

ALICE AMATI

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'In the Studio with Ugo Sébastião'
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You are French and currently based in Lyon. Could you explain your education and artistic journey so far?

I was interested in studying art from a very early stage, starting with design, then quickly moving on to fine art and painting especially. I began my studies in Alsace, where I was influenced by the artistic activity of the Basel region, characterized a relationship between concrete painting and geometric abstraction with its rigorous execution. I then completed my studies in Lyon, where I currently live.

What is your studio like? What sensations do you feel as soon as you enter the space?

I've had the opportunity to have several studios in completely different places: at school, in a disused factory, in an old building... The apartment where I currently live in is very spacious, so I've been able to set up my new studio there, with a door separating my bedroom from my workspace. It's very unusual for me to have this porosity between a place to live and a place to work, where the boundaries are blurred. Nonetheless, the space is quite exceptional, in an old bourgeois apartment, it's very pleasant and I have very good exposure to light at the start of the day. I keep my studio very tidy, as I like to work in a space where only the pieces I'm on and the tools I'm using are visually present. I need to leave as much empty space as possible. Occasionally, I take out all the pieces and research elements to manipulate them, move them around, take stock and step back from recent

ALICE AMATI

works. So far my workshops have always influenced my practice, as the space induces gestures and directs my view towards different aspects in different places. As this studio is quite new, I don't have much experience of the impact it may have on my practice. But to give you an example, when my studio was located in a disused factory, the materials I used were closely linked to that environment: they were more industrial. I also worked on very messy experiments and on much larger scales, which is now more complex to achieve in a studio shared with one's living space.

How do you work on a daily basis? What is your routine as an artist and how does your creative process normally work?

I need a daily practice. I start my day by often drawing an annotated sketch the size of a postage stamp. This is followed by a whole process of gleaning and researching images and photos that I've taken or found on the Internet, on various online archiving sites. Then comes the time of realization, which allows the project to be readjusted through experience. There are also moments where I play with elements in progress, or finished. I usually move paintings around the studio, juxtaposing images and samples. I rearrange the space to notice things that I wouldn't have thought of, and that only manipulation and physical experience can allow to emerge. Of course, alongside this, I spend time on various platforms looking at exhibitions that have just opened and keeping an eye on what's going on.



Ugo Sébastião, *'Dans une grotte il fait toujours nuit (monochromaton)'*, 2019, Oil paint and resin on coton. Courtesy of the artist.



Your works recall subjects and imageries from art history, often proposing religious scenarios. How do you choose the subjects of your paintings? Is there any specific meaning related to your choices?

The choice of a religious subject is not at all a matter of belief or fanaticism. Above all, I believe that using these themes is a real vector of allegory, a reflection on a Western society whose foundations and group's psychology remain closely linked to a marked presence of religion. The Baroque period is extremely interesting in this regard, with the return of wars and epidemics to Europe, the spread of the Counter-Reformation and the apotheosis of painting. The so rich historical, theological and political contexts of this period prompt me to express my feelings and concerns about the world around me.

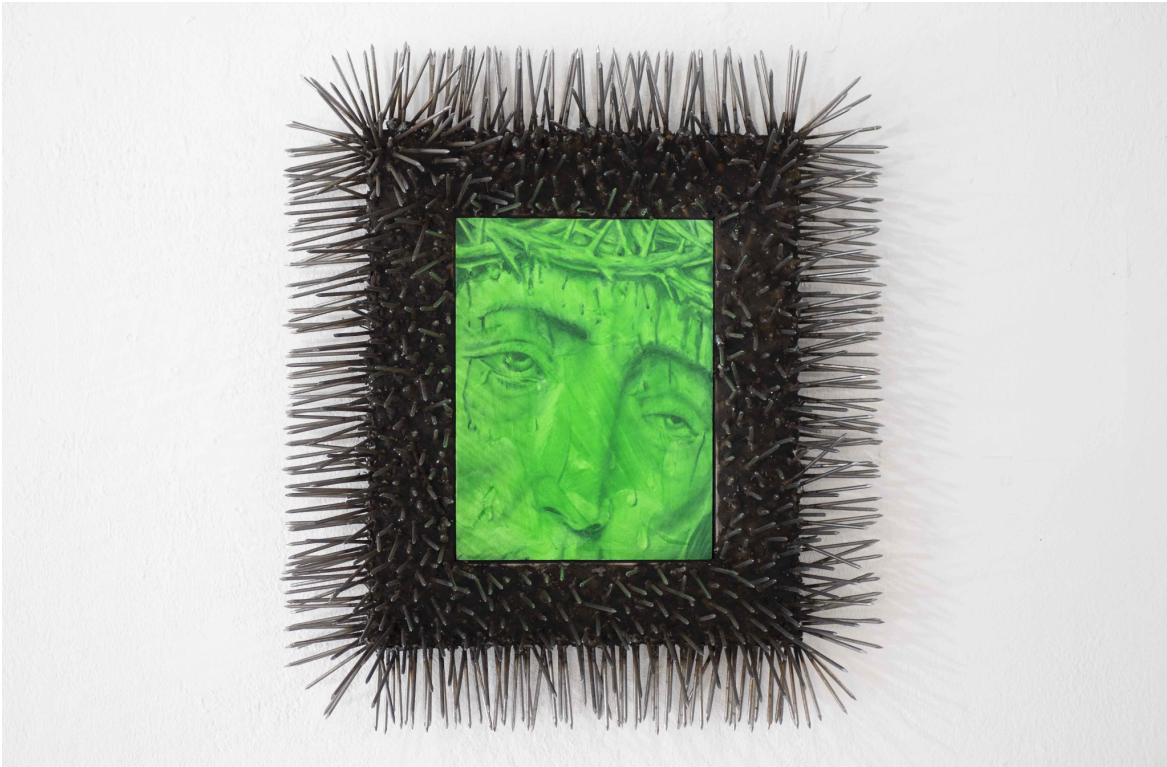
Indeed, I feel that your artistic practice works as a reinterpretation and maybe a reinvention of past iconography within a contemporary context?

