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Interview by Joël Vacheron

**M 7 MUSÉE DES
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CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND, TRAINING AND EXPERIENCES, PAST AND PRESENT, THAT HAVE LED YOU TO BECOME A PHOTOGRAPHER?

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My parents were both photographers and I have always been surrounded by images: in books, magazines or pinned to the wall. Tripods, generators, light boxes and studio backdrops were all over the house. Chemical fumes in the bathroom, couriers bringing and collecting films at the door of the building at all times... From a very young age, I was encouraged to take photographs and I like to consider photography as my “mother tongue,” an activity I have always practiced, taking pictures of my friends, my activities, my family, things I see... Yet, it took me a long time to think of photography not only as a language and as a way of engaging with others, but also as a way of life and means of subsistence. While my parents were mainly involved in an “applied” form of photography, I was only interested in capturing my daily life. Discovering the work of Nan Goldin, Antoine d’Agata, Larry Clark, Anders Petersen and Christer Strömholm, etc. allowed me to embrace the possibility of a “ph-auto-biographical” work, which I subsequently got involved in. The subjects in these photographs blend with their own lives and their own experiences of the world. Self-construction through photography is what interests me the most in this discipline. While broadening my skills independently, I studied literature at school and university and then took a Master’s degree in Philosophy at the Sorbonne, before joining the École Nationale Supérieure de la Photographie in Arles, with the intention of dedicating myself entirely to photography. Then I studied at Le Fresnoy, Studio National des Arts Contemporains, during two years, which gave me the opportunity to discover other disciplines such as cinema, art installation, sculpture and performance. Today, I continue my visual

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and theoretical research at the University of Quebec in Montreal (UQAM), in partnership with Le Fresnoy, as part of a doctorate in research-creation.

WHAT ARE THE RESEARCH-CREATION CHALLENGES IN PHOTOGRAPHY NOW?

This approach to research is still rather unusual in France, but it has existed for several decades in Canada. That is why Le Fresnoy offers university programmes in collaboration with UQAM. This allows specialised students or graduates in various disciplines, in my case philosophy and creation, to integrate different approaches into their doctoral thesis. It can be academic reasoning, poetic ideas, intertextuality, the addition of visual projects, etc. My research, which I would call “indisciplinary,” explores the ontology of post-human or mutant figures. Hybrids, cyborgs, pandrogynes, the un-stupefied, spectres... these figures are (re)modelled by new technology and fiction, as well as by the ways used to present these new bodies that are transformed, traversed and haunted by mutations that result from an artistic action. I work with philosopher Louise Poissant, filmmaker Claire Denis and astrophysicist Jean-Philippe Uzan.

YOUR SERIES *LOON* (2007), *SPREE* (2008), *LÖYLY* (2009) AND *SUB LIMIS* (2010) MAINLY COMPRISE OF INTIMATE PORTRAITS. WHAT THEMES AND EMOTIONS DID YOU WANT TO ADDRESS IN THESE SERIES?

These works are the first “series” I have undertaken as, until then, my work consisted of an accumulation of thousands of contact sheets that were rarely printed. Before joining the Arles School of Photography, I would just scan my negatives and publish images occasionally on proto-social networks like LiveJournal, or exhibit

some of them on printer paper at queer venues in Paris where in many cases I had taken them. Photography was still a way to communicate, to meet people, and a kind of memory prosthesis. Photographing landscapes I had passed through, people I love and moments to remember, was a way of placing an object between reality and my way of understanding it. I really like this sentence by Hervé Guibert: "It's easier to ask if I can photograph you than to ask if I can caress you... I take pictures of you to stock up on you, in anticipation of your absence." I think there was, and still is, something like that in my relationship to photography. Joining the school in Arles forced me to refine my vision, to focus on my subjects, to only frame the essential. There are usually few details in my pictures. The subject I want to look at and show, occupies all the space, without needless information. This focus on technique, which goes from the shoot to the choice of the printing technique, now mainly on aluminium, allows me to create a precise visual language that I see as a visual transposition of an idea that is dear to me: indeterminacy. The notion of "blandness", as developed by François Jullien in his analysis of Verlaine's poetic work, also influenced me a great deal. In particular his use of the neutral, his imagery of fog and the indeterminate, which I thought could be adapted to a chromatic system in connection with the representation of these "bodies of the in-between." Not to giving in to the temptation of black and white or even colour and staying in an indeterminate space between these two possibilities. Therefore, each of these series summarises in about twenty images a year of encounters, books, travels, romantic and friendly relationships and music since I used to make sound slideshows, mixing music and recorded texts, to present these images. These worked, in a way, as rough drafts for the short films that I directed a few years later, notably *Drops* (3 min., 2013), *Seventh Promenade* (17 min., 2013), *Spectrographies* (59 min.,

