

*Christine Safa
& Nathan Berthet*

An interview

Interview conducted by Elie de Gourcuff

From September to December 2021, Nathan and Christine left their Parisian routine to work in an artist's residency, outside of Paris. During these three months spent in the countryside, they both worked on a new body of work, sharing the same studio, and getting used to a new routine.

In December, in a context of pandemic pessimism amid Omicron surge, I went to see Christine and Nathan in Paris, to discuss this experience and their artistic vision, as they were preparing their show at Sapling in London.

Elie de Gourcuff

You have just spent three months in the outskirts of Paris, in a residence¹ where you had to work together and share the same routine. Can you tell me more about this experience?

Christine Safa: We started out in two different working spaces but by the end of the stay, we had joined forces in the same studio. We wanted to change and adjust our set-up to see if it would create a new dynamic.

Nathan Bertet: I also wanted more natural light. Christine's studio had the advantage of being brighter and reminded us of the time when we were at the Beaux-Arts together². We know each other all the better for it.

CS: Yes, but strangely enough, we weren't always very comfortable being in the same studio...

Why?

NB: Probably because of my routine...

CS: Nathan can quickly put some very loud music on, and I'm not always prepared for it. There are days when I don't want to listen to an external voice, especially when it's loud. I feel like I'm being rushed, and it annoys me. But there are other days when it doesn't bother me at all: sometimes, living together means you've got to be flexible. By the end of the stay, we wouldn't necessarily work at the same time; I would try to do something else when Nathan was painting. We got used to this new routine.

NB: Yes, in the end it was a great experience that I hope we'll repeat.

In retrospect, what did you think of the residency? Did you consider it more of a shared artistic experience or simply as a moment spent together?

CS: I think this residency marked us more as a new way of life, than as an artistic experience. Time felt suspended, so far from the distractions of daily life.

NB: Yes, it was a different routine! We weren't going out every night for drinks. Life was quiet. Christine and I would sometimes wonder how people must've lived here in the 1950s. We decided to adopt the same mentality, and just to get used to it.

1. Nathan and Christine spent 3 months in a residency outside of Paris, from September to December 2021.

2. Nathan and Christine both studied at Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, in James Reilly workshop.

CS: As a result, we were able to witness seasonal change in a much more vivid way than in Paris. We saw the passing of the fall and descent of winter. Trees lost their leaves, and the mist began to appear on the studio windows at daybreak.

You also had to change your routine in the studio and get used to sharing it...

NB: We were immediately taught at the Beaux-Arts to create our own bubble when we work—no matter where we are or who we are with. You must confront yourself and your emotions. It doesn't matter if someone happens to be there when you're painting; you're meant to know what you're doing and what you're supposed to do.

CS: I agree, but certain conditions also have to be in place for the right gesture to emerge. Originally, we were only supposed to stay in this residency for two months, so we didn't necessarily settle in properly. I wonder if we used the space and time as well as we could have.

Also, I had more than painting on my mind at the time. I had my solo show opening in Paris³ and another one planned in Milan⁴, so I had to write and think about future paintings, whereas Nathan was fully immersed.

NB: Yes because I had just returned from a two-month break from painting.

It wasn't too difficult, getting back into it?

NB: No, I actually considered that time at the residency as an extension of the holidays. I was still resting and digesting some of the ideas that had germinated during my degree before summer.

When I look at the works you created during this residency, I get the feeling that your approach is a more experimental one...

NB: Yes, maybe. Since my degree, I've relied on my own daily references, and developed a personal canon. At the residency, painting was the only thing that could bring me back to certain states of mind—which reminds me, now, of this Philip Guston quote: I felt that painting was painting me more than I was painting it.

3. Christine Safa, *L'habitude du ciel*, solo show at Praz-Delavallade in Paris, 6 November 2021-15 January 2022.

4. Christine Safa, *C'era l'acqua, ed io da sola*, solo show at the ICA Milano, 18th January-6th March 2022.

You both share a very visceral relationship with painting...

NB: Yes, despite myself! I tried not to go into it too much. Oh well...

