

**Julien Delagrangé: *The Passion / 2019–2021*
A Conversation with Julien Delagrangé, directed by Sylvia Walker**

SW: So, the series is finished! First thoughts?

JD: Finally (laughs)! No, it has been an absolute pleasure, I had lots of fun. Often, working on a series can be rather challenging as it is very difficult to hold on to the necessary enthusiasm and concentration originating from your initial idea. From my experience, this concentration and motivation can fade away when working on a series or even while working on a specific work as the weeks and months go by. This is a crucial element in the creative process and a pretext for a good work of art. With *The Passion*, although it is – for me – a larger series of twelve works encompassing two calendar years, this specific state of mind came very naturally every time I continued to work on the series.

SW: You mention the notion of the 'initial idea'. Could you tell us a bit more about the specific initial idea?

JD: The initial idea consisted of a series of drawings, depicting twelve different images of the Rite of Spring by Pina Bausch. The Rite of Spring consists of various concepts I found extremely relevant in a contemporary context, and, from an art historic point of view, such as the Sublime, syncretism, existentialism, the human condition and also a certain sense for spirituality in a secularized world. By drawing or painting these images, they are called to a halt and therefore questioned. The temporary character of the performance becomes continuous, as certain images are frozen in time. This way, they work slower, influencing our perception and interpretation of these images. Doing so, I try to emphasize the aforementioned concepts. For instance, I made a series of twelve to play with the number symbolism, which is rooted in our human history. In mythology with the twelve tasks of Hercules or the twelve Olympic Gods. With music twelve makes an octave. Twelve months makes a year. Or in religion there are the twelve imams, the twelve Apostles or the often depicted twelve scenes of The Passion of Christ. Everything seems to be connected this way. With the series of *The Passion*, I use this number symbolism and the similarities of The Rite of Spring and the Passion of the Christ to indicate the presence of universal and spiritual syncretism. An inherently human structure which has manifested itself at all times in all cultures in a desire for spirituality, stories and the recurrence of the number twelve. A constant, which presents itself in a different form. With *The Passion*, Pina Bausch's choreography and the medium of drawing permit me to present this structure to the viewer, resulting in a direct impact as it touches our deepest traces of our human nature, a part of the human condition. Today, this is as relevant as it has ever been, as we continue to depart from our nature due to technology and life in ever changing world.

SW: Would you say this was the main incentive for the series and to work with the source material provided by Pina Bausch?

JD: Yes. The strength of Pina Bausch's choreography is that it has a very direct impact on the viewer. *The Passion* series – as *The Rite of Spring* – is about many things. But above of all, it is about a vital energy which is born from life. I came across the specific performance and Bausch choreography over eight years ago, before I even started to paint. I was overwhelmed, dazzled and even a bit emotional. I've never been able to entirely process what I had just seen. It was a sublime experience that I could not grasp or understand. With this series, I investigate this direct impact and its intelligible character. Concepts such as syncretism and the human condition may seem to be very abstract topics. However,

they manifest themselves in an unconscious manner, stirring up primitive but strong emotions.

SW: This initial idea, did it remain, or did it develop over the years while working on the series?

JD: Both. I continued to investigate the aforementioned notions. However, the form in which they are presented shifted as I came to a better understanding of the imagery. At first, I selected twelve different scenes from *The Rite of Spring*. It became a film of frozen images, illustrating the story of the sacrificial rite. When working on these different images, I noticed the series was becoming too narrative. It was illustrating a story instead of what the story means or expresses. We would interpret the series as an event, rather than an experience. The viewer would be reading a story, instead of experiencing it. As a result, I worked towards a more fixed composition, depicting the group of figures frontally in a state of complete ecstasy. A certain directness and rhythm arise due to this recurring frontal composition. The figures fill the entire surface of the image, as if being enclosed by the aluminum frame, bursting of energy encapsulated in a small space. By retaking this composition over and over again, the series feels more conceptual instead of narrative, which is an aspect I am very pleased with.

SW: Although following the same image scheme, every drawing clearly has its own character. They do not only stand as a series, but they also seem to work when being isolated as a single work of art.

JD: Every drawing has its own traits. As I imposed myself to follow one specific composition, the individual character of every drawing is a result of subtle differences in the details. While working two years on this image scheme, I searched for unique ways to make the same drawing work in a different manner. These differences arise from the selected or sampled image and/or from a technical point of view. Some groups have their heads right above their shoulders, making them more static, as others slightly tilt their heads creating a certain dynamic. The separate figures are notes and the full drawing is a melody. By replacing the figures, or elements of the figures, a new tune arises with a different character and feeling. Some figures are avoiding our gaze, others stare at the viewer directly. Some are looking up, others look down. Figures are bouncing, as they are slightly bending their knees and others stand tall. The drapery suggests an upward or downward movement of the body and their expressions vary from anguish to anger, sorrow to shame.

SW: And from a technical point of view? I would say there is a technical development in the series, as the general view of the drawings become increasingly stable.

