



IDEAS

| #3 | EN |

GEORGE SEGAL BY NORMAN KLEEBLATT

JAN VAN IMSCHOOT BY SELEN ANSEN

CLAUDE VIALLAT BY ROMAIN MATHIEU

BILLIE ZANGAWA & DARIA DE BEAUVAIS

TEMPLON

ii

“POP WITH PATHOS?
GEORGE SEGAL’S PHANTOMS”
NORMAN KLEEBLATT
PAGE 2

JAN VAN IMSCHOOT
“EEL SOUP”
SELEN ANSEN
PAGE 8

“CLAUDE VIALLAT:
A REALIST PAINTER”
ROMAIN MATHIEU
PAGE 16

CONVERSATION BETWEEN
BILLIE ZANGAWA
& DARIA DE BEAUVAIS
PAGE 22

Cover: Claude Viallat, *Sans titre n°117* (detail), 2000. Acrylic on canvas, 220 × 268 cm – 86⁷/₈ × 105¹/₂ in. Back cover: *Soldier of Love* (detail), 2020. Embroidered silk, 110 × 135 cm – 43²/₇ × 53¹/₈ in. Right: George Segal, *42nd Street Deli* (detail), 1999. Plaster, paint, plastic, wood, light bulbs, Lite-Brite pegs and electric energy, 244 × 244 × 81,5 cm – 96 × 96 × 32 in. Page 14: Jan Van Imschoot, *L'échange des bêtises*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 190 × 340 cm – 74⁴/₅ × 133⁷/₈ in. Page 26: Billie Zangewa, *Portrait of the Artist in Springtime*, 2022. Embroidered silk, 57 × 55 cm – 22²/₇ × 21³/₈ in.



POP WITH PATHOS? GEORGE SEGAL'S PHANTOMS

NORMAN KLEEBLATT

Art historian and curator Norman Kleeblatt illuminates the work of the most existentialist of Pop artists, George Segal, with a personal and retrospective vision.

Visitors to the Whitney Museum in late 2010 encountered George Segal's monumental sculpture *Walk, Don't Walk*, 1976 immediately upon exiting the beefy elevators of its Brutalist Breuer building. The arresting sculpture was the opening salvo for the exhibition "Singular Vision" and included three life-scale figures stopped at a pedestrian traffic signal. A found industrial traffic light set the stage; the figures were cast in Segal's physically straightforward, yet complex plaster technique. The show, organized by Dana Miller and the then newly appointed curator Scott Rothkopf (now the Whitney's director), offered

curators the opportunity to closely examine the museum's permanent collection and to select important, large-scale works that had not been on view for some time. As important, the range of the ten works shown did not readily conform with the clear stylistic categories and canonical assumptions still rigorously accepted at the time Segal grew to artistic maturity. Nine other similarly staged pieces complemented Segal's installation and included an environment by Ed Kienholz, the heartbreaking death portrait of Felix Partz by AA Bronson, and an unusual boxing-rink installation by the painter/draftsman Gary Simmons. Abstract work by minimalist Robert Grosvenor and a major post-minimal sculpture by Eva Hesse were

Left: *Blue Woman Sitting on a Bed*, 1996. Plaster, paint and wood, 244 × 245 × 211 cm – 96 × 96½ × 83 in.



also presented. Most of the art on view exploited weight and materiality, and most used or implied the figure. The strategy here was not to encourage the usual, smart connections and comparisons still common to standard curatorial practice. By creating discrete spaces to display each of the featured projects, the curators instead invited viewers to slow down, concentrate, and interact intimately with each work, one at a time.

Segal's mature sculpture emerged as Pop Art rose to its ascendancy; his environments initially sequestered along with the then current, cool, detached, media-obsessed movement. From the start, Segal's signature style of casting and the psychological ambiguity and complexity of his figures left critics stammering. Typing and placing Segal's art into the matrix of art produced in New York during the 1960s and 1970s was not easy. To wit: in 1963, both Segal and Warhol were commissioned to create portraits of the protean collectors of new art—Ethel and Robert Scull. Warhol's iconic *Ethel Scull, thirty-six times*, was completed that same year. Segal's double portrait appeared two years later. With such prescient commissions from the ultimate insiders, the Sculls, it was natural to position Segal as a leader in the same circle that in addition to Andy Warhol, included Roy Lichtenstein, and Claes Oldenburg among others. In due course, Robert Scull became dubbed the “pop of Pop,” and hoped to be considered “...[L]ike the guy who sponsored Giotto's frescoes.” It follows that one might fairly consider both Warhol and Segal the court portraitists of the movement. Top collectors of Abstract

Expressionist art and of Pop Art, the Sculls also financed Richard Bellamy's influential Green Gallery where Segal was part of its stable.¹ The discussion of where Segal's art could be located within the contemporary scene is much debated in the literature on the artist, especially in his early career. In many ways positioning Segal remains as difficult as was the case for his forbear and major influence, Lithuanian-born Parisian painter Chaim Soutine. George and I spoke extensively of his veneration for Soutine and Soutine's important influence early in Segal's career. Soutine's 1950 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art would certainly have been important for the youthful Segal who was just beginning to earn his creds in art and art history. I drew on input from Segal for the programming around the 1998 Soutine monograph I co-curated at the Jewish Museum, New York. For like Segal, the master of the *École de Paris* is not-easily categorized; his expressionist style is a contradiction to much of the inter-war School of Paris painting². Like Soutine's un-Parisian interwar expressionism—more Germanic than French—one commentator, Joan Pachner, observed that the pathos of Segal's remote, often desolate figures does not fit with what she called the “upbeat emotional pathos” of Pop³. Was the paradox of Pachner's phrase intentional? Martin Friedman, the risk-taking director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, called Segal's work “an anomaly... its descriptive, introspective character out of phase... with the ironic commentary of his [Pop] contemporaries....”⁴



Miles & Monique, c.1980. Plaster and paint, 122 × 61 × 38 cm – 48 × 24 × 15 in.