CS: In the end, I believe it is quite normal for painting to set a pace for our daily lives. Maybe I do not yet have the benefit of hindsight, but I feel I can now accept and digest difficult moments more easily. I absorbed everything a little more calmly during this residency. I was coming back from Lebanon and wanted to take advantage of that time to digest some things that had happened to me there.

And do you think this new setting had an impact on your practice and your painting?

CS: Not immediately, but maybe something new will come up in the next few months... These last three have mostly inspired me to have a different way of life, one that prioritises serenity. I don't yet know what their influence was on my painting...

When you were at Les Beaux-Arts together, you were exchanging ideas on different painting techniques and aesthetics. Did these conversations resurface during the residency?

CS: My expectations were high! I thought we would discuss painting every day, like when we were at the Beaux-Arts. But in the end, it only happened a few times...

NB: I did use a new casein recipe that I shared with Christine... But it's true, our discussions were less fundamental than the ones we had at the Beaux-Arts. Personally, the thing I wanted most of all, out of this residency, was to start painting again...

Coming back to your artistic practice, many people tend to try and differentiate your work between figuration (Christine), and abstraction (Nathan). Do you find this approach reductive? And more broadly, do you think that contemporary artistic practice should require us all to move beyond this traditional dichotomy?

CS: I find it hard to understand why people still use these terms. You certainly can't forget your historiographical origins, but they don't mean anything really. There are figures in everything, but as Nathan told me a few weeks ago, the act of painting necessarily reveals abstraction. You just can't split painting into two defined poles. Of course, you can distinguish figures or faces in my paintings, but that meaning is certainly not fixed or predefined...

NB: In a conference, Motherwell explained that painting was an act that could be done with a minimum of intelligence. A painter is defined by his ability to make something intelligible out of a few gestures, which sometimes appear as slightly silly. To me, abstraction is intelligence itself, in the sense that it allows us to abstract certain forms and put them together, in an intelligible way. That's how we reason and think, and not just in painting...

In a way, everything in life would relate to abstraction?

NB: I think abstraction is a path. If you take a white canvas and start painting on it, then there is necessarily an abstract gesture, no matter what the resulting motif might be. It is then up to the painter to decide what he wants to do with this abstract gesture and how he will transform it on the canvas.

To illustrate our need for abstraction, Motherwell referred to the representation of the Battle of Gettysburg. Of course, we would like to represent everything in the painting: from the people screaming to the whistling of the bullets; from the smells to everything that made this battle real. But we can't, and it's only through abstraction, then, that we can best represent life.

In a way, abstraction could have more emotional potential...

NB: No, I wouldn't say that, but we can't consider figuration as simply figurative. Figuration only exists through an underlying abstraction...

So, the history of painting would necessarily begin with abstraction?

NB: Yes, ever since the Lascaux caves. And I think most painters today would agree.

If abstraction is the source of all painting, is it supposed to be able to represent what cannot be represented?

CS: Yes, painting can no longer be considered only as figurative.

NB: I would also add that many contemporary figurative painters are painting in an increasingly abstract way. We are no longer looking for figurative resemblance and I'm not sure that Goya and the great Renaissance masters would feel so close to the figurative painters of today.

Both of your works are very referenced, with multiple artistic, poetic, or philosophical sources. Is it necessary to anchor your work in a more global reflection?

CS: I think these artists and authors are our daily life companions. We sometimes need them to comfort us in what we are doing or trying to achieve. Painting makes us feel good, but texts and thoughts can do the same job. It's all about adhering to something and being happy to read someone who thought about the same things as us.

There is this sentence written by Etel Adnan about the work of Heiner Muller and Tintoretto, which I think illustrates our way of painting and the idea that it's worth painting all of your life: *Jannis Kounellis suggests that Muller loved paintings for their power of synthesis, because they are constructions, these layers of memory, that cancel each other out to better accommodate a new one.* These ideas are here to give us a momentum again.

