In the course of my research, I came to understand that this island is fictive. It doesn’t really exist.

This only gives me more freedom to fantasize a more complex landscape because there are the essential questions of what it means to be in unfamiliar territory and at what moment exoticism begins. And for this, we’d have to reread all Segalen. Because for me, in this notion of exoticism, there’s necessarily something . . . For a long time, there’s been this pejorative view of exoticism as necessarily geocentric or Eurocentric.

How is this exoticism reinvented? What would exoticism be today? I believe it can be found in the world of exhibitions, poetry, cinema, music . . . it doesn’t matter. Because there are new tools available and new technology that lets us enhance reality. With them, we can reinvent forms. I find it difficult to be a sculptor today with all the weight or the heritage of history. How can a structure be reinvented when it has such an immense history?

VO: **Music, made with your collaborators, is also a very unique component of this project. Can you tell us something of its importance as an element of the exhibition?**

JC: Poetry, read silently or aloud, has a form of musicality to it that seems important to me. I’m very interested in the question of sound, but I’m deeply in love with urban music, in which I find a diversity of experimentation. It is the most innovative from the standpoint of poetic writing or even the transgression of academic codes. Here, I can generate a part of this exhibition that touches on other senses, because I conceive of the exhibition as something total, something with an element of the operatic or of an expanded cinema, in which one could live. Opera has that dimension of reaching for something total. It was the first to incorporate sculpture, performance, music, poetry, writing, décor. But it’s frontal. Then came cinema, but it’s not total because it lacks physicality and spatialization. And I find that being able to navigate inside . . . let’s say the word, a film . . . something where we can go from one space to another, is relevant from a truly physical standpoint.

One of the tools that is going to enable us precisely to do that today is virtual reality. I can’t wait for the headset to disappear. And these are also the elements that will make it possible to re-invent exhibitions. But for the time being, virtual reality remains, to my mind, an overly individual experience that is hard to share

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from a sculptural point of view. There is inevitably a certain degree of disappointment in the need to choose between having the experience yourself or watching someone else have it. Even so, many artists are trying to find solutions.

VO: Speaking of cinema, landscape, and virtual reality, I find that the drawings you make— which are also landscapes, atmospheres — yield something of a cinematic effect. As they are projected on screens over our heads, they also generate light for the exhibition. Could you tell us more about these elements?

JC: It's true that light is very important, and I thank you, Vassilis, for this question. We need a light to see this array of forms. And I wanted the light to be singular. Now will it suffice to provide a good view? I don't know, but it's worth trying. This light is a sequence of images taken from many books featuring maritime scenes and seaside landscapes.

The images are photographic clichés, archetypal sunsets, collected in large quantities. Then a practically iconoclastic gesture is applied to them, as the surface is scraped to eliminate the presence of any signifiers, any tangible elements.

MG: **Would you say that it's a matter of making the contours in these images disappear?**

JC: Not even that. One can't even say there are contours. If I take a photo and there's someone taking a bath, the presence of the person doesn't interest me. So I make the person disappear. If this image is still identifiable from the standpoint of geolocation, that doesn't interest me either. So it is scraped until it acquires total freedom, until it is freed from someone being able to say, "Oh, that picture may have been taken in Martinique, or it may have been taken on the coast of Italy," and so on. I make that type of information disappear and that's how they achieve a newfound freedom. For me this freedom is the freedom of an emotion of the sky, the sea, and the light that the sun produces.

The images achieve this newfound freedom only by losing all sense of geographic location. All they retain of the original photo is the color or colorimetric emotion. This means that if the image has a dominant blue amid a multitude of blues, only that blue remains. Impossible to say where it is; all that's left is this emotion. You can tell what it is; that much you can sense. It's the sea, but the sea without being able to attach adjectives to it.

And all these images will form the slideshows, which will exist as skies, as lights, as reverberations, and which will come to illuminate the forms of the exhibition. So that's one type of image, one that becomes a light that lets us move through the space. Then there's another type of image that I use, the holographic images that float in space and that display dance movements. This adds another referential

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field. I'm particularly fascinated by the 1525 engravings of Urs Graf that depict peasants dancing. I wanted to show peasants in moments of resistance to the social and political context of their time, to create a kind of historic horizontality. What was happening during the same period on the African continent? What was happening in the Caribbean?

And here, there's a whole process of working with choreographers who will set static objects into motion, objects that have lost their history, "forgetting, buried in sleepless depths," once again. I'm speaking of carved wood statuettes, which we will call by this very reductive name of African fetishes, reductive in terms of spirituality and the multiplicity of practices of people on the African continent. Maybe these pieces of wood are going to carve, articulate, and begin to dismember themselves in an attempt to reproduce dances of resistance.

MG: I'd like to go back and ask you about exoticism, because we moved on from the subject a little too quickly. It's a notion that was highly critiqued, for good reason, as a focus on what's bizarre and different about "the other" rather than thinking in terms of connection and relationship. But you mentioned the way Aimé Césaire worked with a form of exoticism that you felt more comfortable with, and thought was more fruitful. And I'd like to hear more about this because I find this intuition of yours fascinating.

JC: Exoticism in Aimé Césaire? I don't know if it's exoticism or being in unfamiliar territory. The notion of exoticism lets us speak of here and elsewhere. What's intriguing in this specific case is the very idea that being away from home in unfamiliar territory prompts him to think about what's happening in his homeland of Martinique and the effects of colonialism on a population at that time. That's the starting point of a kind of reverie and hence of the very meaningful poetry that we know so well. This idea of being in unfamiliar territory enabling us to have some insight into who we are and where we come from remains an important reality that everyone has experienced in some way or another. But it's not the only one. It is certain that this image will be present in the iconography that will compose the catalog—or rather this work that will not be called a catalog but will have an editorial form.