Simply put, Segal himself felt that his work combined both formal and expressive elements of the preceding Abstract Expressionist movement, joining them with aspects of the Pop phenomenon. His personal reflections offer a more complex picture of what he was after within the sensibilities of what were in fact the artistically diverse, often divisive, and complicated 1960s—more so than generally acknowledged at the time. In 1967, the South Brunswick, New Jersey sculptor, Segal recalled that the decade was “characterized by a unique openness of attitude, a willingness to use unfamiliar materials, forms, and unorthodox stances in the work produced, an unwillingness to accept standard value judgments, a tendency to probe, act, live, and work with final judgement suspended, an appreciation

of the mystery, unknowability, ambiguity of the simplest things.”⁵

The multi-dimensional insights of Segal's observations clearly reflect a highly nuanced understanding of that decade including at very least the Happenings pioneered by his close friend Allan Kaprow and the transatlantic Fluxus movement. The critical attempts to find a secure—yes, even contradictory—place for Segal within a usual art historical box however has led to expanded perspectives on the sculptor's singular vision. Major art historians and curators took their turn offering interpretations about Segal's art. One of the most unusual of such discussions is a filmed visit to Segal's studio by the legendary, broad-ranging art historian Meyer Schapiro. Coincidentally Schapiro, like Segal, was also an energetic enthusiast for the work of Chaim Soutine, discussing Soutine's works in his classes and ultimately prompting the Museum of Modern Art's first US retrospective on the artist⁶. The Segal/Schapiro interview was produced and directed by Michael Blackwood, the noted filmmaker who created documentaries of numerous major artists of the period, including among others Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Vija Celmins, and Philip Guston. The visit of Schapiro to Segal's modified chicken coop/studio in South Brunswick offers intimate glimpses of the mutual interests that grounded the relationship between sculptor and art historian as well as their common humanist sensibilities. In the film Schapiro teases out impressive aspects of Segal's sculpture and thinking. Segal comments smartly on the contradictory nature of the Greek

sculptural ideal with what he calls an “abominable travesty of [modern] beauty”—the department store mannequin. Similarly, Segal critiques how the emotive abstraction of the preceding generation of the Abstract Expressionists “ignore[s] flesh and blood.” Segal regales Schapiro with his long evening bar hopping with Barnett Newman in which a discussion ensues about Newman’s iconic *Abraham*, 1949, one of the Abstract Expressionist’s early zips. Segal challenges the epic Abstract Expressionist, claiming that Newman’s highly controlled abstraction, which the older artist claimed to be a personal reckoning with both his father and the biblical patriarch, was becoming so “pure” it was divorced from flesh⁷.

On the other hand, Schapiro reaches back into earlier modernism, comparing Segal’s interest in the commonplace in general and the worker specifically with figures in certain paintings by the Impressionist Gustave Caillebotte. And, you guessed it, the figures in Soutine’s paintings are also mentioned. Around 1979, when the film was made, Segal had already begun adding color to some of his figures for almost a decade. Schapiro talks about the differences between colors from nature, e.g. green and ochre, and the multiple meanings of more symbolic colors such as blue. In his broad learned approach to art, life, and literature, the famed art historian and thinker calls on Keats and Goethe. Smartly Schapiro remarked on the paradoxical artifice of Segal’s plasters set into scenarios with “real” scavenged, discarded objects from everyday life. Ultimately the famed art historian found mystery and strangeness in what he calls Segal’s environments

and considered the sculptor’s figures as “phantom[s] in three dimensions.”⁸

Other art historians also probed deeply—symbolically, metaphorically, and historically—into the meanings and effects of Segal’s art. For one, Martin Friedman commented on the artist’s “effort to symbolize the fusion of matter and spirit” and how this can result in “a cabbalistic experience.”⁹ Classical art is frequently mentioned in relation to Segal’s sculpture, but of course there are also biblical references and resonances. Figures like Charon and Venus, Abraham and Noah are comparatively noted throughout the literature. A wide range of art historical references spans millennia: Old Kingdom Egyptian statuary, Giotto—a favorite of Segal, Donatello, as well as Degas, Soutine, and naturally Hopper. The color added to his later figures also has been discussed



Body Fragment #4, 1980. Plaster and paint, 76 × 51 × 13 cm – 30 × 20 × 5 in.

as response to Ellsworth Kelly’s calculated abstractions and Barnett Newman’s color fields. Cited as well are Segal’s obvious influences (as well as radical contrast with) the sculptors John de Andrea and Duane Hanson. Important artists of prior generations also weighed in: Marcel Duchamp carefully juxtaposing Segal’s deployment of everyday objects to his own early 20th century invention of Dada. Duchamp claimed that “with Segal it is not a matter of the found object, it’s the chosen object.”¹⁰ Interesting that there are relatively few literary, theatrical, or filmic references in the writing on Segal. Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is mentioned in reference to Segal’s unusual—somewhat surreal—*The Costume Party*, 1972 as well as the chance mention of the existentialist writer Samuel Beckett. This is true despite Segal’s frequent discussions of the influence of Hollywood on him and his personal struggle with commercial cinema’s predictability and conceits. Segal’s figures

relate to the characters in the plays of Sam Shepard, who though nearly a generation younger than Segal was already becoming active in the early 1960s. Described as “ghosts,”¹¹ “mummies,”¹² “golems,”¹³ and “phantoms,”¹⁴ one might consider Segal’s figural actors’ “hermetic insularity”¹⁵ sharing the desolation of Shepherd’s characters but lacking the playwright’s utter desperation. Early interpretation of the South Brunswick sculptor coincided with the idea of “theatricality” as a dirty word for art. Nevertheless, what are Segal’s stage sets if not theatrical, despite the subtle, understated, and ambiguous nature of their emotive substance. Such contemporaneous literary, yes theatrical, references would offer new insights into George Segal’s sculpture as well as the nature of the US psyche at the time.