A reinterpretation yes, probably more than a reinvention. In any case, it's certain that this iconography is a material that I select, cut up and reframe to produce something else. These images are so charged that they always generate and produce a force, an evocative power. But in a way, I've come to counter this iconography, bringing it back to materiality rather than perceiving it as a sacred, inaccessible object. This work of re-contextualization extends to the way I hang the works, sometimes displaying certain pieces particularly low or even on the ground.

Why do you feel this need to bring such subjects back to life?

I think it's part of an artistic practice to keep working on forms and themes, to re-question them, to re-contextualize them.. because they tend to be frozen by history. In a way, they become inert. A painting by Francisco Zurbaran has unprecedented potential to evoke a contemporary world through the temporal tension it highlights, and through the formal responses the artist brought to his time and how they resonate today. We no longer look at a painting, or the world, in the same way as during the 17th century. Inspiring my work from the past allows me to investigate ways of perception, how these have evolved, their impact and how they can continue to be questioned.

ALICE AMATI



Ugo Sebastián, 'Black Hole Sun n°3', 2022, Oil paint, gesso and glass powder on solid oak. Courtesy of the artist and Pal Project Gallery.

The technique you use evokes itself a strong time gap between antiquity and postmodernity. The underneath realistic subjects, which you paint using the Grisaille technique are indeed completely covered by glazes of glossy and bright finishes, almost like a cancellation...

Yes, my techniques are hybrid, borrowing from classical techniques and sometimes hijacking them too, by adding more contemporary touches and materials.

I don't necessarily use grisaille systematically; sometimes I paint directly in cameos of one color, which gives certain paintings a different light. I love to play with these final layers of different textures, sometimes very matt with beeswax, or ultra-shiny with resins and mediums that give a glassy aspect. The apparent flatness is in fact full of texture as you get closer to the work. The reliefs of the oil paint stand out, and sometimes the brushstrokes are very pronounced. I really like this ambivalence between the very flat appearance of the painting seen in a photo or from a distance, and the physical experience you can have with the work. As soon as you get closer to it, there's a whole play of micro-reliefs and textures. The glazes when altering the images reveal them to have another nature, between emergence and erasure, and the subjects become more and more ambiguous. This creates a physical relationship between the work and the the viewer, who is forced to move in order to let the light gliding over the work. They are obliged to move closer to see the figure emerge, while in the far distance only a monochrome can be seen. I consider sight to not be something innate, but instead something that needs to be stimulated on a daily basis.

