This interview was edited by Eli Anapur for WideWalls and was published on October 19, 2022. Cite: Eli Anapur and Julien Delagrange, "Julien Delagrange Questions Internal Conflicts with his Art. WideWalls: 2022.

Julien Delagrange Questions Internal Conflicts with his Art

Emerging from dark backgrounds, charcoaled figures in Julien Delagrange's art unsettle with their indeterminacy. Clear in outlines but blurry when it comes to emotional states, they seem to interact with what they can only see, something lurking at the edges of the canvases that is yet to be revealed to viewers.

Talking about his practice, Julien mentions human nature and nothingness, two poles guiding his practice and philosophical ruminations. As he explains, the urge to know the unknown permeates our nature, but the outcome may not be what we expect and dream of. Eternity is not awaiting after death; there is nothing once the life spark is out, and we should reconcile with it. The metaphysical and existential conflict is only apparently resolved with digital worlds and social media. With the increased urge to connect comes isolation and solitude, all aspects of our contemporary condition.

Searching for images beyond time and space, Julien Delagrange turns to charcoal as his primary medium and charts his world with this old, traditional, and yet unusual material for a contemporary artist. Inspired by Pina Bausch's art, Julien explores the limits of appropriation in his latest works, creating a complex net of references grounded in his visions. With a strong command of the technique, he reaches for the known and pushes it into the existential unknown, from a childhood fascination to contemporary art.

Being also a creative director of CAI Gallery, Julien is exposed to contemporary art tendencies daily, which informs his practice as well. To learn more about his approach to art, we asked Julien about his practice, what ideas drive his thinking, and how he balances his artistic career with that of a gallerist and art writer.

Exploring Human Nature

Eli Anapur: The human condition and experience are often subjects of your work, drawing influences from anthropology, metaphysics, existentialism, spirituality, etc. Could you tell us more about your approach to the subject and the issues that concern you the most?

Julien Delagrange: The inevitable conflict we experience with the human condition is a direct result of the discrepancy between humanity existing for over 300.000 years and us — as an individual, or even as a society or generation — experiencing just a specific time in an ever-changing world. There are inherently human structures and behavioural patterns that made us survive and evolve throughout those thousands of years that are no longer of use or even have to be suppressed.

From an anthropological point of view, think of our basic instincts to nurture ourselves, reproduce, become sedentary, live in groups and communities, and install hierarchy and power within those communities. From a cultural point of view, we encounter similar major human structures. Think of our quest for beauty in architecture and our desire to create art. From a spiritual point of view, there is the ongoing human desire for spirituality, at all times, in different cultures, often resulting in similar world views and models of adoration — think of rites, prayers, the use of relics, or funerary practices. Most often, these spiritual tendencies result from an explainable urge for something supernatural, transcending our worldly existence in response to the existential and metaphysical question of why we exist.

However, in today's world, there seems to be no place left for these structures — resulting in an evitable internal conflict. In a globalized and digital world, we continue to depart from our nature due to technology and the ongoing cultivation of humankind. Sometimes, we experience primitive desires in the manner of hormonal impulses before having to suppress them. With my artistic practice, I want to question this internal conflict and make the viewer aware of our primitive character, touching the most profound traces of human nature.

Comprehending Nothingness

EA: Your subjects often appear as emerging from the darkness, coming off as isolated even when in a group. How do you think this relates to our contemporary reality?

JD: Yes, absolutely. These dark voids in which individuals or groups of figures are isolated result from art historical imaging strategies and my ongoing fascination for a notion that the human brain cannot comprehend; nothingness.

This is also one of the main initiators of the aforementioned existential and metaphysical human conflict. What existed before the universe? The answer is nothing. What will I experience after my passing? The answer is once more nothing. We cannot imagine there is nothing because the human brain always thinks in terms of time and space. With nothingness, there is no time or space.

I believe that with these voids, I depict my subjects in a setting where there is no time or space. If you think about it, in painting or drawing, there is no time as the image is frozen for eternity, nor is there space in this two-dimensional environment. Thus, the power of isolation increases exponentially. This evokes, of course, numerous analogies for interpretation in a contemporary context. The paradox of the social disappearing in a world in which it has never before been as convenient as today to contact others, our presence shifting ever-so-slightly from the physical world to the digital world, entering a different kind of time and space, or societal structures and expectations that function as a catalyst for reclusion and solitude.

The Advantages of Charcoal

EA: You mainly work with charcoal. Could you tell us more about this choice? What do you think are the advantages and limitations of the medium?

JD: After painting for several years in oil, I directed my attention to charcoal for a specific series of works I intended to create; The Passion series after Pina Bausch (cf. infra), in which I aimed to emphasize our primitive nature in a very direct manner. But oil paint was not 'gritty' enough; it felt too cultivated to support this idea. As a result, I turned to charcoal, a medium I had no training or experience with at all.

I was fascinated by the connection of the primitive nature of the substance charcoal in relation to the primitive as a subject matter. It was also a very liberating experience. All you need is a piece of paper and a stick of charcoal. I no longer had to think about the hues or control the paint on my palette and paintbrush. I could work more quickly, intuitively, and easily enter the so-called flow state. Those are, without any doubt, the greatest advantages of working in charcoal.

