

## CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: CAMILLE HENROT

Camille Henrot

*The Pale Fox*

28 February - 13 April 2014

**KG:** *This new work, The Pale Fox, brings together so many different images, objects and ideas. To experience it is a process of constantly shifting and moving between these things and making links. You've created a space that allows people to comprehend this mass of information. How have you ordered all of this content?*

**CH:** Yes, the work shouldn't be considered as a series of objects, it's more like a narration or an experience. You could be looking at an image that is connected with beauty or a feeling of tenderness, like the baby picture, but then very quickly you switch to images that relate to the pollution of water, skin trafficking in Africa or anorexia. In my own life there is the dichotomy between order and disorder, and the question of choice is very present. In the situation in which we're living, we're confronted with a lot of individual, specific problems and then the urge to find solutions and react to that is being repressed. I feel like because it's repressed it's still around us... there is the question – should there be a reaction to all of this information we're receiving? I'm trying to deal with this question of reaction in this exhibition, and ambivalence.

I wanted to build an environment where the problems of this question could be perceived but also with the necessity to approach it with calm. Choice is articulated around binary answers – order/ disorder, work/rest, one/many, so there is constantly this feeling of shifting and balancing. The survival of a human being, or an environment is all about balance. I felt like the exhibition should relate to a blurring of limits. When things are not delimited anymore then the obsession of choosing stops. The way we think in Europe is based on the thesis and the antithesis. Synthesis is never really interesting, it's almost like a bourgeois solution. It's the dynamic between thesis and antithesis that is interesting. The problematic of the universe is also this question of loss and the consequence of expansion is loss. There is this whole experience of the hectic activity of choices and then the experience of learning to lose. Basically learning to lose is like being prepared to die. This was something I felt that I wanted the whole exhibition to relate to but which could be almost joyful or a pleasure.

**KG:** *Could you explain how you have ordered the objects and images. There is a narrative but it is also ordered on a grid system and as a series of overlapping timelines.*

**CH:** Because the gallery space at Chisenhale is such a perfect rectangle I felt that it would be interesting to start with a really crazy schematic map.

**KG:** *And you have a very complex diagram here...*

**CH:** I drew the diagram because I felt it was the only way I could think about the exhibition before installing it. I decided that there would be a different age of humanity attributed to each of the different walls – west, north, east and south. I was already very interested in how the age of humanity can be related to the age of the universe. From the big bang and the primordial soup – the beginning – to the development of galaxies and stars... this, for example, would be connected to the very beginning of childhood, the baby, and in terms of shape, it would be related to the spiral. We are always trying to pretend that we can build knowledge outside of the human perception but we cannot. The question of going beyond the limit of human representation of things is very interesting to me, it's a point where scientists and artists meet.

**KG:** *So two parallel strands are the lifespan of a human being and that of the universe. How do the other elements fit in – the principles of Leibnitz, the four elements?*

**CH:** So the west is the principle of being. As an element it's connected to air and it's connected with the very beginning of the galaxy and the life of a child and it's the area where there is a big drawing that is the master sign, which represents the initial gesture. Before things really develop they exist as a sort of schematic shape. In a way a baby is a schema because everything is already there, just not developed. Everything is coiled. That's why when you move to the north wall there is the bronze with the snake that is coiled and then things start to unfold.

The north wall is dedicated to the law of continuity, it's the reason for becoming, the whole idea of development. Just after the ball (*Head of the fish* ('Desktop' series)), which represents the opening of the eye of god, there are objects related to things opening and unfolding, like Gabagunnu (the womb matrix of the world), mimicking the Dropbox logo. This contains the calabash, you know this fruit that is supposed to contain the universe and mythology?

**KG:** *Actually I didn't know that they were supposed to contain the universe...*

**CH:** They are also connected to fertility and sexuality. It's a male and female

at the same time. The calabash and the Dropbox are the same object, they are both containers.

Then everything starts to develop and multiply and grow until the moment when actually there is an overexposure of man to things, the moment when our sun starts to burn us up, overexposure. Here the sunburn images are related to the photographic image, and the transformation of objects into image.

