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VOGUE

FRENCH TWIST

Mixed-media artist Camille Henrot renders her encyclopedic vision of the world through everything from sculpture to hip-hop to film. Dodie Kazanjian reports. Photographed by Anton Corbijn.



The artist Camille Henrot, who looks and sounds and definitely *is* very French, has been living in New York City for the last five years. Well, maybe *living* isn't quite the right word, because she's so often somewhere else. "I'm moving all the time—I have no idea where I live," she says when we meet at her walk-up studio on the Bowery. (Her apartment is in Chinatown, a short distance away.) Willow and blonde, Camille has a quiet self-assurance to go with her obvious braininess. She's just back from researching a film "about hope and faith" on the Pacific island of Tonga—it will be part of her hugely ambitious show at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris this fall. She's leaving tomorrow for Naples, Rome, Paris (she has an apartment there, too), and Vienna, where she's having a smaller show in a month. "I choose to live in New York," she says, "but I'm very disappointed with my progress in English. When I moved here, I thought my accent would disappear in six months."

She received an artist-research fellowship at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., in 2013. This led, among other things, to her multimedia film *Grosse Fatigue*, in which a fast-moving flow of images (including still photographs, texts, and her own drawings) combines with hip-hop beats and a voice-over reading of creation myths from many cultures. The text was written jointly with Jacob Bromberg, an American poet she works with whenever she's using the spoken or written word. "Collaborating with Camille is very exciting because she is constantly making new and unexpected connections between ideas," Bromberg says. "Her approach is omnivorous, and this is where you need to come from when you work with her."

BLUE PERIOD

Camille Henrot, photographed in her New York studio.
Hair, Shon; makeup, Yumi Lee. Details, see In This Issue.
Sittings Editor: Phyllis Posnick.

Henrot was 34 when she finished *Grosse Fatigue*. Using anthropology, philosophy, literary theory, mythology, poetry, and animation, she was out to storm the heights of avant-garde art-making, and, incredibly, she succeeded. *Grosse Fatigue* won her the Silver Lion as the most promising young artist at the 2013 Venice Biennale, whose curator is the New Museum's artistic director, Massimiliano Gioni. Her thirteen-minute film quickly became the hot ticket at museum shows in New York, Montreal, and Chicago. (It was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, among others.) "It's a breakthrough piece about the desire to know everything," says Gioni, who brought it to the New Museum. "It's both a parody and a kind of manual to understanding the contemporary art world."

Today her studio floor is awash in new watercolor drawings, some of them quite large. To protect them, Camille has both of us don disposable shoe covers, the kind surgeons wear in the O.R. Her drawing style is rapid, fluent, and often quite humorous. "I make 25 drawings to get one good one," she tells me as she offers green tea and croissants. She paints on the floor with her long-handled Japanese brushes, using her whole body in a sort of performative dance. The pigments, also Japanese, are especially vivid.

Her all-encompassing approach is fed by the fact, she says, that "I'm a hoarder. I used to be a compulsive eBay buyer. Sometimes I'd buy because the object had a weird name or because the seller's picture looked interesting. It was always for the wrong reason—never because I needed it." She'd pick up things from the street—a Jacuzzi door, which visitors often assume is a minimalist sculpture by Dan Graham—and of course she couldn't (and still can't) stop herself from buying books, often the same one in several languages. She claims to have been helped by Marie Kondo's famous decluttering book. "It sounds a bit cheesy, but it was a huge revelation," she says. A great many of her unneeded acquisitions ended up in "The Pale Fox," a very personal show of small sculptures, drawings, and found objects at the Chisenhale Gallery in London's East End in 2014. "It was a great way to empty my apartment and my studio," she jokes.

Her show at the Palais de Tokyo will occupy the entire museum. Called "Days of Dogs," it's based on the days of the week, a subject she's been working on for the last three years, and it will combine sculptures, drawings, installations, films, frescoes, and her intricate ikebana pieces. "The week is a division of time that has no organic origin," she says. "The month is the moon cycle, but the day of the week is really an invention. It comes from Greek myths." Her interpretation of the subject is eclectic, personal, and informed by her reading—from Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* to astrology predictions. "Monday is the day of the moon," she says. "So it's melancholia and creative idleness—like laziness, but productive laziness. For me, Monday is the day I don't like to meet people. No Internet, no phone. I'm alone in the studio, I can read and draw, and I can work from bed. No matter what's happening, I try to protect that day." Obviously, none of our interviews were on a Monday.

In Henrot's cosmology, each day is associated with a celestial body. Tuesday is Mars; Wednesday is Mercury; Thursday is Jupiter; Friday is

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FLORA AND FAUNA
Henrot's ikebana sculpture
Heart of Darkness, 2012,
from "Is it possible to be
revolutionary and like
flowers?," 2011–ongoing

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Venus; Saturday is Saturn; Sunday, the sun. “Tuesday is struggle, excitement, sexual arousal, and also the relationship between domination and submission, and how that’s actually reversible.” Camille’s recent show at the Vienna Kunsthalle debuted the Tuesday material, including large-scale bronze sculptures and several heavy chains woven into a giant French braid (it took ten men to braid it) and a video, *Tuesday*, that juxtaposes footage of jujitsu fighters with racehorses being groomed and trained.

