Studio Conversations

Curated by Anaël Pigeat

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108, rue Vieille du Temple, Paris

Mamma Andersson's studio
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David Zwirner is pleased to present *Studio Conversations*, an exhibition curated by Anaël Pigeat that takes the form of dialogues between three artists chosen to reflect the current Parisian scene and three artists who have inspired them since their earliest work. Admiration, appropriation, inspiration ... how does one artist view another's work? What dialogues and playful interactions can emerge between them? The encounters that took place between these painters, ranging from conversation to collaboration, gave rise to exchanges and reflections, friction and resonance.

In the months leading up to the exhibition, three interviews took place, capturing the artists exchanges about the works on display and the ways in which they were made. Moderated by Anaël Pigeat, they took the form of in-person conversations or correspondence.

THE PAINTING AS THE STORY

A conversation between Suzan Frecon and Christine Safa, moderated by Anaël Pigeat

Christine Safa (b. 1994) spoke with Suzan Frecon (b. 1941), whose work has had a strong influence on her since her early years at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Frecon's work led Safa toward abstraction despite the recent omnipresence of figurative painting. Together they discussed early Italian and Minoan art and architecture, the different characteristics of pigments, geometry in painting composition, light and scale, and finally the ungraspable nature of painting.

AP: Christine, how did you discover Suzan Frecon's work?

CS: It was almost ten years ago, at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. We were taught figurative painting, and I wanted to encounter new ways of painting. I then recalled that a friend of mine had once showed me a painting by Suzan on his cell phone, which had remained on my mind. By then, I was also learning about Agnes Martin, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko… The first time I saw one of her paintings in real life was at David Zwirner five years ago.

AP: Suzan, what led you to Strasbourg, and to Paris at the École des Beaux-Arts in 1963?

SF: I went to Strasbourg University on a study abroad program in 1962. Then the following year I worked my way to Paris. I was accepted into L'Atelier André Chastel at l'École des Beaux-Arts as an *élève libre*. The fee was ten dollars, and I was very happy to have a big space where I could continue painting. The most powerful reason for my going abroad and to France was because when I was studying painting as a fine arts major in the USA, we were learning from reproductions of the avant-garde painters of that time in the US, such as De Kooning, Richard Diebenkorn, and figurative expressionists. I wasn't satisfied. So I came to France for the second time, wanting to learn painting much more profoundly, and to see it firsthand in the museums such as the Louvre, Musée de Cluny, Musee de l'Homme, the cathedrals, and the Prado, and on and on. I felt I needed knowledge of painting and art through actually seeing and studying it in reality. Thus, I started to understand Velásquez, Giotto, Degas, Cézanne… It took me years… After more than a year in Paris, I spent almost two years in Spain, so I had access to seeing the great Spanish masters. Velásquez was a revelation of virtuosity.

AP: Did you make friends among the artists of the French art scene?

SF: Yes. It was actually a very international mix of students at the Beaux-Arts. There were French artists as well as other students from far and wide: an Italian painter from Bologna, who was very influenced by Morandi; a Columbian painter; a Spanish painter; an American from Texas; and so on. Many seemed influenced by Fernand Léger and Picasso, and of course Cézanne. At that time, I was still a *figurative* painter.

CS: What made you switch from figuration to abstraction? Was there a turning point?

SF: In 1962, I was still working with the figure, but it was getting in my way and restricting me. I wanted to concentrate on paint, not on "story," or painting illustrating something. I wanted to go to a plane of pure abstraction. The paint itself became the *story*. The year 1962 was when I definitively eliminated figuration from my paintings. I knew it was a good visual decision and freed my painting directions.

AP: You said many times how color comes before the shape. How do you start a painting? How do you come to that "state of suspension" you speak about?

SF: Perhaps it was a personal, sensual, intuitive path. For instance, I would see the red-earth colors in every country I visited. It satisfied and inspired my passion for these colors. At first, I was using cadmium reds. Then I gradually moved into using primarily earth reds.

I looked at ancient architecture, in Crete, including the labyrinths in Knossos and other Minoan sites. These ruins seemed mysterious and fascinating. I began to structure my work through studying plans and remnants of this complex architecture in their locations. Again, through looking I grew to understand how important composition was to realizing painting.

By this time, the 1970s I had relocated to New York City to work. I was seeking geometric solutions in order to strengthen the compositions of my paintings. But many of my contemporaries in NYC were also using geometry at that time, so I didn't feel confident that I could do something innovative. I continued with expressionistic strokes, structured by the outside dimensions of the painting stretchers. But I kept geometry on the back burner.

As I often said, my discovery of Hilma af Klint's work in the late 1980s at PS1 was a turning point. Chris Dercon, then program director of PS1, had recommended that I see her paintings. I was immediately struck by the visual strength of her work. It was beautifully executed in paint material, handling, and structure. There was a suspended balance. It was not static. That was a new beginning or a new continuation. I was not interested in theosophy or religion but in the way af Klint was handling paint. She came from a family of mathematicians and navigators. I was envious of her knowledge of geometry! Seeing it firsthand gave me the strength to recontinue searching for my own geometric solutions, which evolved slowly into scale based on how the human being is perceiving and experiencing the painting: I wanted human-related visual geometry, not a theory of geometry. I felt the courage to continue trying to use my asymmetrical geometry to create a balance to hold the painting.