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George Segal, *Nocturnal Fragments’ Templon New York, until October 28, 2023.*

1. Judith E. Stein, *The Eye of the Sixties; Richard Bellamy and the Transformation of Modern Art*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016: 20–210, 215, 247. Melissa Rachleff Burt, *Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952–1965*, 2017 ex.cat. pp.224–225.
2. See Kenneth E. Silver, “Where Soutine Belongs: His Art and Critical Reception in Paris Between the Wars” in Norman L. Kleeblatt and Kenneth E. Silver (Eds.), *An Expressionist in Paris: The Paintings of Chaim Soutine*, Munich: Prestel, 1998, p. 19.
3. Joan Pachner, “George Segal” in George Segal, Carroll Janis, and Joan Pachner, *George Segal: Bronze*, Exh. Cat., New York: Mitchell-Innis Nash, p. 17.
4. Martin Friedman, *George Segal: Proletarian Mythmaker*, Exh. Cat., 1978, The Walker Art Center. p.9.
5. Barbara Rose and Irving Sandler, “Sensibilities of the Sixties,” *Art in America*, Vol. 55, No. 1, January-February, 1967. p. 55.
6. Monroe Wheeler, *Soutine*, Exh. Cat., New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1950. Meyer Schapiro’s advocacy of a Soutine retrospective in the US, more specifically in New York, was long-standing, starting shortly after Soutine’s death in 1943 and the end of WWII.

7. Michael Blackwood Productions, “The Artist’s Studio: Meyer Schapiro Visits George Segal”, 2018 [1979]. Retrieved September 2, 2023, from: <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/schapirosegal>. In a 1986 essay for a George Segal catalogue at the Sidney Janis gallery, noted art historian Robert Rosenblum uses similar descriptions to Schapiro’s 1979 comments. Here Rosenblum talks about “discrepancies between artifice and reality.” Robert Rosenblum, *George Segal*, Exh. Cat., New York: Sidney Janis Gallery, 1986.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Martin Friedman, *Ibid.* 23.
10. Jan Van Der Marck, *George Segal*, New York: Abrams, 1975. p.26.
11. Sam Hunter, *George Segal*, New York: Rizzoli, 1989, p.6.
12. Allan Kaprow, “Segal’s vital mummies,” *Art News*, February 1964, pp. 30–34.
13. Sam Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
14. Meyer Schapiro in Michael Blackwood Productions, *op. cit.*
15. Sidra Stich, *Made in U.S.A.: an Americanization in modern art, the '50s & '60s*, Exh. Cat., Berkeley: University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley : University of California Press, 1987., p.72.

EEL SOUP

SELEN ANSEN

Selen Ansen's ten-day poetic and theoretical exploration of Jan Van Imschoot's works exhibited at the S.M.A. K. An essay about ghosts, Aby Warburg, Georges Bataille and Edouard Manet, among others.

The women say that they expose their genitals so that the sun may be reflected therein as in a mirror.

Monique Wittig, *The Guerrillères*¹

At that moment, I understood that we were going to go downwards. It was over, we would never go up.

Georges Bataille, *Éponine*²

One day, the iconologist Aby Warburg, who studied the 'survival' and 'revenge' of the gestures of pathos through the ages, believed himself to be Saturn³. Suffering from episodes of delirium at the end of the First World War, he was persuaded that the meat he ingested was the flesh of his children. This personal chaos gave him further proof that bygones resurface in the present – and that the past produces

the future. In the short time between his recovery and death, Warburg continued his study of the migration of forms by means of his *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924–9). His montage of heterogeneous images invalidates the chronological conception of historical time through the use of anachronisms and strives to reveal that the visual culture of humanity is made up of 'ghosts': expressive forms from the past that return to the surface to haunt the images produced by the living. In this compilation of images, one sees the capacity of gestures to never quite die – and to resurface at any moment.

DAY 1 / [...]

As for me, I look at Jan's works and see something entirely different. In them I see existences magnetised by the ground, warning me that everything falls and keeps



La vie stigmatisée, 2022. Oil on canvas, 170 × 190 cm – 66⁷/₈ × 74⁴/₅ in.

falling. I see the putrescible flesh and prosaic bodies assuring us that we will not fly / that we die and reach climax here on earth. I also see lines of forces and oppositions; the rise of impulses and fantasies; the descent of solids and fluids, the fall of ideals; means of inebriation alongside instruments of crime; the macabre rubbing shoulders with laughter.

DAY 2 / [...]

Everything falls and keeps falling. The fall of things on high counterbalanced by the rise

of things down low suggests to me that Jan's figurative approach is complicit in a form of abstraction; that his gesture does not aim to depict violence for its own sake, nor even to feed its desire for overkill; that it seeks instead to highlight the repression of violence. To show that buried things resurface, loaded with the weight of their accumulated silence, with the strength to impact the present and impress the future. Jan has (at least) one brother-in-arms in his fight against the levelling out of images, the civilising fable that makes violence

His cutting
images give
access to
the **CHASMS** by
superimposing
layers,
by piling up
surfaces.

the great other of humankind, the division between *humanitas* and *animalitas* which is a cultural decision and not a state of affairs. In the last century, ‘Monsieur Bataille’, who appears alongside ‘Miss Struggle’ in the title of the work with the acephalous trunk, dubbed this struggle ‘base materialism’ before preferring the term ‘heterology’. Writing about the paintings in the Palaeolithic cave of Lascaux⁴, Georges Bataille affirms the visceral link of ‘image acts’⁵ with eroticism, murder and the sacred. [...]

