

JEAN-MARIE APPRIOU

In conversation
with Rebecca
Lamarche-Vadel











REBECCA LAMARCHE-VADEL

Certain characters recur in your work, who, although they seem to be otherworldly, nonetheless act as allegories of the present and reflections upon our contemporary condition.

JEAN-MARIE APPRIOU

The cosmonaut, the beekeeper and the bather are characters with whom I began sculpture. They are bodies to whom, as in theatre, I gave a role to play, and costumes. These characters have been given a script. The child astronaut evokes an uncertain future; he is alone in space. In an early incarnation, the beekeeper who wears the hat of the alchemist from Jodorowsky's *Holy Mountain* is holding a bouquet in his hand as if he were going on a date, except it's a date with the last bees who are alive on our planet. In another version, there is no bouquet; he carries the child astronaut on his back. In a third version, in which he is thinner, he opens his arms and wears a locust on his stomach, symbolizing nature's vengeance; swarms of locusts coming to destroy the harvests, as in the *Ten Plagues of Egypt*. Our current relationship with that which surrounds us, all that is corporal, animal, vegetable, for me are doors, portals of research.

RLV

What role does the figure of the bather play?

JMA

The bather is the successor to the child astronauts and the beekeepers. She is a very ambiguous character who draws on symbols that are as much mythological as modern: from the bathers of antiquity to those of Cézanne, via Botticelli. The astronaut and the beekeeper are autonomous beings, like pieces of art brut done in the back garden, but the bather for me constitutes a formal change. With her, I'm asking the question: how to take the responsibility of sculpting today? What can figurative sculpture say? It is like a witness of both the present and the works that other artists have created over centuries, for millennia, before me. With her I could develop my modeling practice—the style. It is no longer a question of volume, of mass, of weight, of purely sculptural questions. We're talking about style and signature, but also and above all gesture, like the way Van Gogh's gesture distinguishes his wheat field from any other.

RLV

Earlier you asked the question "What can figurative sculpture say today?" Have you found an answer to that question? What do you find in figurative expression?

JMA

I think it's a generational reaction. Our generation is very interested in figuration, notably in painting. In ten years' time perhaps the next generation will have had enough

and go in the other direction. Maybe it's about taking a breath. I use the vegetable, animal and human body as a vehicle for abstract ideas, and, like a director, I go from a foot, a leg, an arm. For me, sculpture offers a fallow ground which allows infinite possibilities.

RLV

You have been cultivating this fallow ground also by mining knowledge and research that comes from other territories. Quantum physics and chemistry are among the domains that feed your work as a sculptor.

JMA

The multiverse and quantum physics inspire me and open doors within me. If I found myself sitting with a physicist, I'd be lost. But what I like is when things are like a William Blake poem. Artists create parallel worlds and allow us to discover them, as poetry has created millions of universes since man became a poet. I don't have any scientific perception of things, but I like to look at their correspondences, observe them as little keys, or as doors which open new perceptions. One example would be iron. It is an element present in blood, it is formed in bright stars and is found everywhere after the explosion of a super nova. The core of our planet is a giant ball of iron. If soil is brown, it's because of the oxidization of the iron it contains. Wine is red for the same reason—because of iron. Iron brings blood and wine together and weaves new myths like those created by Catholicism. Bridges between things create other stories. What fascinates me is the quest, to consider the possibility that behind this iron there is something other than a metal that can be used to cut.

RLV

This fascination also recalls the Romantics and the complex relationship between man and nature. Many of your works evoke the power of the elements and link the power of the natural world to the world of human emotion.

JMA

Sculptures of doors are, for me, a threshold of perception; metaphors of those moments when we plunge into ourselves and for a fraction of a second time stops. That's when we discover a part of ourselves, a parallel space we bear within us. The wave or the forest are inspired by the sensation of being submerged. They are symbols which recall the intensity of this physical and mental experience; monoliths which refer all the more to the landscape than the object. The wave, *Écume métallique* (metallic foam), rises vertically, and what one finds behind is like a grotto, a kind of submarine space. It also looks like a bus shelter, a place where teenagers hang out in a village, a magnetic gathering space. These works are more physical passages than mental images, like Blake's poem, which gave its name to The Doors. I

like the fact that a leaf can be worked to the point where it becomes the expression of a projection of nature, idealized or inducing anxiety. *Vapeur métallique* (metallic vapor) presents chaos, with snakes emerging everywhere, a scared monkey and fleeing lemurs; it's like a painting by Douanier Rousseau, who had never seen a real banana and painted them the wrong way round. Landscapes are also a way of clearing away reality and creating your own world. These works are passages, going back and forth between different histories of representation but it's true that I am very influenced by the German and Swiss Romantics, as well as Delacroix.