NB: Lucretius, for example, gives me ideas for painting when he talks about the nothingness, the emptiness, and the dust that we sometimes look at. Through a text⁵ that is both a poem and a philosophy inspired by Epicurus, he guides me through my life and influences my vision of things. In an era saturated with images, we need to be influenced by texts and thoughts to create our own.

On a personal level, Henri Bergson taught me a lot, whether it was about abstraction, our relationship to time, or about philosophy itself. I would not be painting the same way without Bergson.

About this relationship to time, do you think that a painting, in addition to being a material object, is also the mark of a given time—a trace of your existence in time?

NB: Yes, we can see painting as something that has a temporality. It bears the traces of the events we have gone through with it, the marks of certain times of life, which can be hours, days, months, or years. It all depends on the intensity and the intention that we want to put into it.

5. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*.

But don't you sometimes feel sad when some works, that bear the traces of certain moments of life, leave the studio? Is it a feeling of dispossession?

CS: When we know that a work is finished, or that it has spent enough time in the studio, there is a kind of trigger that tells us it can go.

NB: There is an undeniable element of tragedy in finishing a painting. But the tragedy is not when the work leaves the studio, but rather, when the work stops. Finishing a work is as difficult as starting it.

And when you start painting a work, do you feel that you are painting it to finish it?

CS: Not really. When I started painting, I often had a fairly clear idea of what the painting should look like. But I accept more and more, now, that paintings take on a life of their own and I feel much freer for it. I no longer paint with images in front of my eyes, and I have realized that I don't need them to paint.

NB: You can start a work with an idea, but it will often evolve: what I'm curious about is how this idea moves over time. Like Christine, I used to paint with images at one point, but my practice has evolved a lot since then, and I no longer use them. I remember taking a photo in a train once, with one of its windows yellowed by time. I had started to paint my carriage and I absolutely wanted to represent this window, with its colour, its reflection and the landscape behind it. I had to synchronize the painting with the image I had in my mind. I had to synchronize my gestures with the image and elements I wanted to represent.

But when you paint, do you intend to represent a thing, or rather, the feeling of that thing?

CS: Representing the feeling has become increasingly important to me, because that's what's right for a painting.

NB: It's almost the opposite for me: I now try to represent something without moving away from sensation and feeling.

CS: Trying is vital. The things I paint are not in front of my eyes, they are only memories. And it's the impression of this mental memory, its evocation, that I try to represent. As a painter, you must keep trying in order to find the best way to represent these memories. Trying is a very humbling act.

Your practice is ultimately very marked by memory. One could almost speak of a painting of memory...

CS: Yes, in a way! I remember that during the first lockdown, Nathan would call me during his walks in Palaiseau⁶ and I thought about how lucky he was to be surrounded by that environment. I can't teleport myself to Lebanon to look at the mountains: they are just fragments of memories that I try to evoke.

NB: This is ultimately what differentiates our work: I am in the space that I paint, whereas Christine is far from it. And it is also a reflection of our two personal histories. We inherit the history of the landscapes we live in: they bear the marks of time and we evolve with them. The Palaiseau of today is much more built-up, but also much more wooded than at the time of my grandfather or my great-grandparents, when the first large urban complexes coexisted with the fields.

Christine, you were referring to the necessity of trying in painting. It reminds me of Nicolas de Staël, who once said that there were only two valid things in painting: the effervescence of authority and the effervescence of hesitation⁷. In the end, isn't it essential to hesitate in order to create something?

NB: I think that both authority and hesitation have always existed. They were described by the Venetians and Castiglione with the term *sprezzatura*. It refers to a certain nonchalance—the impression of achieving something without effort.

CS: Hesitation is part of the creative process and relates to humility. Authority must be applied to oneself first and foremost, in order to maintain the impulse to paint. If you want to keep painting, a certain amount of rigour is necessary. It's almost a kind of devotion.

NB: This sentence, like so many others, is right. But in the end, they are only words. And words do not make a painting.

6. Palaiseau is a small town just outside of Paris, where Nathan grew up and where he is currently based.

7. Nicolas de Staël, letter to the poet Pierre Leconte, 1953.