DAY 3 / [...]

I was wrong to think that Jan’s painting mimics the natural movement of material life by applying Newton’s laws to the things and bodies it de-figures. These streaks, which make a round, almost childlike, writing drool, extend the enterprise of desublimation to the painting itself. They highlight its surface quality, the flatness and material limitations of its support. [...]

Altering what he has at hand, cutting down what history has elevated, is probably what Jan continues to do by creating a painting that brandishes its material condition, instructs nothing, tells nothing, and forsakes grand narratives and heroic gestures to highlight prosaic existences. [...]

DAY 5 / Yesterday, I was about to assert that Jan proceeds the way a surgeon uses his scalpel/a butcher uses his knife. Today, I changed my mind. His gesture does not slit matter, but rather adds matter to matter. His cutting images give access to the chasms by superimposing layers, by piling up surfaces. It took me some time to realise



La réflexion sur le présent et les présents, 2021.
Oil on canvas, 170 × 190 cm – 66⁷/₈ × 74⁴/₅ in.

the obvious: that there is an elementary difference between the bodies Jan de-figures and the one we possess. Unlike the human body, which can only remain immobile for a limited time, these are frozen for an indeterminate time in a gesture, a scene, a system, a circuit of exchange. [...] Gradually, I see them appear. The *revenants*. Motifs and objects that migrate from one canvas to another, past images that re-emerge once, twice and many more times to haunt the surfaces of the present. Unlike the unconscious ‘revenances’ that Warburg sought to highlight in his *Mnemosyne Atlas*, the *revenants* that Jan deploys are conscious resurgences. In other words, his paintings inhabit in full consciousness a territory already populated by a crowd of images, by peaks reached, chasms explored, already hierarchised by symbols. The present time of the image I contemplate is a montage of multiple and heterogeneous times. And Jan, who dismantles chronology, thus creates a very personal genealogy. [...]

DAY 8 / From one ghost to another. I seem to be able to identify without difficulty the old image that resurfaces in *L'Échange des bêtises* with a new look. If commentators of the day are to be believed, Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* was greeted with horrified cries at its inaugural exhibition in 1863 at the Salon des refusés. [...] Manet profanes mythological and bucolic scenes represented by the older masters (Raphael, Titian, Giorgione) in order to subvert their well-behaved nudities and the pictorial conventions. Past, foreign or distant images return, never the same as themselves, never quite true to what they were; they return to a current place. Reinterpreting Manet's reinterpretation, *L'Échange des bêtises* is a mise-en-abyme, a game of mirrors that attests that a ghost never comes alone. [...]

Jan brings everything to the foreground, in the sunlight: the water and the woman,



Le jeu des jumeaux d'antan. A shepherdess' madness in a flying oyster bar, 2020. Oil on canvas, 190 × 170 cm - 74 1/8 × 66 7/8 in.

whom he undresses in passing. His gesture readjusts the distances, reorganises the distribution of bodies and the circuit of gazes. It suppresses at the same time the elsewhere and the depth, establishes the reign of the here and the surface. Everything is there / nothing is there. [...]

Times have changed since the offended cries of the Salon des refusés. The genitals made the veils drop; they emancipated themselves from the bedrooms, bathrooms, bucolic landscapes, painters' studios, from those rare places where their nudity was acceptable. Now, they show themselves off, go out in the open without the need for excuses. The object of the scandal is no longer the genitals represented as exposed and naked in the variety of their states, of their actions, of their possible uses and in the variety of places. The ageless scandal consists of treating genitals (whatever they are) as we treat a face. [...]

DAY 10 / [...]

The eel soup (*Aalsuppe*) is a traditional Hamburg dish prepared with leftovers and heterogeneous ingredients. This 'all soup'⁶ did not originally contain eel. From one eel to another. [...]

The eel-soup-without-eel is, so to speak, the price to pay for accessing the knots and complexity of existence. To grasp these knots, it is advisable to close one's mouth, to open one's eyes, and to look at the images that are the repository of them. Then it happens that, when looking at an image and its own knots, one sees the *revenants*: the crowd of past gestures which are given a new life by impregnating themselves with the current times. It is by looking

at this knot of images, by seeking in the heterogeneous the spectacle of 'a world that was taking on coherence'⁷, that Warburg



L'amélioration de l'inexistence, 2022. Oil on canvas, 170 × 150 cm - 66 7/8 × 59 in.

found his head again after having lost it. On my whitewashed wall Curlieman, Baubo, Miss Struggle, Monsieur Bataille, Édouard, Aby, Madame Edwarda, Sainte-Victoire and all the others cohabitate in juxtaposition. I tell myself that, as far as Jan's painting is concerned, the eel soup underlies the rejection of the aquarium. And that the way it raises and intensifies our base and heterogeneous lives makes it possible to grasp things with a blinding homogeneity.

—
Jan Van Imschoot, 'The End is Never Near' S.M.A.K., Ghent, Belgium, until March 3rd, 2024.

THIS TEXT CONSISTS OF SELECTED EXCERPTS FROM SELEN ANSEN'S ESSAY "EEL SOUP", PUBLISHED IN THE END IS NEVER NEAR, A MONOGRAPH CO-EDITED BY S.M.A.K., FONDS MERCATOR AND TEMPLON (2022).

1. Monique Wittig, *The Guérillères* (London, 1971), p. 19.
2. Georges Bataille, 'Éponine', *Poèmes et nouvelles érotiques* (Paris, 1999), p. 81 (quote translated from the French by Claire Cahm).
3. The Romans associated Saturn with Cronos, the Greek god of Time, who devoured his own children one by one as they were born for fear of being dethroned by them.
4. Lascaux; or, *The Birth of Art* by Georges Bataille was published

the same year as his essay on *Manet* (1955).
5. I use this with reference to the term 'image acts' coined by Horst Bredekamp. See Horst Bredekamp, *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency* (Berlin/Boston, 2017).
6. One might assume that this bizarre phrase stems from the phonetic proximity between the dialect terms *aol suppe* (all soup) and *aalsuppe* (eel soup).
7. Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch* (New York, 2016), p. 469.