There's this drawing that whacks you in the face—or to put it otherwise, that effects a transgressive gesture—on a painting by Gauguin, highlighting two women's bodies with a red marker. We immediately know and identify this red as one that corrects or underlines mistakes, ultimately a very authoritarian red, when it is used with a marking tool.

MG: The color teachers use.

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JC: Yes, the teacher's color. And this red comes to cross out the representation in Gauguin's painting. He too experienced this relationship to exoticism because he was looking for a manner of being in unfamiliar territory, more exotic or wilder or more authentic. As if authenticity meant running away from Europe, away from the white world. Gauguin did this particular work, which is very negatively perceived in retrospect, which is only natural. But I'm against censorship and for assessing and questioning gazes anew. And this is how exoticism is reinvented because we can create new landscapes.

And it's related to what I was saying about new technologies, and what 3D makes possible. With it we can push the limits of a landscape, which is fantastic. Pushing the limits of a landscape or of its representation with the help of a photographic object, a phone or a camera, is complicated today. The effects used for amplification remain insufficient, since it is obvious that all of the Photoshop effects (to give you an abridged version) were invented by Man Ray! All of the effects used today to change the colorimetry, to blur, to double, to add complexity to the image were invented in the first half of the twentieth century.

It's ridiculous to believe that we're dealing with new images in 2022. Truly reinventing those images requires pushing limits. But that's not the work I'm trying to accomplish. I'm trying rather to replay freedom, to reappropriate history, to reappropriate stories, images, iconographies . . . I will as readily reclaim the representation of a statuette with a lost past originating on the African continent, as a painting by Gauguin or a seaside scene shot who knows where in Europe, and then mix all this together, dig my hands into it. Losing the geographies, losing the relocations, and, at times, losing the other, the spectator, the one who looks, the one who listens to me . . . That loss generates material that contains things that can be caught but that slip away and elude our grasp.

MG: **The impression I have from listening to you is that you draw a kind of geography in which you erase so as to redraw, again and again, each time with a corpus of very different references. Whether it's the light of a landscape or a key icon like that of Gauguin, each time you act on it to subtract something without obliterating it . . . Restarting, rewriting, reshaping, giving a new morphology to all these references, to all these intuitions that you try to bring to the surface.**

JC: Isn't the entire process that you just enumerated the work of the painter? Or isn't it the work of the sculptor? I'm attached to that idea because it would be hard to describe me as a painter, even though I feel very much like using the term. I think that the image I want — or the landscape that we'll call an exhibition — plays with layering such that many gestures involve erasing, reworking, recomposing, retracing. At least, that's how I also manage to deploy my formal thinking.

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MG: There's a richness in all this and furthermore it's very beautiful that there are several ways in. It will be essential to tell the guides never to start at the same place.

JC: That would be good.
You see, they can start at different places and there will never be a story that's read from A to Z. Having experienced it and done a lot of guide work in my youth, you can hear when it's by rote, and it's unpleasant. I think that if we value honesty with ourselves and our own relationship with others, doing things by rote is not a good idea. When there is richness in an exhibition, it's clear that there are many ways in. One can then recompose the narrative around the story, take it from any element and revisit it again. But I also have the feeling that this profusion of information allows us to compose the narrative as we wish.

Julien Creuzet – Biography

Born 1986, Le Blanc-Mesnil, France. Lives and works in Montreuil, Paris, France. Creuzet is an artist, video maker, performer, and poet. He spent most of his childhood in Martinique. These first years in the Caribbean, at the crossroads between African, Indian and European cultures, have fostered a practice where the mixture of visions and imaginations has a central place. Through diverse environments made up of composite assemblages, he creates links between the social realities of the current context and forgotten stories.

Creuzet has had solo exhibitions at LUMA Arles (2022), Camden Art Centre, London (2022), Palais De Tokyo, Paris (2019), CAN Centre d'Art Neuchâtel, Switzerland, (2019), Fondation d'Entreprise Ricard, Paris (2018), and Bétonsalon, Paris (2018).

He has participated in numerous institutional group exhibitions including Museum of Contemporary Art of Chicago (2022-2023), Musée Tinguely, Basel (2022), The National Gallery of Prague (2022), Wesleyan University Center for the Arts, CT (2021), Manifesta 13, Marseille (2020), Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris (2020), Kampala Biennale, Uganda (2018) and Gwangju Biennale, South Korea (2018).

Creuzet is the recipient of the 2022 Etants Donnés Prize, the 2021 BMW Art Journey Award, and the 2019 Camden Arts Centre Emerging Artist Prize at Frieze London. Julien Creuzet has been named France's artistic representative at the upcoming 2024 Venice Biennale.

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Exhibition

Julien Creuzet

Orpheus was musing upon braised words, under the light rain of a blazing fog, snakes are deaf and dumb anyway, oblivion buried in the depths of insomnia

On view: 10 February – 21 May 2023

The exhibition at Luma Westbau is curated by Vassilis Oikonomopoulos (Director of Exhibitions and Programs, Luma Arles) and Martin Guinard (Curator, Luma Arles).

Venue

Luma Westbau
Löwenbräukunst
Limmatstrasse 270
8005 Zurich, Switzerland
www.westbau.com

Opening Times

Tue – Sun: 11:00 – 18:00
Thu: 11:00 – 20:00
Mondays closed

Free admission