RLV

What are the subjects you're currently working on and does the human figure still play an important role?

JMA

At the moment I am working on these sort of sharks with characters inspired by biblical, Greek and Egyptian mythology. It is, above all, a work of carnal criss-crossing between bodies that melt into each other. It's about trying to say something very sensual, almost erotic, through the modeling of the clay. My next project focuses on mystical mini grottos, in which we can imagine a hermit, a bhikkhu, or a monk praying, like in paintings from the Quattrocento. There are also huge cornflowers or sunflowers, which are hybrid; they have taken the liberty of being plants from another planet. It's a work of research on familiar vegetable and mineral forms, where no human figure appears, except maybe hands caressing them or modeling these forms with secateurs. These hands evoke magnetism; the power of attraction between things. Magnetism is for me like a lodestar, something which shines in the darkness, and which guides us through terror.

RLV

This interest in zones of shadow, in obscurity, very much makes me think of the work of Camille Claudel, who often represented marginal beings, situation of anxiety, moments of rupture. How does her work inspire you?

JMA

The discovery of Camille Claudel when I was a kid blew my mind. The mini scenes of women clutching the mantelpiece of a little bronze fireplace, or those onyx women huddled together exchanging secrets. In the period when she created these works they had a very strong resonance. Claudel was evoking witches, secret languages and the total power of men. There is something very powerful in the act of taking a material like onyx and sculpting in it a scene of witchcraft as if it were a piece of jewellery. It's a political gesture. There's also that scene of a woman sat in a chair, her head against the mantelpiece, which evokes a moment of solitude but also of inspiration. If we are all drawn to the fireplace, to fire, it's

because there are visions in fire, moments of inspiration. For me the word inspiration is very meaningful because I really work that way, beginning with strong images. It's a word that was completely excluded from our language when I was at the Beaux-Arts—it was something old-fashioned. Whereas inspiration in its noble sense is for me, in the end, all we have, like magic or sorcery in Alan Moore's sense. Inspiration is looking for the thing behind the thing. That's what struck me very powerfully about Claudel's work. Also her presentation of hands—for example there is always doubt in the hands and we feel in the sculpture very forcefully that this was someone who lived in permanent uncertainty, someone who was never peremptory.

RLV

A gesture which often appears in your work is that of incompleteness, of mutation, of the metamorphosis of beings.

JMA

Exactly. That's why I do all my modeling like a draftsman. I am thinking of the incredible work of the illustrator Moebius, for example, in *The Incal*, which he did with Jodorowsky. At the start the character has a big nose, and we almost don't realize that over the course of the series his features become finer, more delicate, like a very elegant Greek sculpture, because he has the Incal within him and he becomes a kind of living god. What I find magnificent in Moebius' work is his capacity to juxtapose a bird character, slightly grotesque in the Japanese style, and a very worked over drawing of a horse. From the same page he brings together images which take you from thing to another, the way Richter moves from an abstract image to a figurative one. That power for me is fascinating; that freedom to bring together two languages which are disturbing for the eye, but also allows you to go much further.

Écaille, 2018 Courtesy: the artist and CLEARING New York, Brussels (opposite page) Orpheus, 2018 Courtesy: the artist and CLEARING New York, Brussels (p. 163) Crotale du temple, 2018 Courtesy: the artist and CLEARING New York, Brussels (p. 164) Python à lèvres blanches, 2018 Courtesy: the artist and CLEARING New York, Brussels (p. 165) Moth 2, 2017 Photo: © Stan Narten Courtesy: the artist and CLEARING New York, Brussels (pp. 166-167) Nude in the Rye 3, 2016 Courtesy: the artist and Jan Kaps, Cologne (p. 168) Apiarist, 2016 Photo: © Stan Narten Courtesy: the artist and CLEARING New York, Brussels (p. 169) The Small Walker, 2018 Courtesy: the artist and Jan Kaps, Cologne (p. 170)

