

Interview with Claude Gigon

Valentine Reymond

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Until recently, your artistic approach was still basically painterly. What has now made you turn to an installation for your exhibition at the Jura Museum of Arts in Moutier ?

Claude Gigon

It has to do with wanting to add a craftsmanlike dimension to my creative process. I chose to do an installation to avoid drawing a parallel between my chocolate-making experience and painting. I wanted to open up new horizons. The underlying idea was to recapture the gestures I once, long ago, practiced and loved as a craftsman, and apply them to the artistic undertaking I have been practicing over the last twenty years. Combining the two enabled me to create something apart from my customary production. Since chocolate-making is linked to food, this sculpture features an olfactory dimension - something that awakens desire, a feeling of succulence. The resulting close link with the body made me think that three dimensions would better bring my idea across.

V.R. So you think installations are closer to viewers, to their body, than painting ?

C.G. To speak of food is to touch upon a basic human need. With food being three-dimensional, I felt an installation would be more suitable than a two-dimensional piece.

V.R. You used white chocolate for this installation. What made you choose it ?

C.G. White chocolate is a by-product. Contrary to black chocolate, it contains no beans : instead, it has cocoa butter to which milk and sugar are added. It's chocolate that has been doctored, just like so many food products on today's market. My choice of a material is directly linked to our relationship with food in general. But that's not the only reason for my choice : I preferred white chocolate above all because of its pure, virginal appearance, in sharp contrast to the extravaganza of my piece.

V.R. So, your idea is the impurity of the installation versus the purity of its whiteness ? Then what would be a pure shape for you ?

C.G. It's not so much the shape that's impure, but the outrageous mass of it. White chocolate is a luxury food, usually presented in miniature chocolate-candy format. Being confronted with a ton of chocolate staged in a space, viewers will feel at a remove from what they are familiar with. My installation has a subversive bent to it with respect to our outlook on food in general. It is the surplus itself that is disturbing, by contrast with an angelic whiteness.

V.R. What's the idea behind the title of the work, *100%* ? Is it that ideal whiteness ?

C.G. The title's main idea addresses the current challenge among chocolate makers as to the percentage of cocoa beans. They rival frenetically with each other to attain a maximum percentage of the beans in the chocolate mass, implying the addition of ever less sugar. But all this frenzy to come up with the most sublime of products is to overlook the fact that the beans are far too bitter to be eaten without sugar. So my title *100%* calls this trap of a sublimated chocolate into question.

V.R. Your title is all the more paradoxical in that it's the black chocolate that contains the most cocoa beans, never the white.

C.G. Yes, of course, it's a play on the remove between the material I use and the work's title.

V.R. A while ago we spoke about what differentiates your installation from your painting. Now I'd like to seek out what they have in common. Your installation appeals to the visitor's body in its focus on the food theme. Do you deal with the body in your painting too?

C.G. Yes I do. The act of painting is a bodily act in itself. Moreover, the body is a central theme of my painting, since I deal with the human condition. Figures are ever more present, although at times purposefully out-of-synch or by implication, like in my *Envelopes* series, which presents slightly blown-up clothes that give the feel of bodily presence without bodily representation. An envelope can be a coat, or our skin. I question the body: how do things infiltrate it, become absorbed by it, pass through it? In my approach, an envelope is one of the most efficient means to express the human figure without actually depicting it. It's an absence that awakens the viewer's power of imagination.

V.R. Getting back to your installation, you mentioned the dichotomy between its title, *100%*, and its material, white chocolate. Are there other dualities in your work, in your painting?

C.G. I'm partial to the play of antimonies and contrasts in my work in general. *100%* will incite feelings of dualism between attraction and distancing. On the one hand, there are certain attractions - the mouth-watering smell, the preciousness of white chocolate combined with the elegance of the exhibition gallery with its painted ceiling - that will bring to mind romance, sensual beauty. On the other hand, as to the distancing, the chocolate's outrageous mass and the frustration of not being able to eat any of it will seem grotesque. In my painting, too, contrasts exist between the subjects of my works and their paint style. At times I work on pleasant themes that I paint in a crude manner; other times I'll handle a more dramatic, more ambiguous subject in a most fluid painterly fashion.

