

Interview Patrick Altès

*How would you say your experience as an artist in residence in an academic context influenced your work both in terms of techniques and maybe creation process?*

Working with the University of Portsmouth, I had access to a lot of brainpower from experts in the topic I was interested in. It was probably one of the key aspect, if not the major one, during this residence. At the beginning, some might have shown few concerns about what a “*piéd noir* artist” would be producing, that I would bring up nostalgia into my work or highlight the “positive legacy” of French Algeria. Raising these issues was quite interesting and these concerns have been very quickly cleared out as I showed my interest for other ideas and especially for a kind of “virginal” concept. Working with the University was very useful in defining very precisely the concept of each of my works before actually starting to materialise them. Working with academics, I had to know what I wanted to say and I also had to find the means of saying it from the very beginning of a new piece, and not, as it sometimes works, “blindly” create a piece of work and then ascribe a meaning to it at its latest stage. It was quite interesting for me.

*In order to process this “virginal” concept, did you have working sessions with historians? How did it take place?*

Not really. It took place with a lot of general discussions. In fact, I attended a lot of classes, took the course like almost any student, and took part in class discussions as well. Actually, I didn’t know much about French colonial history and the relationship between France and Algeria, mostly because of my past. For complex and various reasons, I had tried to avoid all of that. So when the residency started, I did not arrive with precise ideas in mind, but more as “Candide”, sharing my thoughts with Natalya Vince and other people I was working with in order to get their feedback all the way through the creation process. It was very helpful in order for me to elaborate mental images according to these conversations and, afterwards, to find a way to express and realise them. Being in touch with people who have academic knowledge and are not French – which I am – while literally discovering this part of history led me to remain detached from it, and comparison between the British colonial process and the French one helped me to get a lot of different ideas and to form an opinion that reflects in my work. From a superficial standpoint, things can appear obvious and simple: “oh, yes, colonialism is war and violence”; but very often these are just words. And when you take a deeper look into it, into the facts and dynamics of colonisation, then the evil borne by colonialism becomes clearer and real, the “beast comes to life”. As you get more intimate knowledge about how bad it was, these are not just words anymore. This is what fed my work.

*Did you find the dialog and working with scholars and students challenging or fulfilling? You probably didn’t feel the same at the beginning of the year and at the end?*

I felt that people were welcoming and happy to listen to my ideas without any judgment. To be honest, I didn't feel challenged at any time, but supported in a very positive and thorough way.

*Do you fit in from the beginning? One might think that it can be very challenging to work as an artist in an academic environment.*

That is true, but still, I did fit in because... well, it happened [laughs]. Actually, I didn't really make any piece while at university, it was more a time of absorption. This series consisted in a digital work, so all the making had to be done outside university. And I think it really helped, because I could separate the two environments and the two parts of the creation process as I explained earlier. On the one hand, I went to university where I could absorb notions, concepts, talk about ideas and so on, and on the second hand was my studio or, more precisely in that case, my office, as the pieces required hundreds of hours of computer work. During this stage, I have found it very helpful to go back and forth between university and my office with one piece of work. Basically, I presented a first version of a work to people I worked with, discussed it with them, made changes, brought it back to them, and so on. So, in a way, it was quite an interactive process, and anyway constantly evolving. I also felt, as soon as I did my first piece, that I could not keep doing the same piece again, in the same way that a series may work in painting when you create variations of one and same idea. Because the setting was that of university, each new piece could have been the first of a different series in a certain way. So I had to work on different ideas all the time while staying in the framework of post-colonialism, identity, and representation.

*How did you find the elements used in your artwork? Where did they come from and how did you select them?*