CLAUDE VIALLAT: A REALIST PAINTER

ROMAIN MATHIEU

Romain Mathieu takes an uninhibited look at realism in the work of Claude Viallat, one of the founders of the Supports/Surfaces movement.

To write about the work of Claude Viallat is to deal with a form of painting that transcends the commentary it elicits. Viallat's painting is primitivist, yet may take on pop art or kitsch accents when playing with the colored reflections of a sequined fabric. The monochromatic rows of forms in certain works have a remarkable asceticism, yet the painting also has a decorative luxuriance. The expanding formats are translated into an occupation of space, a strategy of surface covering that is immediately contradicted by the fillets, hoops, or thin ribbons within which the painting takes form in the spaces it creates. Viallat's painting goes beyond interpretation, not only because of the vast quantity of canvases and objects produced but also because it defies contradiction and therefore the categories to which it might be

confined, just as artists abolished the picture frame through the deconstruction of easel painting. To transcend any commentary is perhaps characteristic of any great work, but this is a distinctive aspect of the work of Claude Viallat in its principle of inversion of front and back, as in the front and back of the work's surface, playing on itself over and over, at once reiterating itself in a movement that the artist himself describes as a "spiraling," feeding on all it can take for itself.

For this process of impression is one of taking, of taking in painting, of bringing a seemingly unlimited multiplicity of *supports* into the painting. It is significant that Viallat originally thought of the hand as the primary form—that prehensile hand which he later applied to pebbles and wood—before adopting a more neutral form



Sans titre n°301, 2020. Acrylic on military tarpaulin, 131 × 284 cm – 51³/₈ × 111⁴/₈ in.

devoid of any symbolism or label. There is something gargantuan in Viallat's work, a movement that absorbs materials, forms, and colors, besides art historical references and even his own paintings, redoing, in recent years, in different ways, what he has done before. But at the center of this movement of ingestion and digestion, it is not so much the artist that we perceive—his self-effacement before the pictorial process is perfectly captured in the 1974 publication of a photograph of Viallat at a *course libre* bullfight, as he moves out of the camera's frame leaving the bull alone in the ring¹; no, the heart of Viallat's painting, the center of this spiraling movement, is rather the studio and with it the presence of the artist's body.

Claude Viallat lives and works in Nîmes. An artist's biography traditionally begins,

before the list of exhibitions, with a somewhat abrupt indication of location, whose relevance may be purely administrative or practical, or have greater significance. Where Viallat is concerned, these few words constitute a sort of extremely condensed commentary, blending biography, work, and place: the artist's studio. The artist's exhibition at the Carré d'Art in Nîmes is therefore of particular significance, reflecting the close relationship between studio and city.

The studio is precisely the place where inside and outside meet. It is an enclosed space, set back from the street, inhabited and transformed by the painter's work, with works on the wall or on the floor or elsewhere in the space, a mixture of recent canvases and objects and older works in which memories surface. It is a place into

which fabrics, canvases, objects gathered by the artist or brought by friends flow and converge, in a sort of underground circulation that connects the studio, the city, and, through capillary action, the world. These many and varied traces of life, individual and collective stories, wash up here in this place to become paintings, like the driftwood that Viallat often uses for these objects and that comes from the wide beaches of the Camargue, where forms are shaped by the salt, water, and wind.

The other flow connecting the studio to the city is naturally that of *corridas*, but perhaps that flow should not be distinguished and taken as one element among others in this circulation, but simply one that is more intense, in the artist's passion for the spectacle and in its being part of the city. Here, too, the *corridas* paintings, on their precarious surfaces, like a sort of primary, necessary figurative impulse, are accompanied by gathered and collected objects, indicating the clear connection between these works and the rest of the artist's process.

This collecting of elements in the studio, in the assemblage of objects and the painting of fabrics, is a record of the shaping of forms by time and human life. This recording does not seek to elevate but to transform and to show what is present from a new perspective, through new expression. It reveals a past and gives a new existence in the present. Tent canvases, parasols, curtains, armchair materials, blinds, sheets, dresses... countless fabrics steeped in stories, places, eras, and also aesthetics and the desires from which they were born, and each of us might "recognize" some of

them, from our own life history: a child's bed sheet with a 1980s print, material for a stripy dress, a grandma's curtain fabric, a café terrasse awning... Viallat's painting does not cover; it absorbs, takes what there is, the sometimes complex formats turning into pictorial spaces, with the motifs and the materials, reacting differently to the application of the color. In this flow of life, art history mingles with the banal, as in the artist's many *Hommages*, which are revealed in the relation between the painting and the materials, such as the *Hommage à Zeuxis* with the bunch-of-grapes motif on the fabric. It is tempting to compare this use of materials with collage, a technique that Viallat did in fact use in works before the adoption of his form in 1966. But collage is the integration into the picture of fragments that retain their alterity, as intrusions of the real in the pictorial space. With Viallat, this distinction disappears: the painting's surface is one



Claude Viallat passing the bull during a *course libre* in Aubais, c.1970

of its materials. The artist prefers joining to collage: in other words, the end-to-end joining of fragments that together become painting.

