

Interview of Jonathan Meese by the participants of Ecole du Magasin and Inge Linder Gaillard, coordinator of the exhibitions at Magasin in the occasion of the opening of "Mama Johnny" show, Grenoble, 20 October 2006. This discussion took place when Jonathan Meese arrived at Magasin to make his wall painting.

Starting from formal questions it became a two hours friendly conversation about life, art, obsessions, sex, rules and everything...

Art can't be taught, can't be learnt, everything you say about it is wrong and to know this, is good. You can't learn art, it's impossible.

What I like or not is not the purpose of art, it's not important if I look tired, if I am homosexual, politically correct, nice, good looking, woman, baby, fish, animal. My mood, if I'm intelligent or not, is not important. To be creative is not important. There are no rules. You can't say: "hey, this guy paints good" because nobody knows what is good painting.

In the Sculpture room where JONATHAN MEESE has just finished his wall painting

FRANÇOIS: What about this wall painting? Do you have maps to plan before you work?

JONATHAN MEESE: It goes. I knew I wanted to do something about Napoleon. Not because I'm here in France, but I'm doing very much about this figure. I did some bronze sculptures in Germany. Coming back to your question, I just start.

I: And "Doctor No"...

JONATHAN MEESE: "Doctor No" is totally allowed because he is Doctor No and he says "No".

I: This sculpture is also you. It's called "Suzy Wan". Who is this?

JONATHAN MEESE: It's my female side, of course. She is a Chinese figure.

I: Isn't it a brand? A brand of Chinese food...

JONATHAN MEESE: It could, well, it's something connected to China. Doctor No is also connected to China, he is one of the evil guys of James Bond. I've always respected this guy so much.

I: And what about this "Mama Johnny"?

JONATHAN MEESE: It's the Colossus of Rhodes, it's one of the seventh world wonders. It's the figure that stands where ships go through.

I: So it's not you, but it's called "Mama Johnny"...

JONATHAN MEESE: Yes, but what's Mama? It could be Mama Earth. The mistake is to think that what you see about me it's me. A photo is never a person. This is very important.

I: What about the writing "Pompei"?

JONATHAN MEESE: In Pompey you can find small figures which nearly look like these, very sexual. I will go to Pompey in November cause I want to do a preparation also for my play.

I: Are there connections between these three sculptures?

JONATHAN MEESE: Absolutely, it's a dynasty...a family. They are all friends and one of them is the boss.

I: Which one?

JONATHAN MEESE: Nobody knows. They all want to be a boss. It's fight...or it's love. If everything goes well, the boss is art. If it goes wrong, it's the human being. That's why I believe in dictatorship of art. I think if art is the dictator we can stay in love because art is not interested in harming or making us slaves. If you have human leaders they always want to make slaves, they always want to make bad things with human beings. But if you have art or nature as dictators they are not interested in doing something bad to us. I believe, in my childlike point of view, that art is the dictatorship of the future.

Entering the room where the series *Aegidius Suite* is (a work realized in 2006, commissioned by a private collector).

I: In this room you created a sort of portrait gallery, similar to the sculptures, where you gathered different characters from different times and spaces and put them all together. Is there a boss also in there?

JONATHAN MEESE: Yes, they are always looking for a boss. It's the nature of things.

I: So this work is a commission for someone's house. All the 27 characters go in group...

JONATHAN MEESE: Yeah, this is the group for the entrance of his house.

YUKA: These characters, where do they come from?

JONATHAN MEESE: I think it's like when you are sitting on a river and you want to wash clothes. You put the net and then you have the nuggets. And then one nugget is Napoleon, one nugget is Ezra Pound, one is Stalin, one is Pompey. If you wash more and more, the larger it is. Bigger. Why, I don't know. We have to ask the river. The river gives the material....

FRAN: So you think there is a kind of inspirational power coming through you?

JONATHAN MEESE: I think there is a power that comes like this (he whistles), but it doesn't come through. It doesn't even touch me. If it touches you, then you are dead. Your brain is dead. Because then you think you are important, but the artist is not important. If you think you are talented, then it's finished. Then it's just stupidity. I think. Because how can you justify this? People say: "Oh, you are talented". But what does it mean? What is talent? Doing this, like this (whistles again, pretending a movement like if he were painting) it's not talent. It's just doing something.

Referring to the Jörg Immendorff's series

I: Did you like the collaborations you've done with other artists?

JONATHAN MEESE: Very much. I liked to experiment and work with other people that are hermetic like me.

I: A question about the palette that is represented in Jörg Immendorff's portraits. Are you that palette? And why did you want to present yourself as a palette in these pictures about Immendorff?