Another key characteristic of charcoal is its quality to create smooth gradients. However, I do not like the academic aesthetics of traditional charcoal drawing, blending the dust from light to dark. Instead, I was convinced I had to develop a different and more personal technique to achieve the things I was pursuing. So, I chose to ignore this quality of being able to create gradients, resulting in a very personal visual language marked by strong contrasts in which the darkest tones directly clash with the brightest tones. I use the darkest charcoal there is to create the void from which the figures appear before moving the dust with a

wide paintbrush from left to right. I use an eraser to brighten up some areas before covering them with dust once more, creating various tones with thin layers of dust. With accuracy and precision, the drawing feels very photorealistic. However, when we approach the surface for closer inspection, the image dissolves into shapes with hard edges.

The biggest problem with charcoal, however, is the dust going absolutely everywhere. Especially when my loyal studio assistant — read: my dog — enters the studio for some belly scratches and leaves the studio, followed by a track of black paws on the floor (laughs).

A Quest for a Universal Language

EA: Pina Bausch's dance performance, The Rite of Spring, has made such an impact that it has been featured in several of your pieces. What is it about the performance that makes you go back to it?

JD: I came across this performance a long time ago, during my childhood. It was my very first experience when I felt a connection with culture and arts. I was overwhelmed, dazzled, and even emotional. It was a sublime experience I could not grasp or fully understand. This affinity I felt for the performance was uncanny. Many years later, when I started painting, I suddenly realized the figures I was subconsciously aiming to depict could have been figures from the Rite of Spring.

Female figures in white dresses, men with muscled torsos. A quest for a universal language, but it was Pina Bausch's influence all along. When I connected the dots with my earlier experience of the Rite of Spring, I became obsessed with it. Its about vital energy born from life, stirring up primitive and powerful emotions. In combination with other influences — such as La Grande Bellezza (film) by Paolo Sorrentino, Martin Margiela (fashion), my professor Dr. Koenraad Stroeken (Anthropology), and, of course, my idols in (recent) art history — I discovered my vision in this performance.

I became aware of the aforementioned suppressed primitive structures residing in every individual and saw them in the figures of Pina Bausch's choreography. So, I maniacally started collecting, investigating, and appropriating them.

Appropriation and Art

EA: Artistic appropriation is an important part of your practice. Could you walk us a bit through your working process?

JD: Absolutely. Artistic appropriation is, of course, omnipresent in today's art world. Some artists even argue it has become impossible to create art without appropriating anything — Dixit Adrian Ghenie. The discourse is that there is no longer such thing as originality—a sentence where I would like to add a question mark at the end. Appropriation or recycling images has become one of the most common practices today; sampling found imagery and recycling them into new artworks. Some good old-fashion postmodern appropriation. Or isn't it?

Appropriation today has become increasingly problematic. It is no longer a parody of the source material in question, criticizing aspects of its original context, often using irony, humor, and satire. It has become a strategy to use images as stock images. Why create or invent an image if all images you could possibly need already exist? Especially when artists start to appropriate without any obvious reference, with their only interest being the visual aspects of the image in question.

For instance, I know every single Pina Bausch Rite of Spring source material online, and I have encountered several artists using some figures of the Rite of Spring in which they aim to hide the origin. I have even seen two artists create the exact same painting; a stock image of a man with his face against a wall — an ever-trending motif, the Rückenfigur. With my approach to this post-postmodern appropriation, I want to address the issue of artists using recycled images as stock images. If your appropriation is not a parody, it must be a homage in the form of a clear quote. For instance, with the drawings after Pina Bausch, the source material is being used in a clear and genuine manner. Or, when you aim to recycle the images for merely visual purposes, you must be open about this — almost taboo — act by the artist.

From this perspective, I created my series of Forbidden Reproductions. I search visually in databases such as Google Images or Pinterest in order to find the picture I envision for my drawing. It is uncanny to see how close your so-called disegno-interno (cf. Michelangelo) was in comparison to the actual image you selected. With just a few artistic interventions, the image is recycled and called to a halt by the act of drawing.

What once was an image out of a million others, drowning in the flood of images of the 21st century, is now engaging in an art historical dialogue due to the selected medium. Authorship, intellectual property, originality, simulacra; questioning the world in which all images seem to exist.

There is this luring ambiguity between the power of the final result and the forbidden character of the appropriation addressing the aforementioned issues, but simultaneously, being the devil's advocate saying 'yes' to this problematic and ubiquitous visual strategy.

CAI Gallery

EA: Besides being an artist, you also work as an art critic and gallerist. How do these different perspectives influence your artistic practice?

JD: I am incredibly grateful to be occupied with art 24/7 as an artist and as the artistic director of CAI and CAI Gallery. This synergetic interaction has proved to be very inspiring for my artistic practice. I get to digest a lot of art daily, staying up to date on the latest developments, academic essays, and art events in the art world.

The gallery I curate is not an artist-run gallery or a traditional commercial art gallery. It is part of the platform www.contemporaryartissue.com, functioning as a hybrid platform contributing to the canonization of 21st-century art, including on- and offline curatorial activities.

At the same time, I am also afraid of role conflict. I would never represent myself with CAI Gallery, nor would I use the CAI platform to promote my own work. I try to keep both spheres as separate as possible.

In the end, this kaleidoscopic view is terrific for both activities. CAI feeds my artistic practice and vision, improving my overall frame of reference and inspiration as an artist every day. And, on the other hand, as a curator and writer, I have the perspective of the artist to incorporate into the publishing activities and curatorial projects — which helps tremendously.

EA: What is next for you? Any future projects that you would like to share?

JD: I have two solo exhibitions coming up; on October 16, my solo exhibition Dark Matter opens at Space60 in Antwerp — a show I am very much looking forward to — followed by a solo presentation in December at the Lab of Galerie Sabine Bayasli in Paris. Feel free to drop by!