CS: Does it happen that you start a painting, and you change direction along the way?

SF: Well, there is a lot of preliminary searching and trial and error. But no, I work incrementally once I have decided to go forward with an idea that then becomes a plan that I think will be good. Looking and looking and looking as I go along is very much a part of the realization of a work. And in oil it can take a long duration of time. And as I get toward the completion, it starts to get more exciting, because then the fine tuning is often the crucial part of allowing the painting to finally exist as art and *come off the wall*.

Finally, *ungraspable* is a word I like to use. I find in art that I admire, there is an element that transports the viewer, that is ungraspable or unfathomable.

Early on, I kept trying many kinds of geometry, listening to music, jazz for example, to keep the asymmetry. I tried to deconstruct musical theories and work that into my paintings. I had a book that related the golden mean, musical structures, architecture, and art.

Later I would begin making preliminary plans to scale for the bedrock compositions of my oil paintings. Each area in the composition is in proportion to every other area. I sought for plays and dissonances though asymmetry. At the same time, I wanted to keep the composition very distilled. The final test was always that they had to have a visual "rightness." I can see that an arch is not working yet according to the measurements, so I try to get the right curve, and it can go on, sometimes over years. It must work

visually. My work comes from my work. I start building the painting through scale, colors, light, and paint material. The entirety becomes an orchestration of all the elements together, which is form.

CS: The raw pigment that you use is from the brand Kremer Pigmente in Germany, which I like too. Do you use them individually? Do you mix them? Or do you use them separately and the layers do the mixing, which is what I do now?

SF: I don't grind my colors so much from pigments anymore. The red painting I'm working on at the moment though is all from pigments, four different shifts of red earths with shifts also in their resulting sheens [*embodiment of red 14,* 2025]. Red earths are vital in my painting work. The many raw pigments seem infinite and compelling. But some colors are better to buy already made. I go with what the painting needs, whether transparent, or red, or indigo…

CS: You also mentioned that red pigments were heavier than the blue ones. How do you deal with that?

SF: Each pigment has unique properties. Red-earth pigments can be very dense. Their differences in weight and tone can create subtle movement, imparting shifts of rhythm in the painting. The green one I'm working on at the moment is more in earth green [*verona matcha*, 2024]. I think of Japanese forests, trees and shadows in Hiroshige prints…

AP: About another painting, you also spoke of the color of plums in a garden…

SF: That's a little bit different: I was thinking of the *scent* of plum flowers, the first flowers that bloom after the long winter. Their fragrance is intoxicating and imperceptible, very faint, but a beautiful experience. I used purple ocher in that painting [*vernal breath of plum*, 2019].

AP: Although your reds can be related to tantric paintings, it does not look like you relate your works to any form of spirituality that this reference may convey.

SF: Right, my paintings don't come from tantric paintings. (You could also compare Agnes Martin to the *four directions* in contemporary anonymous Indian tantric paintings.) But I think that's not the point. I see earth reds in many cultures: Crete, Mexico, Spain… Even in Mexico a few weeks ago, where the Mayan spirit in the colors remains so powerful and expressive. There's an old former convent in Valladolid that's painted inside entirely in red earths. Upon entering, when one passes from the bright sun into the interior, one's senses are surprised and overwhelmed by the red-painted walls. The forms of the architecture and the sun coming in from the bright blue sky transforms the red into many shades of very intense reds. I don't think this would happen the same in another part of the world where the earths are different reds, and the sunlight is from a different angle?! One of the guards explained that the red earth and the blue are symbols, but for me it's a physical and human reaction. We all have common denominators.

CS: Are there places you like to go back to? For instance, I often go back to Florence and Venice see Italian paintings again and again…

SF: Well, it's not often possible, but the art that has most shaped and impressed me stays with me. There is going to be a Cimabue exhibition at the Louvre that I wish I could see. I am drawn to pre-Renaissance Italian painting; I once traveled to a church in Aquileia in the north Friuli area of Italy. Most interesting to me was the crypt containing early frescos. When I saw the architectural shapes holding the composition of the frescoes, and the emotion conveyed through the paint, I thought probably Cimabue had been to this very same church…

AP: What about the blue? For instance, in [*untitled (m.b.v. haematite)*, 2022]? To me, Cimabue is blue!

SF: Where I live upstate, there are beautiful, eternal, but always changing mountains, especially due to the western-setting sunlight affecting them. People often say, "Oh, I see where your paintings come from." But it's actually the other way around. I was often using curved forms comprised of irregular quadrants. But let's come back to the blue: "m.b.v." stands for mountain blue violet, which is a mixture colors, offset by the rough haematite pigment in material, hue and reflectivity of the paint material and surface.

I want to mention how important natural light is to the realization of my paintings. I paint solely in natural light and am subservient to the light changes throughout the seasons and times of day. As I work, the light becomes inherent to the color and paint material, and its participation adds many more dimensions to the painting's existence, which then enhances the viewer's experience.

CS: Do you still use marble powder to prepare your paintings?