JONATHAN MEESE: I think it's a way to keep distance. To keep the necessary distance to this person who is like a god. I mean, whether I like him or not is not important. He is a God in itself. Then I had to be something and the palette is something that is totally charming and I stay separated, in a respectful distance. And I play the child. I'm the childish palette. What else could I be? I'm not his student. This icon is a friendlier way to present myself as one of the tools in order to paint. This is much more interesting.

I: How do you work together with Immendorff?

JONATHAN MEESE: There are two or three different ways. For example, I started the work, sent him the pictures, and he finished them. The other way was that I came to him and we worked together at the same time on the same stuff. There is also another way that's not happened yet in which he sent me something but I never did something until now. I have to do, it means that we will continue. It's a direct work together and also sending the material. Has to do something with respect, just to say I trust you that you finish it in a good way.

Last room where there are lots of collected stuff

JONATHAN MEESE: Here, you can see some stuff that I did in art school. Let's say ten, fifteen years ago in Hamburg and I was very naïve first. I started to paint and draw when I was 22, very late.

I: You were a writer?

JONATHAN MEESE: I was writing a little bit, but not so much. And I was not thinking about writing, I just did it. Then I started to paint and draw and I loved to do it. And people started to tell me: "If you really like to paint and draw then go to some school." I said, "Why not? Ok." And someone told me: "if you are really interested in art, then you should go to an art school, an art university and you will learn how to be an artist." And I said, "Oh wow. Why not?" And I made preparations and was accepted in Hamburg when I was 23 years old.

I: The paintings in the first room were made for this occasion?

JONATHAN MEESE: Not all. Lots of them were made before. Then I started art school and after half a year I stopped painting and I was just collecting stuff. I had a very good professor. He always said to me: "Do what you want". He always laughed. Then after two or three years I noticed: "Hey, here's something wrong. I don't want to do exams...I just want to play. Because these people can't tell what art is. They don't know more than me". We are all children; we have to play. Then I went to my professor and asked him whether it was ok to just play, and he said, "Yeah, do what you want". But if you look at me I was totally child. You could have broken me very easily, but nobody did. I was very lucky.

I: And then you didn't stay in art school?

JONATHAN MEESE: Yes, I stayed because I had a little room, very comfortable to work. I liked it. The only thing I didn't like was they were giving me notes, grades. How can you get a note for that? It has nothing to do with what I'm doing here. And in 1998 I started working with a gallery.

Approaching to the vitrines

I: Where do these objects come from?

JONATHAN MEESE: From everywhere. From markets, from shops. They are all independent. It's not my choice, it's not a selection. There is no rule behind, or at least, I don't know.

I: This is also the base for *Kokain*, the scenography for the Berlin theatre?

JONATHAN MEESE: Yes, you have to do things, to come to this level. If you always think and make the theory before, then you are stuck and you are unable to do anything. Of course many things are wrong or bad or not interesting, but who knows what is good painting? You can put a thousand people inside here and everyone would say something different. It's all opinions. The only way to escape is to do nothing or do everything. And I'm neutral also to my things. I don't care, that's why everybody can arrange this.

I: And what about the characters in the posters?

JONATHAN MEESE: These characters create anti-reality, a new world, as in the cinema, because, once again, I'm not interested in reality. That's why all these people that do movies about Pollock, Klimt, Picasso, Basquiat are so bad. Because it's so silly to pretend to understand their works from their personal lives. How can you present an artist like this? You don't have any respect. It's rubbish, it makes the art weak and accessible, but art is a mystery...I think it's impossible to draw an artist into reality. The fact that Jackson Pollock was drinking it's not important. It's what he did, those beautiful paintings, that's what's important. That Klimt had sexual relationships and was interested in sex, it's not important. He did wonderful paintings. This is something that has to be shown in the films and not the personal problems of the artist. It's absolutely uninteresting. This could be shown by a documentary filmmaker and not from the point of view of an artist. The people always try to make the direct way: if you take drugs then you are in another world. This is not true. You are in another world when you are in another world. You are not a very interesting person cause you drink a lot.

I: But also you are interested in other artists, for example Van Gogh....

JONATHAN MEESE: Yes, but I'm not interested in their personal lives.

JULIJA: How did your family approach to your work? I just ask you because I'm an artist too and my family doesn't understand what I do.

JONATHAN MEESE: My mother always helped me, but she didn't like my performances because she didn't want to see me suffering. I was the black sheep, but I couldn't change, I had to go on and on and on...

Excerpts of transcription made by Lucia Pesapane and Karla Roalandini
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