Camille was born in 1978 in Paris. Her father, François, is a banker who also worked with France Telecom on the development of the Minitel, a sort of pre-Internet. “My mom is an artist, a printmaker,” she says. “When I was a kid, she was also stuffing animals—especially birds. There were a lot of dead birds at home; I remember a drawer of glass eyeballs that were kind of terrifying.” (The image resurfaces in *Grosse Fatigue* with shots of glass balls rolling around, and dead birds packed in pullout drawers at the Smithsonian.) Mathilde, her sister, who is two and a half years older,

cofounded a company that distributes independent movies online; she produced two of Camille’s earlier films and is producing her newest one, *Saturday*, which will premiere at the Palais de Tokyo.

Growing up, Camille had a rather distant relationship to school. She was too shy to be a rebel, but “I was rebellious on the inside, so basically I was always late or absent or sick and not going.” Her mother, Maud, who had been the same way, was sympathetic. They each spent a good deal of their childhood drawing, and “sometimes I would just go with her to the museum or to the zoo and draw the animals. It was hard to adapt to school because of the freedom I had at home.” At the age of ten, she became a rock climber, scaling courses at Chamonix. “It was the first time I was good at any sport.” (These days she runs and does Pilates.) She was also a voracious reader, including Japanese manga, and an avid watcher of anime on TV. She drew constantly while watching, with Japanese ink brushes that her father brought back from his business travels, and her own drawings usually told stories. The family never traveled outside Europe together, because her mother was afraid of flying. As a child, Camille dreamed of going to far-off places. When she was seventeen, she took a four-month road trip to Italy with a friend, and since then, she’s been making up for lost travel.

Instead of a private university or the École des Beaux Arts, she chose the École Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs—mainly because it had an animation department. “As a teenager, I didn’t like to be identified as an artist,” she explains. “I felt being an artist was sometimes an excuse to be out of the world, out of reality. I didn’t need to learn how to draw or to paint or sculpt, because I’d been doing that since I was a child.” She wanted to learn about design—graphics, furniture, textiles—and especially about animation. At the Arts Décoratifs she was introduced to the feature-length animated films of Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata, and also to the brilliant anime TV show *Cowboy Bebop*. “I wanted to learn to direct or maybe create a TV cartoon show, or long feature films in animation,” she says.

After graduating in 2001, she had a number of different jobs—making short films or cartoons for advertising companies, and doing music videos. She worked often with the French electronic musician and DJ Joakim, to whom she was close. “I saw music video as a format where you could free yourself from narration and have a pure visual language. I was quite successful and had a lot of fun, but I wanted to be free to edit exactly the way I wanted, and taking orders from other

people became more and more difficult. I couldn’t really bend.” Meeting the multimedia artist Pierre Huyghe showed her the way out. She took a temporary job as Huyghe’s assistant one summer, and was fascinated by the freedom and expansive thinking of his process. If art could be like that, she thought, then why not be an artist?

Camille had a very beautiful dog, a Japanese breed called Shiba Inu that was little known in Paris at the time. People often stopped her to ask about it, and one of these meetings led to a conversation with a young woman who distributed art films for the Bureau des Videos. Her new friend came home with her, saw a couple of the experimental videos she’d been making on her own, and encouraged her. Before long, Camille’s videos were selected for two very important shows, “J’en rêve” at the Fondation Cartier and “I Still Believe in Miracles” at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, both in 2005. They were noticed, and Camille joined the art world.

A few weeks after our first meeting, Camille is back in New York. She’s wearing a pair of vintage motorbike pants that are torn at one ankle, which does nothing to disturb her poise. Her latest Shibu Inu, Nami, “attacked” them, she explains. The dog doesn’t live with her in New York or Paris—she’s been banished to Camille’s family’s country house because she’s “too intense to live in the city,” meaning she bites. Camille is here to shoot baptism ceremonies at Seventh-day Adventist churches in Manhattan and Brooklyn for the 3-D film *Saturday*, after the day of the Adventists’ Sabbath. Its main theme is hope—hope for a better life. The Adventists believe in the apocalypse, the possibility that the world will end, explains Camille, who was raised Catholic. “I have quite a critical attitude toward religion,” she says, “but at the same time, I have a tenderness for it. All the symbolism of baptism has to do with hope.”

The latest drawings she has been working on will form part of her ongoing “Bad Dad” series, images of authority figures “from Agamemnon to Michael Jackson,” which appeared for the first time in her 2015 debut show at Metro Pictures. “It’s a perverse, sexual, weird reflection on society, gender, social injustice, and abuse,” Camille explains. “It’s just lashing out at things I get upset about.” It’s not autobiographical, she says; Camille’s thinking and her art so far have been deeply personal and at the same time universal. It’s this binary, nonjudgmental approach that makes her work seem so new and so impressive. The “Bad Dad” concept is influenced,

she goes on to explain, by the sociologist Albert Memmi’s book *Dependence*, which shows how we build up anger and frustration toward the people we depend on. “The idea of the Palais de Tokyo show really comes out of that book,” she tells me. “It’s a deepened empathy toward the human condition, which is above judging.”

The Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson last summer sailed through a tempest to the island of Stromboli to see a festival Camille cocurated at the Fiorucci Art Trust House. He did so because “I really like her spirit and her work,” he tells me. “It’s this gentle, classic French elegance mixed with some really badass attitude. She’s just really cool.” □