Claude Viallat's painting rejects the image as the sole reality of the "work," with the exception of the *corridas*. So it would seem far removed from any form of realism. And yet, when one leaves Viallat's studio, after observing the works laid out over the floor and seeing their colors, after that extraordinary moment of the emergence of the painting in its folds and unfolding, another famous studio in the history of art springs to mind: that of Gustave Courbet and the painter's depiction of it.² In that canvas, Courbet paints a landscape freehand, an unclothed woman standing next to him and a child looking at the work, the artist surrounded by the society of his time and his friends and family as well as ordinary people. Courbet declared, with regard to this painting, that "it is the world that comes to be painted at the studio."³ With Claude Viallat, there is no depiction, of course, but the world also comes to be painted, literally. In 1861, Courbet wrote: "I maintain, in addition, that painting is an essentially concrete art and can only consist of the representation of real and existing things. It is a completely physical language, the words of which consist of all visible objects; an object which is abstract, not visible, non-existent, is not within the realm of painting. Imagination in art consists in knowing how to find the most complete expression of an existing thing, but never in inventing or creating that thing itself."⁴ There is no doubt that, for Viallat, painting is an absolutely concrete art, but



Sans titre, 1978.
Acrylic on tarpaulin, 275,5 × 200 cm - 108½ × 78¾ in.

"to find expression of an existing thing" is also an extremely pertinent definition of this artist's painting, in the relation between color and surface.

While the term "realism" is highly ambiguous—Courbet himself said as much and I take the liberty of using the word here, too—it correlates with a quest for truth that was noted by the critics of Courbet's painting at the presentation of his *Atelier*: he is "more concerned with truth than with beauty."⁵ The concern for truth is also present in the work of Viallat; it is essential in challenging the notion of painting as a scene and painting as a material process. But truth also lies in the relationship with the real that is part of Viallat's painting. It is perhaps the *corridas* works that express

There is
something
gargantuanesque in
Viallat's work,
a **MOVEMENT**
that **ABSORBS**
materials, forms,
and colors...

this presence of the real most directly, not because of the images they create but because this concern for truth lies in the repetition of the bull motif, breaking into the painting like an element of the real. In bullfighting, the confrontation with the bull is wholly truthful—“in the ring everything is for real,” observed the famous *toreador* José Tomás.⁶ How could it be otherwise, in that moment where the man stands between the bull's horns, risking his life, and when naked, bloody reality prevails? Yet as Paco Aguado remarks, “each toreador to his own truth, so there are any number of truths in the *torero*: ephemeral or eternal, light or profound, festive or tragic, self-evident or discreet, tough or delicate, fast-paced or slow, baroque or neoclassical, avant-garde, with *tremendismo*, artistic, warrior-like, in the style of El Gallo or of Belmonte... and all these truths demand from those who exhibit them on this chessboard of sand a raw sincerity; the very same as that demanded by the infallible judge that emerges unconsciously in our minds every afternoon from the darkness of the *toril*.”⁷ In the insatiable repetition of the act of painting, the canvases of Claude Viallat are always exploring this multiple truth through which

the real is shown: lavish or bare, festive or grave, serious or ironic, cheerful or melancholic, sunny or dark, anxious or carefree, sometimes feminine, often erotic. Among the many possible readings that it offers, Viallat's work is a response to that fundamental aspiration of painting which is to paint the world. If Viallat's artist's studio is a bullring, it is not in reference to a struggle—to borrow the image used for the action painters—but because that aspiration requires the greatest sincerity with this world that enters and becomes painting. It is with this sincerity that Claude Viallat's painting finds the most truthful expression of that which exists, and that his work is, in its way, a painting of history, of our individual and collective lives.

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Claude Viallat, ‘*Et pourtant si...*’
Carré d'Art, Nîmes, France, October 27,
2023 – March 3, 2024.

Claude Viallat, ‘*A Couple of Sidesteps*’
Templon Brussels, until November 4, 2023.

Claude Viallat, ‘*Hommage à la couleur.*
Toiles 1966 – 2023’ Templon Paris,
November 8 – December 23, 2023.

1. *Course libre* bullfight, Aubais, 1969, photograph by Henriette Viallat, in *Claude Viallat*, exhibition catalogue, Musée d'Art et d'Industrie, Saint-Etienne, 1974.

2. G. Courbet, *L'Atelier du peintre, allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique*, 1855, oil on canvas, 359 × 598 cm, Paris, musée d'Orsay.

3 P. Ten-Doesschate Chu, *Correspondance de Courbet*, Paris, Flammarion, 1996.

4. Gustave Courbet, *Peut-on enseigner l'art* [“Art Cannot Be Taught”], (1861), Paris, L'échoppe, 2016.

5. Théophile Gautier, “Salon de 1850-1851, M. Courbet,” fourth article. *La Presse*, February 15, 1851.

6. José Tomás, *Dialogue avec Navegante*, French trans. François Zumbiehl, Vauvert, Au Diable Vauvert, 2013.

7. Paco Aguado, “Vérités sur le sable de l'arène,” French trans. François Zumbiehl, in José Tomás, *Dialogue avec Navegante*, op. cit.



CONVERSATION BETWEEN BILLIE ZANGEWA & DARIA DE BEAUVAIS

Conducted by curator Daria de Beauvais, this conversation with Billie Zangewa revisits the origins of the artist's textile practice, her spiritual visions and commitment, the question of power and the latest developments in her work.

DDB: Let's begin with the techniques you use, such as sewing – an ancestral, intercultural gesture, traditionally defined as “feminine”. How did you come to it?

BZ: First of all, I think it's because I'm a very tactile person and I've always been, since I was a little girl. Tactility is really an obsession for me.