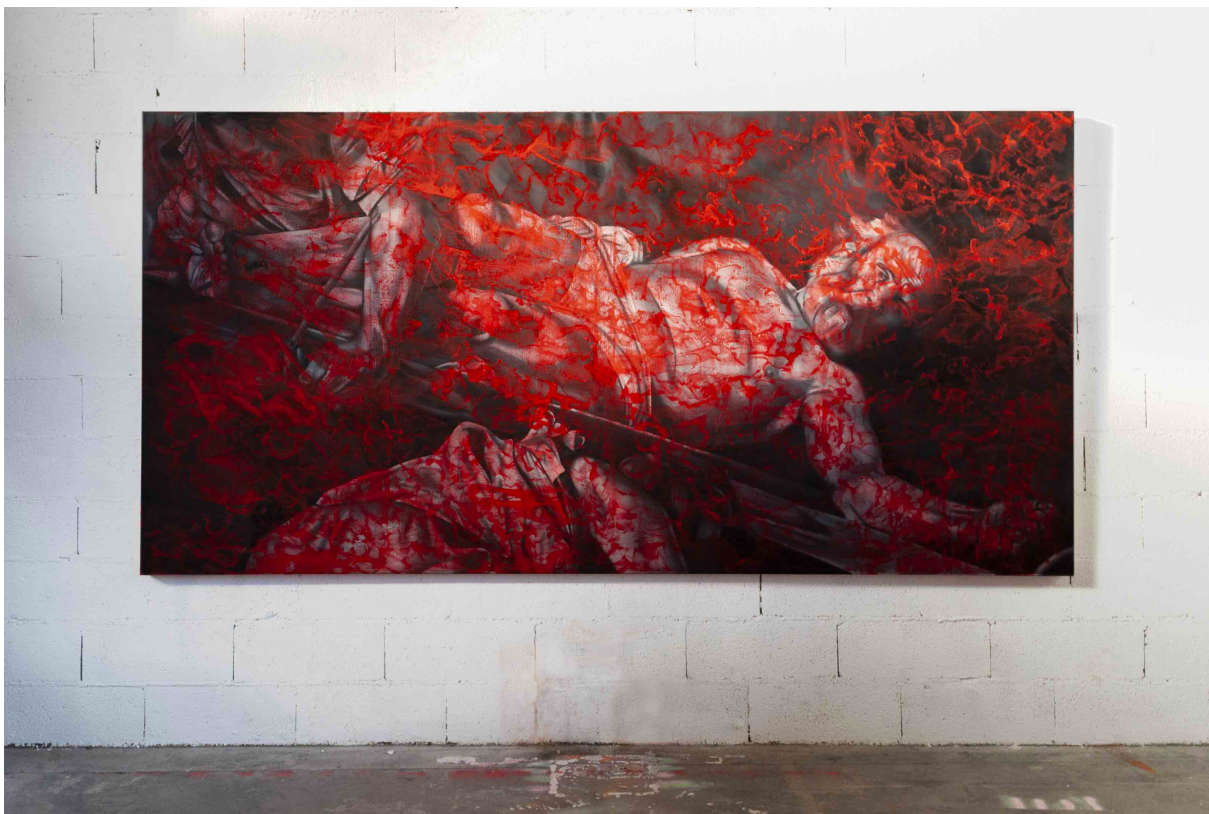
The colors of the top finish that you use to cover your paintings are very brilliant and relate to the color palette of digital printing...

ALICE AMATI

In fact, the layers that finish the painting are formal translations of the computer and telephone screens that have become absolutely ubiquitous, through their lacquered and homogeneous appearance. These glazes add depth and brightness to the image from the inside, while at the same time they convey a very high degree of flatness. At first, I restricted myself to an RGB color palette. Nowadays, I'm leaving myself more space for the poetry of the studio, for the colors I have at my disposal and for personal desires that come out of this color gamut.

So, the digitalization of images and their consequent distribution is what stands at the base of your creative process. You want to reproduce the digital modes over your paintings...

At the beginning of my research, the basic intent was to reproduce or simulate this digital aspect. As time advanced, I became more interested in hybridization, an ambiguity between the handmade and the non-handmade, between natural and highly artificial materials. All the digital operating modes have a huge influence on my choice of images and how I approach them. The cell phone has brought a haptic aspect and tactility to the image when you slide an image with your fingers, leaving a trace on the screen once locked. This kind of detail influences pictorial gestures in my latest work.



Ugo Sébastião, 'Un escalier sans marche', 2020, Oil paint, pigment and bleached beeswax on linen. Courtesy of the artist.

ALICE AMATI

In fact the trait is almost alive. There is a visible gesture on the top finish that you put over paintings. What does the act itself mean for you? What do you feel when actually covering the peculiar process done underneath?

The overlay is a really exciting moment, often arriving after a fairly long period of image construction and completely transforming it in a very short lapse of time. At this point, I often leave the way open for the materials to generate shapes of their own accord, through their technical qualities, viscosity, gravity and drying times. This moment allows me to take a step back from my pieces, as they become autonomous, in a sense ending by themselves. The lively line is there to mark the touch of a tool that becomes a motif, making visible a completely different register of gesture and temporality, sometimes exogenous to the painting. With these gestures, I emphasize the idea that the painted image is itself a support that receives and is crossed by eras and territories.