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2014), *TRAUM* (26 min., 2015), *Unda* (20 min., 2016), *In Somnis Cosmic junkies* (20 min., 2016) and *Les Apocalyptiques* (15 min., 2019). Only with hindsight, I did realise that these images all told the story of a mutation, a crossing/passing through and a transition, in every possible way. You go from one age to another, from one state to another, from one gender to another. By photographing my life and those of my close friends, mainly from the LGBTQI+ community, a possible representation of our mutant identities, seen from within, was emerging. Something that was sorely lacking in our imagery just a decade ago. At the time, these series seemed to me much more self-centred, they gave form to states that are difficult to describe, linked to loneliness, the difficulty of engaging with others and a kind of melancholy.

AROUND THE MIDDLE OF THE 19TH CENTURY, PHOTOGRAPHY WAS OFTEN USED TO SHOW PARANORMAL PHENOMENA OR PROVE THE EXISTENCE OF SUPERNATURAL ENTITIES. THANKS TO DOUBLE EXPOSURE TECHNIQUES, THE SO-CALLED "SPIRIT" PHOTOGRAPHY SHOWED THE TRANSPARENT TRACES OF ANCESTORS, GHOSTS OR OTHER SUPERNATURAL PHENOMENA. ARE THERE LINKS BETWEEN THESE SECULAR IMAGES AND YOUR PROJECT OF A "SCIENCE OF THE GOSTLY"? IN PARTICULAR, THE THERMOGRAPHIC PROCESSES USED IN YOUR SPECTROGRAPHIES PROJECT (2011-2015) EXHIBITED AT THE MBAL?

The themes of construction, mutation, delocalization, disappearance, the after-life, the limits of the body, etc. are at the centre of my research. With the *Spectrographies* project, I wanted to explore the idea of the spectre. Namely, the presence that remains beyond



Untitled, from the series *Sub Limis*, 2009

7 the visible. It pushes the boundaries, which are exciting to explore, especially for a photographer. The thermal camera is primarily a measuring instrument used in construction, medicine or by the army. The use of a high-tech tool allowed me to go beyond the differences that one usually makes between the visible and the invisible, presence and absence. The images obtained are biometric, they offer a unique portrait of each person “captured.” What we perceive as heat is actually an invisible light; the part of the electromagnetic spectrum whose waves are too long to be detectable by our eyes. The thermal camera translates this invisible light into images, where each colour corresponds to a specific temperature. *Spectrographies* is a project that first speaks of love, of the irreducible distance between lovers when they are separated by travel, death or fantasy. I wanted to address this theme with my photographer’s eye. Heat and, by extension, touch, are crucial components in romantic relationships: these are the first things that you miss when the other is absent. Similarly, in photography, what is profoundly missing is touch. The thermal camera compensates this by allowing us to see the traces of a presence that is no longer there, by recording the heat and energy that passes between presence and absence. There is something magical and spectral in this technique. Thermograms bring heat back into the photographic image. These are literally photographs of ghosts.

**MORE GENERALLY, WHAT IS YOUR
RELATIONSHIP TO TECHNOLOGY IN
YOUR CREATIVE PROCESS?**

In general, the works that interest me the most are those that stay in the indeterminate margins of photography, film, poetry, painting, philosophy, psychoanalysis and sometimes science. I am interested in technologies

that develop a form of metaphysics, a vision of the human being in connection with the forces that surpasses it, with the invisible, with the dream, with memory, with technology, with scientific discoveries related to the infinitely small or the infinitely large. I try to put my thoughts and my work in line with this approach and my projects have the specificity of being “indisciplinary,” combining books, photographs, sculptures, cinema, video, and performances. My approach is similar to the ones of artists such as Eduardo Kac, Matthew Barney and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, who had a major influence on me. Using different technologies in my work allows me to do two things. On one hand, to build an approach based on different points of view and different languages and revealing latent potentialities and, on the other hand, to take advantage of alienating technology, exploring the possible mutation of devices used for control and surveillance and turning them into poetic or artistic tools in a “techno-dream” approach. For example, the prologue-work of the *Spectrographies* project, entitled *Cellulairement* (2011-2012), involved the implantation, inside my arm, of an electronic chip linked to a technological device developed by a research team at CNRS (2XS at IRCICA/INRIA). This chip allowed me to physically feel, against my own skin and in real time, the heat of the visitors who moved around my installation. I wanted to create a device that allowed me to be literally “haunted” by the visitors, to literally feel their presence, at a distance. As well as recording their “ghost,” their thermal/biometric portrait, inside the chip.