SF: No. I buy the linen prepared with an oil ground. Years ago, I was making gesso panels. I was impressed by the burnished gold being a dark or a light in the composition depending upon the stance of the viewer. I made some paintings using burnished gold. But mastering burnished gold took a lot of time, and after all, I thought it was best left to master craftsmen. So, I concentrated more on what I really wanted to do, which was color. I started to use shiny colors just like gold, which reflected positively and negatively. At the Louvre in Paris, there is a magnificent Cimabue Madonna painting. I was struck by seeing how the large gold areas in it could be both dark and light as one moved around it. This caused an amazing further dimension to the experience.

AP: We spoke about hanging the painting low. How do you get to the right scale? How do you compose your diptychs?

SF: I was working in a golden-rectangle format for a while. Then I wanted the painting to be bigger, so I stacked one golden rectangle of 87 3/8 x 54 inches on top of another. For me it was an apt solution for further paintings in relation to our human stances and perception. Standing in front of this scale, I wanted the viewer to be able to feel that they could interact physiologically with this scale. Yet it didn't seem so big that one would feel overwhelmed by entering or experiencing, the painting.

Thus, I wanted the painting to hang low, regardless of ceiling height, so that the viewer's experience would be the most important factor determining the height, not the architecture. If there was a lot of white space along the bottom, it took some strength from the physical immediacy of the painting and caused it to appear to "float."

Smaller paintings are two feet wide. They come from the measurements of Byzantine icons, like a torso. One looks at them closer. These two sizes seem to work for me. The scale seems important to my work. All the other works come from the big paintings. Again, they are made for the viewer's maximum experience.

AP: When do you decide to do watercolor, and how do you relate those works to oil painting? Is it a different kind of working for you?

SF: I consider all to be part of the same unity. From the beginning, I was working in oil. Except one year I was ill and didn't have the strength for executing the large oil paintings. So I did watercolors. I prefer oil, because I can't move the paint around the same way with watercolor. Now, they are also different

because I don't do measured plans for the watercolors the way I do with oil. The paper and its outside form become an integral part of what is the watercolor. I also often work out ideas and research colors through watercolors. And If I have some days to wait for oil paintings to dry, or if I only have a short time to paint, I work on watercolors. If I'm working in oil, I go to the studio in the morning and need the full day to prepare and paint…

CS: Do you have an ideal paper?

SF: Yes. I found a stack of old Indian rag ledger paper in an art supply store in NYC. (Neither store nor paper exist anymore.) The poet Franck André Jamme, who was a friend, often traveled to India and sometimes traded me paper. He found pieces in Rajasthan and brought them back. And other colleagues and friends knew I liked this paper and sometimes brought me some from India. I felt a little badly to work on it because tantric painters used the *leaves* for the same reasons that I did. As painters, they knew that this paper takes the color beautifully; it absorbs the paint a little, just enough. I can even wash it sometimes and rework it in case it didn't work the first time.

CS: Is poetry important to you? Does it help you in your painting?

SF: Poetry is very important, not so much directly. Like music, I find it can often transport one's mind to a more anonymous plane, where it can escape some of the interferences of everyday *distractions*.

CS: When I feel badly, I read Agnes Martin's advice for young artists. What would be your advice to a young artist?

SF: It depends on the artist; everybody is different. When I taught, I tried to figure out what each student wanted to do and to help them develop where they wanted to go. I am delighted to see the work of great younger painters. There are many. And so, the art of painting continues and is validated.

I would not tell my students that they should be abstract or figurative because I find that a painting is made up of the material of the paint and its inherent virtuosity. It is up to the artist to make the paint itself compelling and convincing.

Suzan Frecon
Made over long stretches of time, Suzan Frecon's (b. 1941) abstract oil paintings and works on paper invite the viewer's sustained attention. In her work, composition serves as a foundational structure, holding color, material, and light. Frecon mixes pigments and oils to differing effects, and the visual experience of her work is heightened by her almost tactile use of color and contrasting matte and shiny surfaces. Figure can become ground and ground can become figure in, as the artist defines it, a back-and-forth of full and empty space.

Christine Safa
Christine Safa (b. 1994) paints landscapes from memory. She also paints figures, portraits, and sometimes doubles—emotionally charged moments and places that memory has preserved. Faces and mountains mixed. Silhouettes and horizons. In the light of a moment frozen in memory. Figures in the landscape, reduced to the essentials but alive. A warm palette that confesses its Mediterranean origins. What it means to be there, simple but complete, is what these sober, powerful paintings convey with obvious empathy.

EXTRACTS FROM A CORRESPONDENCE

Between Nino Kapanadze, Mamma Andersson, and Anaël Pigeat

Nino Kapanadze (b. 1990) met Mamma Andersson (b. 1962) in Paris, when she was working on a series of engravings in a studio near Place de la République at Atelier René Tazé. Originally from Georgia, Kapanadze had long admired Andersson's work without knowing that the Swedish artist had taken an interest in the little-known Georgian painter Niko Pirosmani, or that she had written a text about his use of black backgrounds. Both have long been passionate about the experience of frescoes, particularly those by Giotto in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua; the contrasts of light and bursts of color on the canvases of El Greco; and the humble paintings in Romanesque churches. Following their initial conversation, in preparation for *Studio Conversations*, each of them painted works inspired by natural landscapes and simple forms, creating an astonishing echo effect both formal and spiritual.