You also practice collage on some of your works. There is a rich contrast content-wise. Again, the painting at the very base is contrasted by post-punk visual contents. Why the post-punk image?

Like glazes, collage adds a temporal layer to the painting, with the complexity of playing on several iconographic fields. This collage work is close to my heart and is still a bit of a parallel research project. The post-punk imagery of some of the visuals I stick is an attempt to create a tension between my personal life and tastes and a larger, more conventional history. I'm not sure that this necessarily leads to anything, but I have a strong taste for certain alternative cultures that were part of my early years and helped me build my identity.

I guess through this method you question the significance and permeance of past images in the present. What do they evoke in yourself? And what do you believe they evoke in the eye of the observer?

Absolutely, the layers I apply to my paintings, whether collages or glazes, are also layers of historical evocations and different temporalities. How do certain images persist in our time and continue to work on me or a society? I work on them in return. The layers I apply and the different elements I leave to be seen are all elements I leave to the viewer to experience what I'm proposing. This iconography allows me to evoke or question the great subjects of humanity and our society, the relationship to the figure, to consumerism, to death... Painting elevates life very intensely through unleashed passions, sometimes even violence. Artistic practice allows me to perceive the world more powerfully. After a long day at the studio, pleasures as simple as a ray of sunlight passing through the foliage and the surrounding sounds resonate more deeply, my perception is heightened, and that simply makes me happy. I wouldn't pretend to provoke the same sensation in the viewer, but if the works I produce enable him to enrich his vision, then all is already won.



Ugo Sébastião, 'The birds make a strange sound', 2023, Oil paint, glass pearl, pigment, dammar varnish, gesso on linen. Courtesy of Tom Carter and Alice Amati Gallery.

Another interesting detail is the way you frame your works. The framing is always unconventional, sometimes almost unexciting or hidden. When did this experimentation with painting display begin?

Working with the frame as an object is quite recent, in a way it's the most obvious and simplest way of presenting a work in the sense of an installation. The frame allows me to bring a more sculptural or object-like dimension to the painting. Similarly, when working with light and textures, the metal frame, which is sometimes corroded or finely sanded, lets me obtain a whole range of light and color that can interact with the painting itself. As for the framing of the images, there's a real influence from digital interfaces, and sometimes I take paintings whose frame is defined directly by its medium of distribution, which is not the original framing. In the same way, I play with scales. A detail will sometimes be human-sized or much larger, whereas the original work is not at all of those dimensions. I quickly realized that I couldn't just paint pictures. I began to install them in space, sometimes with unconventional hangings, placing the painting on the floor or, intervening on the walls when possible.

This makes me think that you have a specific attention on how your art is being shown. Do you curate your own shows?

ALICE AMATI

When I have the opportunity, it's extremely important for me to be present at the various stages of the work, from production to exhibition and distribution. The hanging is an extension of the work, a constitutive part of it.

How do you believe your practice will evolve in the near future?

I'd like to create large scale works again, it's been a while since I've produced very physical pieces several meters wide and several meters high. I'm also thinking of moving away from the Italian Baroque iconography, and to continue my reflections through other visual corpus, not necessarily from painting.

Is experimentation an important aspect within your practice?

Experimentation is a fundamental element of my practice, and it is often the starting point for a new piece. Technical and material issues sometimes help me to solve formal problems, and vice versa. The subject of a work is supported by the materials that make it up, just as materials can influence the choice of an image. For example, choosing to paint on a wooden panel will bring a certain materiality to the work. The smoothness of the surface allows for glazes that would be impossible on canvas or paper. A calm, meticulous subject will contrast sharply with a metal frame with crude welds and a heavy appearance. From these formal and material dialogues, a discourse emerges.



*Ugo Sébastião, 'Black Hole Sun n°2', 2022, Oil paint, bleached beeswax and pigment on plywood, panel and steel.
Courtesy of the artist and Pal Project Gallery.*

ALICE AMATI

On future steps, do you plan to keep living and working in France or would you like to move anywhere else? Are there any cities or countries that particularly inspire your work?

I'm very open-minded, and at the moment I've got a setting that's quite propitious in Lyon, but if opportunities to move arise, I'd be delighted. Travel is one of the most exciting aspects of art in my opinion. There are many places that I really enjoy, with beautiful artistic dynamics and a rich history, but sometimes it's maybe more interesting to travel to these places occasionally and live in a different, quieter place.

Do you have any upcoming projects in mind that you can reveal?

I'm very pleased to be fully occupied with projects planned for the upcoming months, in England, Northern Italy, and in Austria. I'm also working on a number of other events, but it's a bit early to say more about them at the moment.