It also comes from those moments when I was watching my mum and her sewing group in the lounge, and I saw how it impacted their psychology. Some of the women went from being stressed out about

their marriages and homes and whatever, and it just became so peaceful and zen; it was almost like meditation. I was a young child so obviously I had no words for it but I knew there was something very important happening in that room and I knew it had something to do with the repetition of stitching and sewing. And maybe the fact of being in a group, although I don't work that way. I definitely saw something there. I don't know why but I never asked my mum to teach me to sew. I only started sewing when it was proposed in primary school, I did it with my peers so I guess what I wanted was to be surrounded by girls my age and all of us trying to learn how to do this thing. That's really where it began

Left: *At the End of the Day* (detail), 2020.
Embroidered silk, 137 × 109 cm – 53⁷/₈ × 42⁷/₈ in.

and how I ended up coming back to it and using it as my medium of self-expression. It was first about necessity; I had no resources so I had to be quite inventive and creative. Again, it's also about meditation so it's a very empowering act for me when I sew – it's not just stitch in and out, in and out – I'm *actually* creating my future in a way. I know some people are not spiritual and they don't believe in projecting desires into the future, but I think that's where the power lies for me. I believe that I manifest myself through the sewing. Even though I have assistants I always make sure I sew, always make sure I find the time for it as it puts me in a specific state of mind.

DDB: That's interesting because you started speaking about the sense of being part of – of belonging to – a community, with your mum's sewing group and you learning with your peers, and then moving on to something very solitary and meditative – more looking inward than outward.

BZ: Exactly, because I am a very introverted person and I do love to be with myself. I can sew when my family or friends are around but it is very important to me to see sewing as an opportunity to find inner clarity. If the whole world could just do craft for an hour every day, I feel like it would be a better world!

DDB: Continuing with your techniques, you have always been working with silk, a material that is both natural and precious. You have mentioned your interest in this fabric for its luminosity and reflective effects – can you tell me more?

BZ: A friend of mine was an interior decorator and I would go with her to collect fabric swatches, to source samples for her clients. I would go home and lay down silk pieces and be very much impressed by their nuances. Depending on where in the weave we place it against the light, it can have the subtlety of paint. I was really, truly moved by this. Also, I had never lived in the city before – I'd lived in suburbia my whole life. And I saw the glass panels on the building surfaces, which reminded me of the silk nuances and reflections. That's where the connection went for me: the nuanced squares of silk and the glass surfaces of the buildings. That's what first led me to work on architecture in my creations; it was a jumping-off point. Then, as I've mentioned, I'm obsessed with texture and tactility. And raw silk is just so sexy!

Of course, when I started thinking about it, as my process was developing, I realised it was no accident that I stumbled upon silk because it's a product of transformation, and all I've ever been trying to do is transform something within myself into something else. Initially it was about difficult emotions and situations. And at the end I get these beautiful artworks even though it still reveals my pain or fragility, but the joyous moments as well. In a way, what I was seeking was also seeking me. And this is something I like to say, that I was on the path to meet silk because it was how I was going to be expressing myself.

DDB: Your works sometimes appear to have an "unfinished" aspect. Is this a way to let the work's narrative go on?



Soldier of Love, 2020.
Embroidered silk, 110 × 135 cm – 43²/₇ × 53¹/₈ in.

BZ: It is first about bringing us back to the medium because if it was all perfect it would look like a canvas, that's why I make it more textured. It also speaks to the perfect and the imperfect, as I like to call it. I believe all of us have got wounds and scars, but society always wants us to project ourselves as perfect while it is the imperfect that makes us perfect. What I'm saying is that I am showing my vulnerability, my traumas – I'm showing the negative side of who I am but at the same time I'm celebrating. I believe that when we hide those damaged parts of ourselves, we create shame and shame is the most toxic emotion, an incredibly destructive feeling. The important thing is to be able to reclaim it, to feel 'I'm beautiful because of it and I'm beautiful in spite of it'. That's why I like the rough edges – as I said, it's both the perfect and the imperfect.

DDB: Following up on what you said, the missing fragments in your works could also be described as tearing apart, bringing forth a form of violence that contradicts

the scenes of peaceful everyday life that are mostly depicted.

BZ: Yes, because life is not easy. Even the way we come into the world is violent, both for mother and child. It's a traumatic event, but it bears this beautiful fruit. I feel that's the contradiction of nature we all have to live with. That there is violence and trauma, but there's also beauty and peace and gentleness. I'm really embracing all of that.

DDB: Indeed, love and a sense of peace both shine through a lot of your works, while the torn elements tell a different story, maybe something darker?

BZ: It's also a way of allowing a kind of interaction between myself and the viewer, where the viewer can finish the narrative. And there is as well a communication between my works: a missing part of one work can be a component of another one. But I love the idea of entropy, and I know we're going to this darker aspect, where things break down. It's open to interpretation, I think it's up to the viewers to decide what it means to them.

DDB: When I see your work, I think about this famous sentence: 'the personal is political', which appeared at the time of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s. It seems particularly relevant to your practice.

BZ: It makes sense for me in that I find so much meaning in the most mundane things, and elevating those mundane things does kind of politicise them. It's very exciting that I get obsessed with mundane things



and they mean something when they're exhibited or published. That's really exciting because it's just a reflection of who I am. I'm not a grand gesture person, I'm not waiting for some big movement to happen in the world for me to make art about. I am interested in fleeting moments and just taking the time to appreciate them as a lot of artists do, I believe.

DDB: Saying that you're not a grand gesture person shows that you are grounded in your work and your position as an artist. Important works are not necessarily grand gestures; humble works can be very strong, political, and meaningful. Your work seems tightly woven between the general and the particular, society and personal life, History and stories. How do you manage to position yourself on the threshold of these different strains?

BZ: I think that I just have to be authentic. I've had lots of different jobs in my life before I really decided to be an artist, knowing this decision would challenge me for the rest of my life. I knew I had to be authentic in sharing my experiences, so couldn't work about Apartheid in South Africa or pre-independent Malawi for instance, because those are not my experiences. That's how I started to focus on the personal. This is the one area in which I can be truly authentic. Even if the subconscious mind is a tricky space and we don't always really know ourselves fully...