Wed. 15 Jan 09:48
dear Karin and Nino,
What a pleasure, our breakfast at Café Beaubourg this morning after looking at this full moon from three different places in town! To begin our conversation, it would be nice to come back on this image that we discussed: the artist being a "transistor" between the world, the energies of the world, and the work. Nino was mentioning the position of the artist between the world and the depiction of the world. How does that resonate for you?
Warmly,
Anaël

Wed. 15 Jan 11:49
Dear Anaël, dear Karin,
I have thoughts piled up since our exchange yesterday. As a term, I would often use "transistor" to the world—the way I feel at times… Yesterday, our talk touched me so much, when we were listening to Karin reflecting on life as much as on art, feelings, metaphysical experiences, connection to God, to Nature… Here is the text I wrote, that I was mentioning: "My work exists at that boundary, between the world and depiction of it, this is a boundary where I myself must disappear. My work is part of my 'survival method' to totally to submit myself to:
"1. what I see: decomposition of light, transparency of air, horizons, dust between objects, backs of people who pass by;
"2. what I feel: grace (of God) or fear of its absence.
"And that condition is expressed physically in two forms, in all cases: either long contemplation or painting. Until I have to make myself visible again."
Warmly,
Nino

Wed. 15 Jan 13:22
dear Nino and Karin,
Karin, we just received the image of your new work. In dialogue with the other three, it will be fantastic. We like the mask a lot, and the fact that Marcel Dzama offered it to you. Nino has been working on a work that resonates with it in a very special way. That leads us to the very subject of the show: what is it for an artist to look at another artist's work?
Warmly,
Anaël

5 Feb 22:54
Dear Nino and Anaël,
It was lovely to meet both of you in Paris.
I have spent almost my entire lifetime with another artist. Our conversations took place almost every day. We developed many ideas side by side; sometimes it was hard to know who said what. In parallel with these conversations, I have had a different kind of dialogue with art history in my studio. Not exactly a dialogue, but rather a never-ending well, in which I discovered various approaches to working with painting. There is no right or wrong; different artists throughout different eras have worked with very diverse methods and techniques. Often, when I get stuck and don't know what to do, I have looked into my books or visited various museums, gaining the strength and courage to move forward—not least in terms of inspiration.
In truth, the only artist with whom I have truly had a collaboration with is Tal R. On two occasions. The first time was in 2016, the exhibition was called *Svanesång*.
It was held at Galleri Bo Bjereggaard in Copenhagen and at Galleri Magnus Karlsson in Stockholm. The second time was in 2022–2023. Then, based on the Swedish artist Carl Fredrik Hill (1849–1911). We had exhibitions at three different museums: Museum of Modern Art Aalborg in Denmark, Malmö Museum in Sweden, and MORE Museum in the Netherlands. During the process, we sent images to each other and had already agreed on a common stance—or rather, a theme. But the point is that we never abandoned our personal intentions.
What we are doing now is different, I intend that we try to explain to each other how we view our respective processes. Honestly, it is really not easy. I find my process, to say the least, rather muddled. I wish for a plan, a clear idea that I can follow. That is not the case, every time I start a painting, it feels as if I pull my trousers down and stand there completely naked, without a map or a compass. I begin somewhere and follow an inner voice that at times leads me down completely wrong paths. I have to scrape away, paint over, and change things, but perhaps it is precisely that uncertainty that is also part of the charm, that I have not the slightest idea where I am headed. I take it for granted that the overall mood and any potential narrative will emerge on its own, after all, it is still me holding the brush, the crayon, or whatever tool I'm using.
Usually, it is only afterward, sometimes long afterwards, that I can understand bits of what I was doing, what was swirling in my mind and soul during that particular period of work.
But I agree with you, Nino. It might be dust, transparency, certain color combinations, a horizon, or seeing the back of someone that sets the process in motion. I wish I felt grace, that I could be more contemplative, that I could surround myself with less worry, feel safe and be well rested. That is not the case, but I strive to get there. Perhaps this state of worry is the battery that keeps me alive. Right now, I cannot say more, I will get back to you.
Nino, I think it will be difficult to come to Italy and see your exhibition, but one never knows, suddenly it might be possible, we shall see.
Best wishes,
Karin

9 Feb. 15:07
Dear Karin and Nino,
This is exactly the thread I would like to pull in the show. It seems to not only consist in looking at an object, but at the mystery of a creative gesture. What can this dialogue look like?
Best,
Anaël

9 Feb. 16:28
Dear Karin, Anaël,
In this new painting that Karin created for our show, I love how "grey" it stays whilst ochres are lighting from below. I feel those blues discreetly swept by, which is also a reminder of us speaking of Giotto blues, Northern Macedonian frescoes, etc. The light and shadow are measured beautifully.