The east wall is associated with earth and with the principle of sufficient reason, so knowing that everything has a limit. It's the wall that represents the age of maturity, the moment where you understand that you have already lived half of your life... the consciousness of limits and the possibility of adaptation to reality, to desire, to control, the flattening of the world.

***KG:** So that's where we find images relating to the meeting of humans and nature... hunting, for example.*

**CH:** Also images related to the pollution of water, the exhaustion of the earth's resources. There is the notepad about what to do now and what to do later which relates to the process of ordering and drawing limits around things. Slowly it develops into the principle of the indiscernible – the reason for existing – on the south wall. This is the moment where technology and art come in. There is an attempt to find a solution beyond the limits. The computer was invented to be in charge of calculations the human brain could not do, as a calculation machine, but it was also created in the model of the book so there is a personal, subjective aspect. This is also the wall that's related to oldness and shamelessness, when you know the limits exist but you don't respect the rules anymore. There are elements related to the invention of computer language but also to boredom and the necessity to find a meaning to life, so the crosswords with the holy bible or the prospectus of the Jehovah's Witnesses. This wall is associated with the element of fire. Then it goes back again to the origin of life and the egg, with The principles of being, because the search for meaning always goes back to the question of the origin of life. So it's a landscape of man's essential questions, distributed around the space.

***KG:** Could you expand a bit on your interest in Leibnitz's principles? You've also mentioned *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1993), by Gilles Deleuze.*

**CH:** *The Fold* is a kind of synthesis of the four Leibnitz principles. When I read it I had already started working on the exhibition and it really struck me how these principles were containing, on a meta level, so many of the ideas that I had already placed and so I found them very useful.

**KG:** *One of the most striking things about the exhibition, and something you decided early on, is to make the space entirely blue. It's almost like chroma key blue as if you're trying to key out the walls and floor and make them disappear.*

**CH:** It felt to me that the deep blue colour would allow me to put a lot of objects from different sources on the same level without them being perceived aesthetically. I wanted an environment that wouldn't deal only with the question of art and would open the question to other matters. Also blue is the colour of the air and brings the notion that the objects are isolated in emptiness, very much like we are in the universe. We're so small in this massive emptiness. It felt like the blue colour was a way to make an exhibition that would echo this feeling of ambivalence between intimacy and universal distance. Also, I was inspired by Yves Klein... it's obviously a reference to Klein, but it's also a bit ridiculous with the ambient music as well. Without any irony, I felt that the ambient music would be interesting because it's funny but it's calming also. You go through different phases. First you're like 'oh this is so beautiful' then you're like 'no, this is so silly', and then you're like 'oh but I feel good.'

**KG:** *You drift in and out of self-consciousness and awkwardness and total immersion. To me the blueness of the room makes the exhibition feel like a video to some extent. It feels like slightly altered reality.*

**CH:** The way I make film is closely related to the way this exhibition is organised and it's the first time I've worked this way. Before I felt a bit constrained by exhibiting in an art space and doing film was a way for me to get rid of that because you build your own your universe, you build your own space entirely.

**KG:** *You've actually described The Pale Fox as an 'installation version' of Grosse Fatigue (2013), the film you showed at the Venice Biennale last year. And you were working on this exhibition at the same time as making the film. It feels like it's related not only because of it's content, although it would be good to talk about that as well. Grosse Fatigue developed from the residency at the Smithsonian in Washington DC that you did at the beginning of 2013. The Smithsonian is the largest museum in the world and so it is, perhaps, the most comprehensive attempt to contain human knowledge and present it through objects and images. Could you talk about your research at the Smithsonian and this impulse to represent totalities.*

**CH:** People told me 'you have to be careful because you're very curious and you will be lost very quickly if you don't choose a very specific angle', and that's exactly what happened. I got completely lost and I spent weeks and weeks looking at the shape of invertebrates, looking at the archive of

anthropology and learning about winter counts...

**KG:** *What is a winter count?*

**CH:** It's an object of the Navajo used during the war to count time or the number of men killed from the US army, the number of horses they got, the number of guns. It's a very beautiful drawing with a kind of code, with the number of years shown as the number of summers and winters, because they are counting the number of winters.

**KG:** *Wow. I can see how you got distracted.*

**CH:** Very quickly I discovered that I liked this feeling of being overwhelmed and it was part of my experience in the United States, as well and the Smithsonian being so much about the American perspective.

