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Reviving the Art Salon – Leah Oates interviews Virginie Sommet

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Salon 177.

Leah Oates: Your work has an aspect of performance art in it. Is this the case and if so what was your progression towards performance as an artist?

Virginie Sommet: I do not know if I can be considered a performance artist but I did perform in the piece 99c Dream, which is a dress made out of a girl's wedding toys. I wore the wedding dress and I gave people a text against marriage. People were very surprised that it was possible to be against marriage.

Now, I am working on making contemporary mandalas with the practice of Japanese Zazen meditation before and during the working process. It is like a performance because I put string together on canvas with over 100 hours of meditation and concentration. The tension of each string has to be even to achieve an esthetically pleasing effect. It is a performance of self-discipline

to ignore the solicitations of the city. As well, each time you meditate you help humanity.

LO: You have a monthly opening called Salon 177 where you show the work of other artists as well as your work. The space itself is also a work of art and in a sense is a large-scale installation that changes as the art changes every month. How did you find the space and how did Salon 177 begin?

VS: I found the loft through a friend of mine in 2000. It was in very bad condition so I decided to demolish everything and create an interior that would meet my needs and sensibilities. I was tired of square rooms and windows so me and another person created five round rooms and windows. The esthetic result is a combination of a small Guggenheim with a little bit of Barbarella and a touch of Greece and Morocco. The loft/studio/gallery is in Chinatown which is an underground area (even if it is becoming slowly bohemian and gentrified) and is challenging to understand. I love when a community is dominant in a specific periphery and I am almost alone in it, so I can build bridges with my work.

Also, I was tired of hearing people say that women do not have solidarity. So in 2004 I decided to create the Girls Goals with some friends. During one of our monthly meetings to help each other in careers, one of them told me that I was not using my space enough to show my work. I decided to create a monthly Art Salon on Saturdays. I always like esthetic, philosophic and politic interaction between people so it was great to have the opportunity to be the generator of this. This kind of salon is popular in France and in Europe and has been for quite a long time.

LO: Salons have a long tradition in the arts. However there are not many contemporary salons that I know of. It's a great concept that has not been maintained over time. Why is that, do you think?

VS: The only one that I know in New York is the one of Louise Bourgeois. Yinka Shonibare and his girlfriend were talking about creating one in London. Perhaps there are many art salons in New York and we just don't know about them. Most of the time it is only by invitation, word-of-mouth or by the intermediary of friends, it is not in newspapers or magazines (this time it is!) so this is perhaps the reason that it has not been maintained over time.

LO: Please speak about the artists you have shown and what your aim is for the monthly salons? Who are the artists you have coming up?

VS: Every month I show four artists. I will be showing the following artists soon. The photographer Frank Thompson who represents people of mixed-race. Thompson sometimes combines up to seven ethnic groups into one person. The portraits, shot in

black and white, are close-ups of different angles and physical attributes related to different ethnic groups.

The graphic designer/Art Director Gary St. Clare gives the viewer an opportunity to look back at specific moments in history from television on subjects related Afro-American history and slavery.

Painter Summer McClinton who paints cartoonish figures with flat, unnaturally vibrant colors, composed with overtly graphic styling. In the Fall, I will be showing Marc Antoine Dupont who is doing photograms which represent at once order and disorder and they are very colorful and geometrical.

LO: What are you currently working on conceptually as an artist?

VS: Currently, I am working on three contemporary mandalas with the practice of meditation. This series of work has been very successful for me, as there is a waiting list for the work and they are already sold.

Some other works that I'm in the process of creating is a 3-D work about bandages for people of different skin color and pictures which depict nature that grows in the city, they will be part of a future exhibition entitled "Urban Nature."

LO: Who are your favorite artists and why? How have they influenced your work?

VS: Two artists who have been very important for my work and my own esthetic evolution are Nan Goldin and Sophie Calle. I discovered both of them during the first year of my art studies in Paris VIII University. I also like Yinka Shonibare's and Shirin Neshat's work.

I realize now as a more seasoned artist that my work is a little bit of both: I use sociologic research for my work and often I do not decide 100% of the esthetic result, much like Sophie Calle. Also many of my concepts are non-mainstream, similar to Nan Goldin.

I love Nan Goldin's work because her subjects are people who have a very specific way of life. She consistently brings her focus to "minorities" or people who are not mainstream. I respond to her work as it was so far from how I was brought up, in a very conservative way.

Sophie Calle is one of my favorites because her conceptual intention is very strong and the esthetic result is not that important. Her sociologic research is very important and an explanation is always present with the pieces, which I like.

I like Yinka Shonibare's work because he is not afraid to be very political and speak out on taboo subjects such as the rape during slavery and he always does so in an elegant way.

I think that Shirin Neshat is making very powerful and necessary work. I think that in this period her work is even more important; to

make people think about world politics more.

LO: What shows and projects do you have coming up in the future?

VS: I have exhibitions in Spain, France and South of Africa and hopefully will be given another Award for Action Against Hunger. Also I would like to create more structured debates (lectures) during the next Art Salon with the artists and the public about what they see and what they feel in front of the work