**ALL YOUR WORK EXPLORES THE
MALLEABILITY OF GENDER IDENTITIES.
BEYOND YOUR FORMAL EXPERIMENTS,
HOW DOES THE FLUIDITY OF SEXUAL
ASSIGNATION EXPRESS ITSELF IN YOUR
DAILY LIFE CHOICES?**

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I consider my vegetarianism a life choice, as living in a quiet suburban area of Paris or living with a cat. For the rest, it is less a choice than a fact of life. The relationships I had with queer people and artists since I was a teenager, whether it was through friendship, love, photography, political activities or sometimes imagination, allowed me to better understand, to assert my belonging to this protean community and to gradually build my own identity, outside any labelling. I have therefore always used multiple pseudonyms to present my work in its various forms. I decided a few years ago to change my name into a mononym. To change one’s name is also to reinvent oneself. You remove the last “label” – the one from which it seems you cannot escape. For me, it is not a question of subversion, since I can remember I always felt estranged, deep down, when it comes to gender. That is why “removing” gender from my name was self-evident for me. SMITH is neither male nor female. It is not linked to an era or a continent. The fact that it is one of the most common English family name is a way to escape, as much as possible, the tracking, archiving and algorithms imposed by Google, and to blend in. It is also a way of bearing witness to the systematization of collective and community work in my own output. We are many, I am several... I believe that fundamentally, it is more about dissemination than transition and disembodiment. “*Ich spukt.*” I haunt... I am a spectre... a trans-spectre, undoubtedly! I have gone through many bodily and hormonal stages and I still do not know what the fate of my body and my identity will be, if it will ever settle down, and where. This constantly feeds my work, for better or worse. Reading the latest works written by Foucault made me ask myself several questions. Why should the relationship to oneself be linked to truth? What does “the truth of self” mean? It is clear to me that the idea of fixing the heart and shape of my identity once and for all worries me and displeases me.

It is important for me to constantly change the appearance of my body, my gender and my name, to mutate them, let them escape, hack each other. And to always step aside to create my own (re)presentations. This, of course reflects the identities that are at the centre of my work.

**WITH REGARD TO CURRENT ISSUES
LINKED TO SEXUAL IDENTITY, DO YOU
CONSIDER THAT YOUR WORK HAS
A MILITANT OBJECTIVE, WHETHER
POLITICAL OR FORMAL?**

Most of my photographic work is centred around the human body, its future, its mutations and its transformations. I do not photograph these bodies at random, they are “bodies that matter” for me, in the sense Judith Butler gave to this expression. They matter for me, but above all they have more “matter” than others. The vast majority of people I photograph are queer and/or trans. They are all questioning their identity and the future of their bodies, in a more urgent manner than most of other human beings. For me, addressing bodies that are “on the margins,” visually in my case, is political in essence. Personally, I have always been very attracted by the representations of bodies in French and German neo-classical and romantic paintings. This is reflected in the poses and colours of my images. These portraits may be “naturally” part of a collective imagination and culture, thus making them easier to understand. We must re-inject bodies considered as marginal, which have almost always been removed from historical representations, art history and cinema, as a form of heritage or natural extension of these pictorial references. It is an idea that is haunting me and I am trying to update that by infiltrating the dominant approach and narratives, both visual and artistic, and by appropriating myself

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what history has taken away from us. Bodies, that are sometimes revealed in these images, could be considered strange if you are not familiar with them. They show transgender bodies, operated bodies, bodies in transit, bodies that interact with other bodies. I like the idea of being able to suggest a form of sensuality through the (re)presentation of bodies that art history has relegated to the role of “freaks” and these are bodies that I find attractive, that I love surrounding myself with, filming and photographing. However, I never explore the intimacy, nudity or sexuality of these bodies. I prefer to leave this out of the camera’s range. It is mainly a way of giving visibility to bodies that, until now, or at least at the time of these series, had very little exposure in the public space. So my work is *de facto* a form of militancy.

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