This period of research at the Smithsonian is how I came to the idea of the history of the universe. I had also seen the Jehovah's Witness photodrama slideshow on the web. It's a history of the universe in four hours and it's very interesting because it mixes real historical fact and religious mythology. It was one of the very first slide shows. The Jehovah's Witnesses are very interesting because it is their goal to spread information to as many people as possible and they've developed new methodologies of communication that are very interesting. Anyway, so I decided not to choose a very focused subject and also to address the necessity of man to talk about globality and to deal with this strategy of the global gathering of artifacts, and guilt, especially in America, especially with the question of the Native Americans. For example, the Smithsonian was built on the destruction of a very rich culture. When the Indians were still being massacred and expelled from their land into reservations, the second director of the museum sent a lot of people to gather objects and record ritual and so on because he knew this culture was disappearing. At the same time as there was destruction there was also the recording and accumulation of objects in the museum. I think that this whole logic of destruction goes together with the idea of building up a global image.

**KG:** *There is also the cliché of the museum as mausoleum...*

**CH:** For me this is a question that has already very much been described. But it's not so much that the object dies in the museum but that the museum is based on the fear of destruction, the fear of death and the fear of things disappearing. The museum does it but we all do it. Everything we do to protect ourselves from death is already putting us closer to death. There is this ambivalence between the remedy and the malady. The remedy is almost always a malady in itself.

**KG:** *The title of the exhibition is taken from anthropologists Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen's study of the West African Dogon people, as recorded in their book, The Pale Fox. I think that there is an interesting relationship between this mythology and the museum, which is about representing the knowledge of a culture through objects and images. In societies with oral traditions, mythology fulfills a comparable role. Dogon mythology contained much of the knowledge of that society, preserving it and making it accessible.*

**CH:** When I was collecting creation myths one of my main sources of inspiration was the book, *The Pale Fox*, because in itself it seemed to me it contained a lot of different approaches to describe the universe. It doesn't really make complete sense as a narrative but it seems like a code, embedding information about agricultural processes, the way seeds grow, about the position of the stars in the sky, about why you have to circumcise a child. It became a very interesting text for me. I felt an affinity with it straight away. The drawings in the book already looked like my own drawings and everything about the numbers and the egg I had already been thinking about. I'm a very superstitious person and so when I found so many coincidences in the book I realised that it was a sign and I had to continue.

It felt like if I went too deeply into the book the work would become too obscure, but then I felt relieved by this obscurity. I felt like maybe that's how I can be emancipated from this schematic approach that became too heavy. Then I found that there is a relationship between order and disorder – between making a schema and then feeling free to make arbitrary choices. I always try to do this in my work, when I get very obsessed with a method and a code and then I end up breaking it a little bit and going out of it but it's still there. This is very much the way we live. We have rules but we don't follow all of them.

**KG:** *The titles of several works in the exhibition relate directly to the book, for example, Amma's Door (2014). What does this represent?*

**CH:** It's the access to god from earth, so it's the correspondence between sky and earth. It felt important to have one vertical element and the archetype of the vertical element is the door, or even the totem – something that is pointing towards the sky.

**KG:** *Could you explain more about what interests you in the story of The Pale Fox?*

**CH:** In *The Pale Fox*, the drawing is very important. Before the universe was created it existed in the mind of the creator and then it existed as a drawing – as a diagram. There is this moment where they eye of Amma opens, and

then he collects things from the sky and brings them to earth. It was messy, not selective. Amma took everything and put everything. Then he destroyed everything apart from one seed and he started over by creating gods in pairs so they could multiply and generate and the gods are the ancestors of man. They were called the Nommo and they were fish. One of the Nommo was called Ogo and he was restless and impatient for his sister to be created so he tried to steal a piece of the placenta to make his own sister by himself. God was mad and made the placenta turn very fast and it became the sun and Ogo was burnt. So the sun was created by Ogo's greed and impatience. It felt to me like this character Ogo, a distant and mythical figure, was echoing a very universal state that we're all experiencing... this greed and restlessness and how as human beings we are bringing disorder into the world.

