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# CAMILLE HENROT IS IT POSSIBLE TO BE A REVOLUTIONARY AND LIKE FLOWERS ?

6 September - 6 October 2012

Kamel Mennour is pleased to present Camille Henrot's second solo exhibition at the gallery.

Bouquets carrying the names of books, an ideal library as an artificial garden... what lies behind such an incongruous juxtaposition? This space through which we walk, as though in a library, radically problematizes the relationship of books to flowers through its thorny title: 'Is it possible to be a revolutionary and love flowers?' With the third part of this equation, we get to the heart of the work. Camille Henrot cites Marcel Liebman's account of one of Lenin's colleagues saying, "You start by loving flowers and soon you want to live like a landowner, who, stretched out lazily in a hammock, in the midst of his magnificent garden, reads French novels and is waited on by obsequious footmen."<sup>1</sup> The love of flowers would appear to be a slippery slope towards the practice of something no less counter-revolutionary: literature. Just as the freshness of flowers revives the colour of a dead body, literature soothes our troubles. Must we, in fact, choose between revolution and consolation?

Translating her books into flowers in a single gesture, Camille Henrot perpetuates, in her own way, the Japanese art of the bouquet, where the arrangement of flowers is supposed to reflect the state of mind of the person who creates it. From April 2011 to April 2013, Camille Henrot decided to make nothing but *ikebana* based on her personal library, thereby giving her books a purely material existence, a return to their primal element: the vegetal.

Her practice of *ikebana* is linked to the idea of 'art as autotransformation,' as imagined by John Cage in a book (*How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)*) which is here embodied in a single organic endigia planted on a *kenzan*, the traditional tool used in Japanese *ikebana*, which oddly echoes one of Cage's recurring preoccupations cited by the artist: "days spent searching for non-synthetic food."

Like a book, the *ikebana* concentrates in one object the entirety of a thought, brings together disparate fragments, and reconciles opposites in a whole of global dimensions.

If, as Jean-Christophe Bailly wrote in *Le propre du langage*, the library is a polyphony, the environment of *ikebana* becomes a cosmogony where heterogeneous thoughts form a harmonious whole based on the principle of the bouquet itself - an assemblage of uprooted elements, cut off from their context and brought together in synthetic unity. Whether they play on taxonomy, their 'palimpsestic' power, the vulgarisation of the language of flowers or the history of their origins, the mysterious forces that come together to create the bouquet practice an ultra-lucid language. In reinterpreting the ancestral art of the bouquet, Camille Henrot literally sweeps away the rigid hierarchy between the sensory and the intellectual arts, situating the practice in both cyclical time (natural time) and historical time (revolutionary time). "In my view, the thoughts produced by literature, philosophy or anthropology form an integral part of daily life, in a way, they are also 'decorative objects,' displayed here to create a stimulating and calming environment," she explains. In this sense, she perpetuates her perspective by placing herself in an ahistorical vision of time and by reintegrating rationality into all human behaviour.

In this literature transcribed into flowers, spirit and substance give birth to one another. Just as values are embodied in natural things, supposedly innocuous flowers take on the aura of powerful and destructive weapons in the hands of the artist. Camille Henrot puts in place a lapidary language whose phrasing liberates. Now we understand why revolutions appropriate the names of flowers: the Carnation Revolution in Portugal, the Hundred Flowers Campaign in China, the Rose Revolution in Georgia, that of the Tulip in Kirgizstan, Saffron in Burma, and Jasmine in Tunisia. In reality, these *ikebana* lead us to the heart of a principal of resistance violently opposed to all forms of power and authority: the pleasure principal.

Camille Moulouguet, July 2012

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Liebman, extract from *Leninism under Lenin, the Conquest of Power*, 1973

Born in 1978, Camille Henrot lives and works in Paris. Her work has been shown in numerous group and solo exhibitions in France: at the Louvre, the Centre Pompidou, the Palais de Tokyo, the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, the Espace Culturel Louis Vuitton, the Jeu de Paume, the Fondation Cartier; as well as abroad: at MOCAD in Detroit, Bold Tendencies in London, the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul, the Centre pour l'Image in Geneva, the Hara Museum and the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo.

Several of her films have also been shown and awarded prizes at festivals such the Moving Images biennial at the ICA in London, the Rotterdam International Film Festival, the Clermont-Ferrand International Film Festival, the Quinzaine des Réalistes at Cannes and the Hors Piste Festival at the Centre Pompidou.