JD: Exactly. The thing is, before this series I had made just several drawings but never found my own trait as a draughtsman. With *The Passion* this changed and that's why this series is so dear to me. As I did not have any academic training in drawing, I had to figure out drawing by myself. At this time, I was finally starting to figure out painting with oils. As a result, I started experimenting with charcoal implementing the same creative process I had when painting with oil. I worked out the general image by locating the darkest tones, building up the composition by drawing surfaces rather than lines. One of the main strengths of charcoal is the quality to be able to make smooth gradients of light to dark.

I choose to ignore this quality, resulting in strong contrasts as the darkest tones clash with bright tones without any gradient resulting in a very personal style and overall view. Accuracy and precision offer the drawing a photographic realism when seen from a distance. However, when we approach the surface for closer inspection, the image seems to dissolve into shapes and tones. Even more – as with my painterly oeuvre – the tones are not in accordance with the photographic source material. The middle tones are initiated by using a soft – a rather cheap one (laughs) – wide paint brush, moving the dust of the charcoal into the paper. By altering the tonal values of the image, I continue to depart from reality, as it is no longer reality or a narrative I am depicting. The dust of the charcoal can be very annoying, it simply goes everywhere. When our dog – my loyal studio assistant – pays me a visit in the studio while working on a charcoal drawing, chances are we will find a track of paws in our living room too, sadly (laughs). However, the upside of this dust is that it enables the artist to continuously rework and manipulate the drawing. Just as oil paint does due to its slow drying time. As with painting, one finishes a work by applying the highlights. Instead of using lead white pigment, I simply use an eraser. When they are too bright, I rework them with a paintbrush to get some dust on top of these highlights and continue to add detail by building up the image in these thin layers of dust. The final result of this very unusual technique is a drawing that does not appear to be a drawing. Often, people think it's a black and white painting, or a mixed technique using watercolour and charcoal. By times, due to these reactions I imitate some pictorial effects of watercolour by outlining some of these shapes of tones, as if the pigment of the watercolour is heaped up at the border to the water.

SW: I am right saying with the first part of the series the technique was still evolving and by the middle you had found the ideal recipe?

JD: I think you're right. I would be able to reproduce the final part of the series very accurately as my technique has become very stable as I have learned to control the end result. However, the first few drawings are a bit different, and I am not sure I could reproduce some of the details and effects in them. There are also some clear differences due to the used materials. The used set of erasers for example. One to six are all made with a kneaded eraser, as seven to twelve are produced with a smaller and harder eraser, resulting in fine details in the highlights.

SW: I guess the choice to use charcoal was an obvious one as it has characteristics similar to oil paint?

JD: It was indeed a straightforward choice, for several reasons. First of all, I really liked the darkness and depth of some sorts of charcoal. It is a very dark and intense black, reminiscent to some black colours with oil paint which I use very frequently. When using this strong black charcoal on a white piece of paper, it is like you're piercing wholes into the surface. Further, I really like the simplicity of charcoal. When painting you do not only need to

think in terms of tone, but also in terms of colour. By times, remixing paint with every stroke can be very challenging, especially when things aren't going as you would have liked. So, you can imagine it felt very liberating to work with charcoal. It's all you need, a piece of paper and a chunk of charcoal and off you go. However, the most important aspect of using charcoal is related to the selected subject matter. The power of the works resides in the correlation of the substance, the charcoal, and the image. As stated before, The Rite of Spring is marked by a strong emphasis on the primitive nature of being human – which is a common feature in all my works in fact. As a result, a unique continuum and metaphor arises due to the primitive nature of charcoal and the depicted scene.

SW: Could you tell us a bit more about the use of the selected source material?

JD: When I decided to work with the Pina Bausch performance, I maniacally collected images of the performance, such as press pictures, archival images, film stills and more. Doing I so, I made an archive of figures, poses and compositions from which I could start building my images. By cropping, sampling or even by making collages, I arranged the figures in order to establish the image I was searching for. I think this is a very common practice today to sample found imagery and recycle them into new artworks. Some good old fashioned postmodern appropriation. However, I want the original source to be cited very clearly. Not only in the title – (after Pina Bausch) – but also in the work itself, so the appropriation is genuine. Many artists today effectuate a similar strategy in collecting found imagery and reworking them into a painting or drawing. However, in their process they attempt to hide the original source and make it their own. I do understand why one would like to hide their indebtedness, as it would detract value from their own contribution. But why? With this series, I am indebted to so many people and so many things. I cite Pina Bausch in the title of every drawing, but I also feel very tributary to the photographers, the camera operators, the costume designer, the scenographer, the performers and even to the medium of drawing, the software I used to work with the source material, charcoal as a substance and even to YouTube who recommended the video of the performance eight years ago. All these aspects brought me to making this series. In fact, I feel as if I play just a small part in these works – and I am perfectly happy with this role, subordinated to the final result and the viewing experience.

SW: Would you say this series is the result of the accumulation of coincidental circumstances, experiences, influences and personal preferences?

JD: Of course, it is, as is all art. But intuitively, the artist knows: I have to make this.