I wasn't much interested in using archive material but rather personal memories, especially pictures. I have to say that I faced certain difficulties to find people who agreed to entrust to me their pictures. In a first time, I tried to reach a few *pieds noirs* associations in this regard, but without any success. In a second time, I located and contacted *pieds noirs* people independently from associations, but I wasn't any luckier. I also tried through Facebook and joined a *pieds noirs* group, but then again, my project didn't seem to raise any interest. Eventually, I found the first person who answered in a positive way to my request, and he sent me about 20 pictures. I also got a few pictures from my parents as well, 24 exactly, and then little by little a few people accepted to work with me. I didn't get hundreds of pictures but a few people did accept to entrust their pictures to me, so I could use them in my work. It means a lot to me because it is not an easy thing to do having something that belongs to your past and allowing a perfect stranger to use it with the hope that the result won't be offensive to your identity and experience. When introducing my work to them, I tried to explain its purpose while being as honest as possible. I also remained vague enough so that they could fill in the blanks on their own with their own expectations. So far, I've shown the series to all the people who helped me and there hasn't been any problem. Besides pictures from *pieds noirs* community, I also got pictures from Algerian people who had ones from the colonial time as well as from contemporary Algeria. And finally, I went to Algeria myself three times during this work and I took a lot of pictures. I also included some drawings and other photographs from other places.

*In most of the pieces exhibited, different techniques, colours and layouts are put together and arranged in order to create an aesthetic unity. But at the same time, each element keeps its own specificity and remains very distinct from the others. Would you say this is at the core of colonial encounter? That, in a sense, the specificity of this kind of encounter is that in fact it never happened as such but created divisions and segregation between different peoples despite the fact that they lived together, shared a land and influenced each other in terms of culture?*

I think it's true, and I did think about colonial encounter while working on this series, but I did not specifically create the artwork in order for it to reflect that reality. I rather approached it like a path towards better knowledge, and if I may say so, almost a spiritual knowledge. The work of Frantz Fanon has been very important in that regard and deeply impressed me, especially *The Wretched of the Earth*. Its influence over some of my pieces is actually very strong, like for example the *Pied Noir Cowboy*. In this piece, you can see a man riding a horse through what seems to be a wide empty space, and comic bubbles come out of his mind reflecting his thoughts. With a closer look, you'll find that this apparently empty space he's riding through is actually full of caricatures of people, of a mass. This is a reflection of Fanon's work explaining that the colonists viewed Algerians as some primitive animal-like kind of people, always deviant and ready to organise a bomb attack against them. They felt under constant threat from them and yet, at the same time, they also described Algeria as an empty country ready to be inhabited with no harm. And I have tried to recreate these two notions: on the one hand, the so-called "emptiness" of French Algeria according to the colonists with this empty land, and on the other hand, surrounding the "cowboy", the beast-like native Algerians ready to bounce on him. I think it is probably the harshest picture against colonialism of the series.

*One could probably say the same kind of things about memories of colonisation nowadays and the stereotypes that they bear. Would you say that it is something specific to a period or that it is something enduring through times?*

Very ironically, these very stereotypes described by Fanon were used by French people living in France against the *piets noirs* when they arrived in France after liberation in 1962. They were thought of as animals driven by their instincts, not completely humans. It is very interesting to observe this shift from one group to another. In that respect, I would say it endured.

*The elements of your artworks match one to another with this very striking specificity that they are both fragmented and fused. It reflects very well the confusion between identity and culture in a colonial, and later on, postcolonial context. How did you come up with this technique and idea? Was it something fully rational and well-thought of or did it "naturally" emerge at some point in your work?*

In the case of my work, nothing is ever rational or well thought of. As an artist in France, I was not using computers at all. I discovered how great tools computers were when I did my MA in fine arts in Brighton in 2006-2008 and also when I got my first Mac. I then started to work with Photoshop and found that it echoed my own painting technique. In my work, I've always been interested in creating a sense of depth through additions and subtractions of layers. For instance, you can see it in the paintings of the series that they are made of different layers, and the closer you get to the role canvas, the deeper you are "into" the painting. The layers actually help to create closeness with the painting. Photoshop technique is based on piled up layers, partially covered or erased, which is somehow similar to the technique I've developed in my paintings. So I did develop a concept with this series but I did not create it from scratch. The emergence of deep layers detail is something that very well corresponded to what I wanted to do, so I enhanced and elaborated this technique.