**KG:** *But it's also about the creative potential of disorder. You said previously that you think that it relates to the role of the artist.*

**CH:** I feel that the artist embodies this idea of being restless impatient and hectic, having too much ambition and being greedy. When I was travelling and making films I saw myself from the outside as this pale person who was being burnt by the sun from staying too much with a camera trying to capture too much. The character of myself as a sunburned, greedy character was very strong.

**KG:** *You talked before about paleness as a sign of working or overwork to the point of sickness – staying up all night in front of a computer screen.*

**CH:** It can be developed in so many ways and I like that. Staying up all night on Firefox!

**KG:** *Could you talk more about some of the things that recur in the exhibition, like eggs or twins?*

**CH:** In the Dogon story the universe is created in an egg. I felt that the egg was a very useful image, something that also contains the idea of development. It's compact and spherical, so there is something global about it, but I like the idea that things are coiled inside. It's also interesting to note, for example, that often following assisted conception the woman will have twins and the twin is also an image of divinity for several different cultures including the Dogon. Also the twin to me is representative of the photographic process and the art making process – the object and its duplication. Plus I'm a Gemini!

**KG:** *In Grosse Fatigue you articulated time through a series of layered windows on a computer screen, where things happen simultaneously. In The Pale Fox there are details like stacks of The New York Times, which are*

that architecture doesn't tell stories anymore. Before we had atlas people lifting the door for us, we had nymphs dancing and there were stories everywhere. Modernism got rid of all these narratives. Where have they gone? Repressed things always come back in a different shape. It feels like the most modern aspect of our society is dealing with this narrative now. When we try to make sense of Google results we are making use of this narrative. I wanted to make these things material again. It felt like the frieze was a kind of rhythmic dance and it the best representation of how the universe developed – it's a rhythm, it's a vibration.

**KG:** *I wanted to ask you again about your interest in anthropology because it comes up again and again in your work. As you mentioned before, The Pale Fox is a heavily contested book. Are you interested in its ambiguous status as Ethnofiction, in the line of Jean Rouch and Carlos Castañeda, and the difficulty of remaining objective when studying fellow humankind.*

**CH:** I tend to research things that I feel uncomfortable with or that itch me. I started to read a lot of anthropology books, especially Claude Lévi-Strauss who is super interesting – such a brilliant mind in the way that he constructs a system and then un-builds, and the way that he was a critic of his own discipline. I like the idea of criticism and failure embedded in anthropology. Of course it was built out of colonialism but then quickly the goal became completely lost and then reversed. It's also interesting to see the impact that the cultural anthropologists had on French culture – Surrealism for example, and Deleuze and Guattari who were deeply influenced by concepts from other cultures, brought to them by anthropologists. I'm also interested in the unsolved problem – the constant back and forth between guilt and curiosity and the impossibility of not fetishising otherness. Often with anthropologists it is very clear that they just fell in love.

**KG:** *I'm really curious to know how it feels for you to see all of the content of this exhibition coming together in one place – some of these things you've had for a long time but others you are seeing for the first time – like the elements that were fabricated in Europe.*

**CH:** It was very alarming packing everything in the studio and making the list of objects we would bring because it reminded me of when I moved to the US and I packed my whole apartment.

**KG:** *You've spoken before about the embarrassment of objects and the anxiety that can be caused by storage in a domestic setting – what is seen and what is not. How does this relate to the moment in making a work when the contents of your studio, or your head, suddenly becomes a public exhibition?*

**CH:** When somewhere is crowded it creates anxiety, that's why design magazines show just one book on a shelf. A crowded shelf is ugly but it is ugly because it creates anxiety. I'm interested in the figure of the hoarder as a manifestation of anxiety and also a way to protect. By accumulating objects you protect yourself from the outside world. Accumulating knowledge is the same – accumulating knowledge, accumulating objects – they're both a way to build a wall between yourself and the outside world. When I was walking on the way here I saw that so many people are putting all the things they don't want on their balcony. It's very interesting because they show to the public about their own space is what they don't want to see inside. It's interesting to think about that as an artist also. Maybe what you put in the exhibition is what you don't want to have inside anymore.

*Camille Henrot interviewed by Katie Guggenheim, Exhibitions and Events, Curator, Chisenhale Gallery, February 2014. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.*