My new paintings carry certain energy and intensity that reflects our exchange not only on painting, history of art, but more on life, physical and psychological resistance, fragility, stability and moving through. Painting is this particular time/space dimension which I "put on" like an armour and with which I move through all storms. The process itself is intuitive and counterintuitive at the same time, and sometimes I have the feeling that paintings are like footprints, or that they carry DNA with more "information" than I was ever conscious of on my own self.
Warm regards,
Nino

14 March 20:04
Dear Karin and Nino,
The idea appeared to publish extracts of our correspondence on the preparation of the show. To fill the gaps of this written conversation, here are a few more questions that I wanted to ask you:
Karin, when I introduced you to Nino's work, you spoke about the Georgian painter Niko Pirosmani's work, whom you knew about. How did you get interested in his work? How did you perceive his use of black?
Nino, how do you relate to Pirosmani (to his representations of animals in particular) and to black?
Karin, you also mentioned in our previous conversation, a Hungarian painter who was related to Pirosmani, Tivadar Csontváry Kosztka. Could you tell more about how you encountered his work and about what interested you in his work?
Nino, what do icons represent for you? Do they relate to your practice of fresco?
Karin, I understand you are also interested in icons, especially Novgorod icons. Is it for the light? Where does this interest come from?
Karin, what is your relationship to Surrealism? The painting of the bust in the show seems to have a very specific tone in your work. Could you tell about this object? And maybe also about its relationship to antiquity?
As a conclusion, I wanted to ask the two of you what trees represent for you. I have the feeling that Karin's trees look very human, and that Nino's are more like clouds or air. How would you react to that interpretation?

15 March 15:59
Dear Anaël, and Karin,
In early childhood, my first access to painting, besides the books we had at home, was through Georgian Orthodox frescoes and Pirosmani. His existence equaled to nature, I could not image the world without him, his animals are as wholeheartedly magnified as love of his life, actress Margarita (Marguerite de Sèvres). His use of black pigment, different shades, is extremely rich—in backgrounds, for nights and as well as for clothing which beautifully depicts iconic Georgian style, civil clothing of that period, which somehow stays in connection with monastic attire. His whites are very significant too, especially long table covers! Black and white can be inverted and both can play role of negative space in painting, during our meeting with Karin we made a point that maybe how black functions for her, white does for me.

Icons are objects of reverence to me, they carry light and life, whilst frescoes are there in lavish to tell stories and dominate. Technically they both require mastery of transparency, the quality which through industrialisation of painting got more and more difficult to maintain. My fresco practice is not only technical and physical exigence but a spiritual one too, I cannot carry them with me or protect them like paintings, you shall give it all and leave there at the wall.

To me trees create nominal spaces between earth and sky, and as they try to defy gravity towards heights just as deeply they extend their roots. I love depicting their relation to light and air, but I also experience much pleasure exploring line, calligraphic insertion in painting, and for that, trees make wonderful subject matter.

17 March 22:54
Dear Anaël and Nino,
In the autumn of 2018, I traveled to Vienna with my two sons and my son's wife to see an exhibition of Bruegel the Elder.
At the same time, another major solo exhibition was on display at the Albertina—Niko Pirosmani.
I had never encountered his work before, at least not that I was aware of.
We were exhausted after a long day filled with impressions, but something about the exhibition at the Albertina caught my attention.
These naïve, vivid, and strikingly credible paintings of landscapes, people, and animals were something truly special—almost luminescent against the black backgrounds.
I took many photos with my phone but didn't think much more about Pirosmani afterward.

Not until Poul Erik Tøjner contacted me in early 2023, asking if I could write something about Pirosmani's paintings, did I revisit him.
My first response was that I didn't know who he was. But when I looked him up, I realised that he was the Georgian painter, born 100 years before me,
who painted on black "wax cloth," the very artist I had seen at the Albertina in Vienna.
I called back and said I would be happy to immerse myself in his work. I became deeply moved by Pirosmani, his unique way of painting, and his life story.
It led me to order black pre-primed canvas and start working with it myself.

In encountering Pirosmani, I was reminded of another artist with certain similarities, whose work has followed me since my youth—Csontváry Kosztka Tivadar (1853–1919), born in Hungary.
I first saw his paintings at Liljevalchs Konsthall in Stockholm in 1994.
A beautiful exhibition book was published at the time, and it has been with me ever since.
Like Pirosmani, Csontváry painted and drew in his own distinctive manner, somewhat naïve yet incredibly precise and believable, particularly his vibrant,
almost psychedelic landscapes, such as those from Taormina, Sicily.
Since I myself spent several years painting landscapes on-site, directly within the environment, this aspect of his work intrigued me.
He remains an important inspiration alongside early influences such as Sidney Nolan and Camille Corot.

Icons from the Novgorod school have a particular pull on me, not just spiritually but also in their brilliant compositions.
Yet what fascinates me most is their layered painting technique on wooden panels.
The restrained color palette still carries a glowing, almost supernatural quality. They are serious, almost sacred in presence.
I first encountered icons physically when I worked as a guard at Nationalmuseum in Stockholm in the 1980s.
This allowed me to study them up close, to be near them. The room with the Russian icons became a place of contemplation.
Even today, when I visit Nationalmuseum, I make sure to take time to see them again.
But my first real encounter with icons came through cinema—Andrei Tarkovsky's 1966 film *Andrei Rublev*.
Tarkovsky had a deep connection to visual art, and film has, at times, been the most important artistic influence on my own practice.

You ask me about Surrealism, what it means to me. The answer is perhaps everything and nothing.
Surrealism is a broad term for a movement that took place in the 20th century. It encapsulated art that moved beyond realism,
creating a world drawn from the subconscious, the occult, or pure imagination.
I consider Hieronymus Bosch a surrealist, even though the term wasn't coined until 1924.
For many years, I felt almost ashamed when someone described my work as surreal.