DDB: There's also a double axis between the representation of the interior, the intimate, and that of the street, the public



La Tour, Ponte City, 2004.
Embroidered silk, 71 × 50 cm — 28 × 19 5/8 in.

space. In both cases, we are dealing with representations of moments that may seem insignificant, but which carry within them much more than that. I understand when you say you are not a political artist, but again, the personal is political and I think the mundane moments you represent can be the seeds of possible revolutions.

BZ: I think that sharing is powerful. If you share with somebody who feels unseen and alone, and you show them that you have those moments too, suddenly they're not alone anymore, they feel empowered. Also, maybe by highlighting very ordinary things there is a sense of affirmation.

DDB: On another note, architecture and public space have been for a long time

considered as masculine, while domestic space was a prison or refuge for women. But this historical "evidence" is not inevitable, as your work shows beautifully, going from urban landscapes to interior scenes. It's about putting women at the centre of a story from which they have been absent for too long.

BZ: Yes, exactly! Because nobody ever wanted to go into the homes and see what women were doing. For me, having a child did highlight the domestic space because I had to be in it, even though I had always been a homebody, in this particular instance there was a very strong reason why. That's really what opened my eyes to all the things that people staying home were doing but no one was acknowledging or seeing. And understanding also that the domestic landscape is a very challenging one, that there are so many things that you have to deal with.

DDB: I'm impressed by your ability to use personal stories to tackle social issues that shape the status of women, like the question of intimacy. You reveal things that are usually left unsaid, and reveal their relationship with the world, deciding by yourself what your role in the world is and what you want to do with it.

BZ: Life can be so beautiful if you're given the opportunity to find your path, when you follow the signs. I remember something I did when I was about five years old and we were still living in Malawi: women and children were supposed to welcome visitors, especially men, by kneeling down

and greeting them with one hand on your elbow, then with the other hand, in a submissive gesture. I was watching this and thinking: 'How come the men don't have to do it? Why is it always the women and the children?' So, I spoke to my dad one day and said: 'Daddy, I don't understand why the women and children have to kneel, and the men don't. I don't know how you're going to take this, but I'm never kneeling for anyone again. If it means that I'm not allowed to greet guests when they arrive at the house that's fine, but you cannot change my mind.' I was very lucky because he supported my decision, when he could have decided otherwise. He was like 'I've got a fierce female for a child and she's questioning conventions. So that was the breeding ground.'

DDB: To conclude, we could say that your work is about emancipation. Behind the apparently innocuous scenes that you create, there is a strong will asserting itself.

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'Billie Zangewa: Field of Dreams'
SITE Santa Fe, USA, November 17,
2023 — February 12, 2024.
'Billie Zangewa, A Quiet Fire'
Tramway, Glasgow, Scotland,
until January 28, 2024.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

SELEN ANSEN (b. 1975) is an art theorist and curator who lives and works in Istanbul. Holding a PhD in Theories and Practices of the Arts from Strasbourg March Bloch University, Ansen has taught in the fields of comparative literature, theory of the arts and aesthetics in various universities and superior art schools in France and Turkey. Since 2015, she has been Senior Curator at Arter, a non-profit institution for contemporary art based in Istanbul. Ansen has contributed to exhibition catalogues and artist monographs, and curated several exhibitions at an international level.

DARIA DE BEAUVAIS is Senior Curator at the Palais de Tokyo (Paris), independent curator and writer. She has curated or co-curated numerous exhibitions, both solo and group shows (including the 15th Lyon Biennale in 2019 and “Reclaim the Earth” in 2022). She teaches “Exhibition Practice” at the Panthéon-Sorbonne University and is co-head with Morgan Labar of the research seminar “Indigeneity, Hybridity, Anthropophagy” at the École normale supérieure. Her experience has included roles in institutions and galleries in France, Italy and the US.

Right: Jan Van Imschoot, *Le déménagement des temps* (detail), 2019. Oil on canvas, 130 × 150 cm – 51¹/₈ × 59 in.

ROMAIN MATHIEU is an art historian and art critic. He teaches at the École Supérieure d’Art et Design in Saint-Étienne and at Aix-Marseille University and has been published extensively in France and abroad, on contemporary artists and the art of the 1960s and 1970s. He is a regular contributor to the magazine *Artpress* and was co-curator of the *Artpress* Biennial in 2020 and 2022. In 2017, he curated the exhibition “Supports/Surfaces – les origines 1966–1970” at Carré d’Art in Nîmes.

NORMAN KLEEBLATT is an independent curator, critic, and the current president of the United States chapter of International Association of Art Critics. He is the former chief curator at The Jewish Museum, New York. Kleeblatt has organized many major exhibitions including the award-winning “Action/Abstraction: Pollock, De Kooning, and American Art, 1940–1976” (2008) and “From the Margins: Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis, 1945–1952” (2014). Kleeblatt contributes essays to museum and gallery catalogues as well as publications including *ARTnews*, *Artforum*, *Art Journal*, and *Art in America*, *Hyperallergic*, and *Brooklyn Rail*.

Page 32: Billie Zangewa, *Quiet Contemplation* (detail), 2022. Embroidered silk, 138 × 50 cm – 54³/₈ × 19⁵/₈ in.





TEMPLON PARIS

30 rue Beaubourg
75003 Paris, France
Tel: + 33 (0)1 42 72 14 10

28 rue du Grenier Saint-Lazare
75003 Paris, France
Tel: + 33 (0)1 85 76 55 55
paris@templon.com

TEMPLON BRUSSELS

Veydtstraat 13
1060 Brussels, Belgium
Tel: + 32 (0)2 537 13 17
brussels@templon.com

TEMPLON NEW YORK

293 Tenth Avenue
New York, NY 10001, USA
Tel: + 1 212 922 3745
newyork@templon.com

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EDITOR

Victoire Disderot

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Clarisse Robert, Maya Sawmy

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Clémentine Tantet

CREDITS

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