Camille Henrot will exhibit her work in September at New York's Sculpture Center, and in November at the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia. Her work will also be the subject of a solo exhibition, "Jewels from the Personal Collection of Princess Salimah Aga Khan," at Rosascape in Paris, from 7 to 23 September.

She was one of four finalists shortlisted for the 2010 Marcel Duchamp prize.

Camille Henrot "Is it possible to be a revolutionary and like flowers?" is on show at galerie kamel mennour from Tuesday to Saturday, 11am to 7pm.

For further information, please contact Marie-Sophie Eiché, Jessy Mansuy-Leydier and Emma-Charlotte Gobry-Laurencin, by phone: +33 1 56 24 03 63 or by mail: galerie@kamelmennour.com.

"The strange, mysterious, perhaps dangerous, perhaps saving comfort that there is in writing: it is a leap out of murderers' row; deed-observation."

Franz Kafka, *Diary*, 27 January 1922

"Definition of the word Cosmopolitan:  
That which belongs to the whole world  
That which feels at home everywhere; without any ties, either local or national  
That which is made up of borrowings from all over the world or from certain societies."

John Cage, *Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)*, 2003

"The role of art: a fictitious carrying out of "privileged situations".

Michel Leiris, *L'Homme sans honneur: Notes pour le sacré dans la vie quotidienne*, 1994

Freely inspired by the codes and rules specific to the Japanese art of *ikebana* (生け花)<sup>1</sup>, I have - over the course of the last two years - made more than 150 floral compositions, some of which were created in dialogue with Rica Arai, master of Sogetsu school *ikebana*.

Each of these compositions has been put together with reference to a book chosen from my library, which I subjected to a sort of *devenir fleur* [becoming flower].

My initial attraction to *ikebana* has to do with how it corresponds to the idea of an object meant to appease a troubled soul. Unlike 'western' art, which seeks to ward off the anguish of death through the creation of imperishable works, *ikebana* sets out (and this may appear paradoxical) to console us through the intervention of elements with necessarily very short lifespans.

The practice of *ikebana* - to the extent that it requires one to take care of the composition if one wishes it to remain exactly as it was conceived - has the role of creating a 'privileged space,' just as much for the person who views the arrangements as for the person who composes them.

The approach finds its sense in the presentation of several *ikebana*. The aim is to create, in the image of a library, peaceful 'environments.' There was an entire literature of consolation in Greek antiquity, inspired by a deeply held belief that the *logos* provided an effective weapon against everything that threatened one's spiritual immunity. This connection seemed to me even more pertinent since the book is also, in some ways, an object whose 'soul' is in need of consolation - and in this the project anticipates the threat that e-books pose to the physical book.

The choice of works that foster a relationship with subjectivity and alterity seemed evident. Works that evoke exoticism, the projection towards an elsewhere, the disillusionment of discovery, the cult of authenticity and its resulting fiction... all sorts of questions and problems that are surely relevant to modern anthropology, but which are also very close, even identical, to those of the amorous encounter - with its misunderstandings, its expectations, and the inevitable disappointments it breeds.

By all accounts, my practice of *ikebana* - even though it belongs to a current that is itself non-traditional (the Sogetsu school) - contains no shortage of serious interpretive mistakes and naiveties, as well as irregularities in terms of the fundamentals of this art. The presence of such errors is, however, perfectly integrated into my approach. It is even one of the subjects of this project - and more generally of the whole of my work - to remove a segment of culture in a partial and unfinished manner in order to propagate it in the compost of my personal culture.

Through this project, I also had an ambition to attack in some small way the mental hierarchy specific to western culture that always has a tendency to idealise the arts of discourse and to undervalue the everyday arts such as flower arranging. Here, one is reminded of one of the major themes of Zen anti-rationalism, neatly summed up in the following adage: "Those who know do not speak and those who speak do not know."

The attempt was made, as far as was possible, to establish a direct relationship between the taxonomy of the plants that make up the *ikebana* and the book to which each arrangement refers.

However, this approach could not be systematic, and the work on the codes of *ikebana* has become a work on the forgetting of these same rules.

Camille Henrot, July 2012

\* *Ikebana*, sacred ancestral Japanese art of flower arranging, is historically linked to Buddhism - its origin is the *kuge* (供華), an offering of flowers made to Buddha - but in fact it originates in a very ancient Japanese custom described in the *Nihon Shoki* and which dates back to the death of Princess Izanami. Her people, who adored her, used flowers to decorate the place where she lay in order to 'console the soul' of the woman they loved so much.