This was because I always associated Surrealism with René Magritte and Salvador Dalí, whose work never interested me.
However, many artists and writers I deeply admire are sometimes classified as surrealists,
such as Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978), Odilon Redon (1840–1916), Lewis Carroll (1832–1898), and Gunnar Ekelöf (1907–1968).

In 2023, a friend in Copenhagen gave me two plaster copies of antique sculptural fragments.
One of them was a half-face originally depicting Apollo, the Greek/Roman god of light, music, and art.
This fragment became a significant artifact in my studio and made its way into several of my paintings.
It was prominently featured in my solo exhibition at David Zwirner gallery in Paris in October 2023.
The face conveyed something I had been searching for in my work. In recent years,
I have found great pleasure in painting real objects in my studio, almost like still lifes.

Finally, you ask about my relationship to trees.
Trees are my roots, they have always been present in my imagery. They have taken on many different forms—pure white birches, massive oak trunks with thick bark,
or desolate clear-cut forests, where only a few dying pines stand like calligraphic symbols against the sky.
Sometimes, we cannot see the forest for the trees—just as in life itself.

With best wishes,

Karin

Mamma Andersson
Characterized by a unique combination of textured brushstrokes, loose washes, stark graphic lines, and evocative colors, the work of Mamma Andersson (b. 1962) embodies a new genre of painting that recalls late nineteenth-century Romanticism while also embracing a contemporary interest in layered, psychological compositions that draw inspiration from a wide range of source materials.

Nino Kapanadze
In her paintings, Nino Kapanadze (b. 1990) seeks the presence of silence, of sensations of fear or peace, representations that are not descriptions. Avoiding the idea that an image has a fixed end or a fixed viewing point, with neither category nor predefined identity, she explores the sensation of movement, varying tempo and transparency within the realm of the canvas.

MOONS, CATS, AND SWIMMING POOLS

A conversation between Marcel Dzama and Jean Claracq, moderated by Anaël Pigeat

Jean Claracq (b. 1991), who has been in residence in New York since the beginning of 2025, visited Marcel Dzama (b. 1974) in his Brooklyn studio. The two artists talked about music, Polaroid photography, surfing, and the light produced by the full moon. As the conversation progressed, Claracq and Dzama created works on paper collaboratively, blending their worlds in a kind of game. To experiment with new forms, Claracq moved away from the main lines of his explorations, medieval references and pictorial variations on the light of computer and telephone screens. Dzama, whose work extends from drawing and painting to sculpture and stage design, also presents a series of works on paper in which costumed characters explore our gestures and emotions, penetrating into our subconscious.

AP: Jean, what has led you to New York, where you met Marcel?

JC: I was in Paris for ten years and in Marseille for two years and needed some fresh air and new prespectives. So I applied to a residency at the ISCP, which is funded by the Salomon Foundation.

AP: Marcel, apart from your French name, do you have any connection with France?

MD: My love for Marcel Duchamp!

AP: You met several times in Marcel's studio in New York. Could you describe it as it is today?

MD: It looks like organized chaos, borderline order! There's a lot of masks and costumes from films I made, a lot of artist books, and flea market objects that give me some inspiration to work from. It's nearby my home, and I've been here for eleven years now. It didn't start out this cluttered, but progressively it is surrounding me.

AP: Most of your works in the show are on paper. What do they represent compared to your other works? Are they more intimate? What does working on paper mean for you?

MD: To me, it's the intimacy and it is humble. Anyone can have it, unlike canvas and paint, or photography. I grew up very poor, so I could not afford those luxuries, so a pencil on paper was my main medium. Also, in art school, professors were telling me that I should do things on a computer, and that is the future of art, and I rebelled from that computer age. A revolt against technology. Keeping authentic and with soul.

AP: How do you choose your papers? Jean told me he liked them a lot.

MD: It was a notebook paper at the beginning. Now the gallery provides me with quality paper, which is great for bigger works. It has so much weight now that it doesn't rip or wrinkle.

JC: At the beginning, I never really thought about the paper, either. Marcel, I was wondering about the paper I gave you for our common work: it is so different from the one that you use. Did you like it?

MD: I can work on any kind of paper. I got used to that one. On the one with the moon, I might have used too much water. It ruffled a bit, but a frame will flatten it out!

JC: When you put water on those papers, they move a little, but then they flatten again.

AP: Jean, it's new that you show works on paper like you're doing in the exhibition. How come now?

JC: A year an a half ago, I got back to my first love, which is drawing. It was for an art fair, and it did not work. Then I did it a lot until today. Actually, watercolor was my first love; it's so much fun. For me, drawings don't necessarily make sense on a wall. I prefer notebooks. It's more intimate and related to the way I look at art. Now I'm excited to try that in the show.

MD: When I was in art school, I painted on found wood. I was living with my parents then. A house fire burnt most everything I made and owned. The insurance company put us up in a hotel near the airport. For my thesis final, I did hundreds of drawings on hotel stationary, with the title and address of the Airliner Inn. That same week after, a curator saw my work at the university and asked me if I wanted to be part of a group show in LA. And that's how entered the art world.

AP: Jean, you use very bright colors. Marcel, it seems that blue is very present at the moment. Is your work blue?