V.R. What do those contrasts express?

C.G. To me, contrasts are life. They symbolize the antagonistic feelings we experience daily - love and hate, desire and frustration, impulses and limits. It's my way of expressing the destiny to which we must adapt ourselves or else against which we must fight.

V.R. In your paintings, you always isolate the figures. Is that for esthetic reasons or to express the content?

C.G. In my development as a painter I gradually came to eliminate anything incidental in order to accent what I wanted to bring to the fore. Isolating the figures or objects represents the fact that in true life, we are always alone in the face of adversity, and even in that of pleasure, since our feelings are unique unto ourselves. Not being able to escape that solitude is the foundation stone of the human condition.

V.R. Speaking of the difficulties Life throws our way, you made a video film presented in this show. Entitled *Le Moulin de la mort* (the watermill of death), it shows you swimming against the current, on a sort of impossible mission.

C.G. The video's theme is the absurdity of the life battle. It is a filmed performance based on the myth of Sisyphus, and its title - *Le Moulin de la mort* (the watermill of death) - alludes to the boundary line between France and Switzerland, along the Doubs River. Many people have lost their lives seeking to cross it over; in my performance, swimming along that boundary underscores the poetic aspect of such an absurd action.

V.R. In another of your performances, *Sweet dreams* of 2010, you invited viewers to spontaneously participate in making lollipops by shaping them against parts of their body. And *100%* invites them to adopt an impulsive view of the work - that is, through their olfactory senses. Is your way of directly connecting viewers with a work an attempt to close the gap between art and life, like the *Eat art* works of the 1960s by, among others, Daniel Spoerri?

C.G. Making sweets interests lots of people, as opposed to the more elitist art world. In *100%* I feel I'll be touching viewers more directly, since I broach the vital need to feed ourselves. Confronting chocolate without being able to eat any of it is frustrating. The fact is that frustration is a painful condition vital to our acceptance of our life path.

V.R. Less frustration in your invitation to the show at the Jura Museum of Arts, since you plan to include an edition of edible cookies. Is that your way of making up for depriving visitors to your chocolate installation?

C.G. I'm not in the least interested in compensation. It's something else. My cookies, which usually bear a smile in the pastry shop window, will be grumpy - a quirk meant to introduce a certain distancing. Before eating them, people will ask questions about food. For example: How can we trust products we buy if they are different than usual? Last but not least, my cookies make an announcement: combined with the invitation, they will inform visitors about what they'll be seeing in my show - namely, the result of my research projects with new materials.

V.R. But doesn't your cookie also tie in with how you conceive of the human condition and its difficulties?

C.G. Yes, the cookie's shape, a sad and isolated head, ties in with the theme of the human figure, which is a constant in my work.

V.R. Your artistic approach is based on real life difficulties, but you also draw on dreams. You even entitled one of your visionary paintings *Nuit blanche* (white/sleepless night), and in your *Enveloppes* series, the latent presence of figures can bring to mind specters. What role do dreams play for you?

C.G. Dreams are the necessary escape hatch to keep on living. Everything is in suspension, since we can disappear at any time. The wavering effect in my paintings conveys such disappearance, which we are obliged to confront. Dreams provide all the fantasies that render life acceptable.

V.R. Is your exhibition title, *Nuit américaine*, also linked to dreams?

C.G. The title refers to François Truffaut's Day for Night film, where special effects make actions filmed outdoors in daylight appear as if they were taking place at night. Since my own work entails dreams, that title fits my exhibition well. I wonder about the power of dreams: are they more, or less, important than our waking moments? Aren't our fantasies more important than our acts? Dreams convey our desires and fears; they are what enable us to get on with our lives. When the eye of night opens in broad daylight, everything seems more radiant.

V.R. But on a cinematic level, "Day for Night" is all special effects, faking.

C.G. Yes, art is an illusion and a "dark brightness."