*While doing this, were you focusing on the images or also analysing them from an intellectual point of view you?*

I usually do this kind of work mainly unconsciously. I figure out correspondence between different elements and try a few combinations. Sometimes it doesn't make any sense or it isn't satisfying, so I let it go and try again later with different things, until something begins to take shape in a way or another and that a "relevant concept" emerges from it. From there, I can start working on adding other elements and layers in order to qualify it or to enhance it until I'm satisfied with it. But it can take time and it is not necessarily a straightforward process. All my pieces are made of three elements: the concept I'm interested in sharing, the way I want to express it, and the aesthetic of the whole; it has to be pleasant to look to the extent it is possible. All of these are equally important and it can take time and a lot of attempts and fails to get there. In this series, I played with Orientalist aesthetics as well as *Pieds noirs'* one which is supposedly gaudy. In that sense, I could say that I added a layer of irony even though it is very real at the same time. In fact, I've tried to add as many "meaning layers" as possible or needed: sometimes it matched immediately and sometimes it appeared and was shaped as the work was executed.

*How would you say that the artist's sight shape the way he/she describes things? In history, as a scientific discipline, there is a methodological framework that defines the way investigation should be done and the way reflections should be communicated in order to remain with objectivity. In the art, on the contrary, one should explore his/her subjectivity in order to reflect a reality that transcends individuality. How would you say these two approaches can be combined or work together? It might have been something you experienced during your residency.*

I wasn't interested in applying or trying to adapt an academic approach to my work, nor to create something to which scholars only could immediately relate to because it would have consisted in a description of something rather than a work of art. In order for art to get there, it has to evade some realities and at the same time to create a certain ambiguity in such way that people can input their own ideas, their own prejudice and their own vision in it, and do so to the extent that it would transform the work. When I've shown some of my pieces to people, their interpretation was not related at all to what I wanted to stress, but it doesn't really matter after all. And I think that a piece of art becomes really interesting, almost an icon even, when people watching it can relate to it by being moved with a specific emotion without necessarily being able to explain it. That's what I try to achieve, even though one can't always succeed in that respect.

*How would you define this series compared to the others you have created so far? Where would you say it stands in your personal and artistic trajectory?*

This is my second residency with the Leverhume Trust which is something quite unusual in itself. The first one was about cancer and I have cancer so it was quite close to me but I did not engage in it in the same way. For some reason, I kept distant from it, maybe because I was scared of the whole thing. Still, it was a fulfilling work and it helped me evolve. But this series is very specific, it is the one I most engaged with so far in terms of emotions and as an individual; I've opened up a lot in it. I would say it is definitely my best work so far and it includes the paintings as well as the digital works. In many different stages in the making of this series, I felt like having a muse on my shoulder who would influence the process; which I've not always experienced in my work. For instance, the "P'tit

gars bien de chez nous” is very powerful in my opinion, I’m very proud of it. And the same goes for the “Garden of Eden”. People might think there is a trick in the way the layers were piled up, but there is not. I went to Algiers, took some pictures of the Jardin d’Essai and when I came back, a person who had given me some pictures previously sent me a few more of them, including three old ones from the Jardin d’Essai, and the perspective was roughly the same as the one I had taken. It was amazing, and I started to work on this basis. And even though it looks like an easy picture, I put a lot of work into it as it was actually very difficult to achieve, and there was some kind of serendipity as well. I’m also very proud of it.

*This exhibition has toured in different places. How diverse was the public receptions from one place to another?*

It first went to Cork and I was really pleased to observe that people somehow related to it by transposing the experience of France and Algeria to the experience of England and Ireland. They felt some kind of connection, which would mean that this series bears a kind of universality to an extent that helps people to connect with it. It then was showed in Chester where it also was well received. Another exhibition happened in Algeria which I am very happy about. It was part of the Biennale events in Oran last June and obviously some people were very moved by it, and by the fact that a French *piéd noir* was coming back to Algeria presenting a work that was not pro-French and probably a little pro-Algerian – but not completely –, with a heartfelt approach. So I think there were good reactions there as well.

*What is your next project if you already have one in mind?*

I probably won’t keep working on Algeria because then I would become the specialist of the question artistically speaking, which I don’t want to be, but I’m really interested in the concept of hybridity. I wouldn’t mind being able to gather threads of my experience in South Africa under the apartheid, of the years I’ve spent in South America where the concept of colonisation, first by the Spanish people and then by the United States, even though it is more of an economic fact, is quite alive as well. I like this notion of “in-between” and I am trying to work on it. I also appreciated working with academia and universities because they are such good assets for an artist, and hopefully it will happen again.