MD: Yes, I'm in my blue period right now! That all started when I was working in the NY City Ballet: I was doing costumes and sets for a show in their art promenade space, a show at David Zwirner, and two film projects. Then my art was very brown and red; it was earthy colors. I was exhausted after all those commitments, and had this possibility to travel to Morocco for a month with my family. I drove us to all the cities and sites. The sunlight is different there; it really highlights color. Just seeing all the marvelous carpets, the textiles opened my eyes to colors. My favorite colors were blue and yellow. I wanted a new chapter, a clear change. Things were getting very depressing when Trump first came to power, then Covid started. The work I was doing before cynical, but times had changed, and it was very very depressing, so I wanted to bring some hope to my work. I did two types of work: very political work and work with beauty color and hope, but with a strong message covered in beauty. Sugar to disguise the medicine. There was an element of escapism as well: because of Covid no one could travel, so I traveled in my drawings to far off places.

AP: Jean, your bright colors always reminded me of International Gothic painting. Your paintings have a wide range of lights sources: screens, phones, cameras… And you've also explored very muted colors. How do you work on color?

JC: My colors are always evolving through time. When I was younger, I focused in a very instinctive way of using color. I would not think too much about the colors. I was obsessed by red, and now I'm obsessed by pink. It was always muted colors, with a few touches of bright colors. In the end, if you put too many colors, nothing works. Two years ago, I decided I wanted to do better with earthy colors. I've been looking at Orthodox icons in the past years.

AP: You both have a strong interest in illustrated books: Marcel for children books like *Little Nemo*, and Jean for illuminated manuscripts. (You even started one on the works in the show as an illuminated page.) What do books represent for you?

MD: Yes, children's books were my first inspiration; I loved Maurice Sendak books, I was lucky enough to collaborate with him on some drawings before he passed.
There weren't many art shows in Winnipeg. So that is how I first saw art, in books. Strange enough, as a kid, I had seen Marcel Duchamp's work because we had the same name; his work really stayed with me! My parents had no idea about Duchamp. My dad's name is Maurice, and he is named after a carpenter my grandma liked. My dad was a baker, and he had seen my name written in his locker and like the sound of it 'cause it kind of sounded like his name but was different. In Winnipeg, the winters there are vey long. So I would take out a maximum amount of books and draw in my bedroom during those cold days. So books meant the world to me; they opened up a world of art of the past.

AP: You also do scrapbooks.

MD: Yes, since high school, and I kept them. It started out as comic books and zines. I thought I was going to have to be an illustrator instead of an artist. I knew the style of the punk records, and of Raymond Pettibon. My early work perfectly fit in a book format.

JC: I've been looking to miniatures for a long time. And lately I've been looking at sixteenth-century illuminated manuscripts, which is new for me. They are beautiful, and represent a different way of doing a narration. The intimacy is very appealing. There are compositions you don't find anywhere else, with a huge freedom—but before paper, it was on skin, so maybe it was actually not that free.

AP: Marcel, you often have spoken of William Blake and Goya. But in your recent drawings, modernity is very present, Marcel Duchamp as well as Picabia, or even Léon Bakst from the Ballets Russes. With regards to your recent work, he seems to be of interest.

MD: I discovered Léon Bakst's work when I was working with the New York City Ballet. He was a bit of an influence on a stage, costumes, the curtains I was working on, and even some drawings. He had some of that brightness that I had found in Morocco. Picabia worked for a ballet in Stockholm. He drew costumes with polka dots. I was drawing these characters with hoods and kind of a rebellion or terrorist organization sort of look, but I wanted them to look friendlier and clownish, so I gave them polka dots so it would make them more like clowns or performers. Any excuse to reference Picabia I usually try.

AP: Some of them also remind of Loie Fuller.

MD: I saw books or films on her dance in the 1990s. I don't know if it was her or someone copying her style of dance. I was also obsessed by early cinema like Georges Méliès and *Trip to the Moon*. In my drawing, Loie Fuller is like a moth flying that goes towards the moon.

AP: Do you relate your interest for modernity and the politics?

MD: I always had a leftward leaning since I was many punk bands in my youth. And I knew the stupidity of George Bush's war on terror. Then that first term of Trump, there was this toxic masculinity everywhere. When I was a teenager, I always loved feminist bands like the Raincoats, the Slits, Kleenex, Patti Smith, X-Ray Spex, and even to some degree Nirvana. In the last few years, women's right have taken away. I went to a few protests, and made a few works on the fact that we are going backwards in the USA.

AP: Jean, you made this drawing of a man on the moon. Where does he come from ?

JC: He's named after Man Ray's picture of Duchamp's *Dust Collection* (*Elevage de poussière*), when he was doing *The Big Glass* (*Le grand verre*). I wanted to do something about the moon in relation to Méliès, but in a very Renaissance aesthetic—a friend gave me a little moon as an earring! And I ended up doing this dust collector (*éleveur de poussière*). I wanted to do this black blue sky, which reminds of science fiction, that you see on pictures of spatial stations. It was a sad work because that dust felt about death. I've always been collecting stories about dust in relation with artists. I put dust in jars and used it as a pigment in my works. It's the first layer of ruin. I was thinking of his will of going to Mars as a kind of failure of modernity. I did it for this show and in relation to your film, Marcel, so I included references to my work and to your work.

AP: The masks remind of the commedia dell'arte. The outfit could remind of the circus. Picasso connected those two domains. Méliès is not disconnected from them either. What do all these mean for you in the drawings and in the film?

MD: As a kid, I was obsessed with costumes, and I sometimes wore them as regular clothes. I loved masks. I had one that my grandmother had brought back from Hawaii that I still have a version of in my studio: two faces back to back, one happy and one sad, like in Greek comedy and tragedy. In my early films, my main actors were my dad, my sister, and my uncle, and they would wear masks. It was easier if I needed to dub what they said. And so they wouldn't smile or laugh while I was filming them.

AP: Do you relate the moon and cinema?

MD: The obsession with the moon started when I went to Morocco, near the Atlas Mountains. It was a pink moon. It looks so huge up in the mountains and so bright like I've never seen it before.
Also the moon had this strange quality that inflenced me a lot. Whenever it's a full moon, I defenitely have more energy. It has some kind of weird werewolf-like effect at work.

AP: The film also pays homage to the film *Un chien andalou* by Luis Buñuel.

MD: The original idea of the film is a script by Federico Garcia Lorca in response to *Un chien andalou*, Buñuel had this character that falls from a bike. People make fun of him because he seems effeminate. And so Lorca mades this revenge film, *Trip to the Moon*. There's a dead artist character with a mustache, who is probably Dalí, and a young couple make love on top of him. It was lost till 1990. It was very surrealist. The Lorca Foundation asked me if I would be interested in making the film, and I love Lorca, so I accepted. This was ten years before I actually did it. The funding came with Performa in New York City. And I took the project again. I found out a Catalonian artist had done it since then, and there was these rape scenes and strangulations of animals. I made it so the victims all got revenge and never were only victims, it and made it more joyful, about a resurrection of Lorca, becoming the moon—because was killed by the fascist regime. I play guitar in the film, to add a Spanish sound to it. My friend plays keyboard and guitar, and my son is on the percussion as well.

AP: You heard about Lorca through Leonard Cohen. How important is music in your paintings?

JC: I did my club paintings to represent crowds, queerness, and spaces where you can get safe and lost at the same time. I listen to a lot of music when I work. It has to match. If I'm very focused, its silence.

MD: So do I, especially when I draw. And when I paint, it's usually an audiobook or a podcast. When I paint slow, and when I want to paint faster, I put the kind of music I want the painting to reveal. When the work is successful, I have this feeling I don't exist anymore, and the work is happening and time disappears.

AP: Does filming change the way you paint?

MD: Yes, all my ideas come from drawing first. Sometimes I'll have made a film and base the drawings on the film for a show so it is more cohesive and lives in the same world. And with the ballet too. They are like living characters in this strange world.

AP: Is magic important?

MD: Maybe dark magic, ha ha! When I was growing up, there were magazines about the occult. It was very popular after World War I: people wanted to communicate with dead soldiers. Maybe theses things go in cycles, as it seems to be coming back.

JC: I do have a lot of people around me that are involved in ahamanism. I do believe in spells. But I never did research on that, and I probably never will. I'm just sensitive.

AP: I'm now coming to your collaborative works. Marcel, you have collaborated several times with other artists, such as Raymond Pettibon. In Winnipeg, you were also a member of the Royal Art Lodge. What was it ?

MD: I went to school with my uncle who was a year younger than me. We were like cousins or brothers. We were both in bands together, and we did collaborative drawings every Wednesday. There were three suitcases: good drawings, mediocre drawings, drawings to destroy. It was really fun because there was an egoless endeavor. We didn't even put our names on it, just a date stamp. And now I draw a lot of exquisite corpses with my son. He would also write ideas for films during Covid confinement! I learn a lot from collaboration. Before I started collaborations with Raymond Pettibon, I wasn't doing large drawings. Then I had to change to make it look cohesive with his larger size. It defintely influenced my work. He also introduced me to new brushes. My work became more painterly—rather just coloring in the drawings.

AP: How did the new images occur?

MD: We talked about themes that related to our works: the moon, cats, swimming pools… I had a cat who passed away last year at the age of twenty-one. He was my main companion when I was drawing late at night. I collaborated with him a lot, because he had this manic energy at three in the morning and would splash the work. Also I'm sort of socially awkward, but when I collaborate with another artist, I have this feeling that we can have this deeper conversation. There is in this work putting up resistance to what's going on in the US, with everything falling apart.

AP: What advice would you give to a young person who would want to become an artist?

MD: Have fun when you are working, because if you're enjoying it, that energy shows up in the work.

Jean Claracq
A painter of miniatures and icons, Jean Claracq (b. 1991) creates a dialogue between traditional painting and the digital world. His models come from social networks such as Instagram and Grindr. They interact in his paintings with numerous references to the history of classical art, particularly the schools of Northern Europe. Using traditional techniques—oil paint on wood and attention to detail—the artist plays with different ways of reading and accurately depicts our relationship with screens and loneliness in the urban environment.

Marcel Dzama
Since rising to prominence in the late 1990s, Marcel Dzama (b. 1974) has developed an immediately recognizable visual language that investigates human action and motivation, as well as the blurred relationship between the real and the subconscious. Drawing equally from folk vernacular as from art-historical and contemporary influences, Dzama's work visualizes a universe of childhood fantasies and otherworldly fairy tales.