



CLAUDIA COMTE

Tucked down a Berlin back street, in a building that looks like a storage facility on an industrial estate, is the studio of artist Claudia Comte. Tipped as one of the top 20 Swiss artists set for great heights, Comte, in her early 30s, has achieved artistic acclaim with exhibitions in New York, Paris, London, Brussels, and Zurich, to name but a few.

Author: Michèle Bodmer

This year, Comte has been commissioned to create a large-scale sculpture – one of her most ambitious projects to-date – for a prime location in London. The sculpture will go on show in 2018, but the exact details of where it is located and when it will be unveiled will be kept under wraps until nearer to the inauguration date. “In terms of scale, production, and budget, this important commission takes Claudia’s career another leap forward and allows for enormous international visibility,” explains Chaja Lang, co-founder of BolteLang, the Zurich-based gallery representing Comte. “We are confident that she and her highly professional studio have what it takes to work on similar large-scale productions in the future.”

Comte’s work sits in the margins between sculpture, painting, video, and even computer-generated design. She is at ease talking about her recent horse-riding trip to Kyrgyzstan for a new video project as she is about her latest spherical paintings, described by her as wall sculptures, or another project in progress where she juxtaposes singed wooden cube sculptures with linear wall art. It is her abstract wooden sculptures for which she is best known, and it is here you will discover her roots. She grew up in the Swiss forests 20 kilometres outside the French-speaking city of Lausanne in the small village of Grancy. When Comte speaks of the energy and colours intrinsic to a piece of wood she speaks with a passion born of familiarity. “The fact that I spent my childhood in a chalet near the woods has had an important impact on my attitude toward nature and it influenced how I work,” she explains.

#### FROM NATURE TO INDUSTRY

Her journey from the Swiss forests to her Berlin industrial estate workshop has been eventful. En route she has had residencies in Rome, Berlin, Paris, and Johannesburg and has won the Swiss Art Award, the Kiefer Habliltzel Award, and the Mobilier Award, three significant prizes from her home country. Her latest coup is a massive leap in the 22nd annual ‘50 Best Swiss Artists Ranking’ organised by the Swiss economics magazine, ‘Bilanz’. She is currently ranked 18th, up from 44th in 2014. The very first time Comte made it into the Bilanz ranking was 2013. Barbara Staubli, Curator of the Julius Baer Art Collection and member of the Bilanz jury in 2015 and 2014, explains the significance of the jump. “Over the last few years, Claudia Comte has had a series of impressive exhibitions and projects in Switzerland and abroad, such as at the Centre PasquArt, in Biel, the Centre Culturel Suisse, in Paris, and her solo show this year at the Gladstone Gallery, New York. The 2015 ranking reflects her strong and convincing appearance on the art scene.”

Though she travels the world for her art, it is to the childhood chalet where her parents still live, that she returns to source, store, and sometimes work on the cherished wood she uses for her sculptures. “It is like a kind of cellar for wine,” explains

Comte. “I talk to the lumberjacks from the area to find just the right piece for a sculpture because when you look at wood it does not always immediately reveal itself. For example: yew, the Rolls Royce of woods, is very valuable and expensive, and has these crazy colours inside that you just can’t see when the wood is rough. But when you work with it and start to polish it, incredible colours are brought out.”

It is through her relationships with the forest and its workers that Comte has learnt her craft. She can explain the rate at which a certain wood will shrink as it dries, where and how it will crack, and how to treat it to ensure that the wood’s intrinsic beauty is given true expression. In her studio she keeps pieces of oak, pear, acacia, walnut, cherry, and cedar ready for use. But this stash, she points out, is nothing compared to her Swiss forest stockpile.

For Comte, the sculpture comes first. She decides on its form and then she chooses the wood to work with. “First I make a precise sketch, then a clay model, and then I pick the right material for the sculpture,” she says. “Finding the right wood is half of the process. Now that I sell my work, I can invest more in the material and be much more precise. What’s so interesting is the way that wood reacts to where it grew. If there is a river next to it or it’s in a forest, there is a particular energy within the material.”

#### MASTERING HER CRAFT

Comte likes to work fast, which is one reason her sculpting tool of choice is the chainsaw. She normally begins the process in the forest and then transports the sculpture to her studio for sanding. She explains how she started out with her grandfather’s electric chainsaw, which she broke within hours by using it on trunks that were far too big. Undaunted, she then borrowed a more powerful petrol machine from a local in her village and so loved the rapidity with which it allowed her to work that it became her adopted method. She keeps five chainsaws of varying size in her studio. “I learnt how to use the chainsaw from people in the woods near my home and have never had an accident. I now really know how to use it. It is still dangerous, for example you cannot cut at 90 degrees because you get a kickback when the chain is turning. But when I use it I know how to react,” she says.

Process is key for Comte. For each day working with the chainsaw there are about seven of sanding, followed by waxing. She gets the wax from a 90-year-old living near her hometown. The smell, she says, is “so good” and the effect when applied to her art is “just right”.

Comte’s studio in Berlin reflects her artistic versatility. Divided in two to accommodate the dusty work of sanding and the cleanliness needed for painting, the space has the utilitarian air of a factory with its high ceilings and its bright, open

space, and yet she has divided the large room in a way that creates a relaxed and warm atmosphere. It is split level, with a kitchen below the stairs and a living room above, complete with her cats, Minus and Cortex, who roam freely around the studio and the industrial complex.

#### BERLIN – THE CITY FOR ARTISTS

Comte moved in to her Berlin studio a year ago, having spent a two-month residency in the city in 2009. She says Berlin pulls off the trick of being both functional and enabling. It’s a dynamic city that provides the sort of creative freedom necessary for a vibrant contemporary art scene. Comte also enjoys being away from the commercial distractions of the art market. “While there is an art scene here, there is not a lot of money. The collectors are not here, which is good in a way, because artists don’t feel the pressure to sell so much.”

Time is a key consideration. Comte reflects on how working with a material that takes so long to mature, and that will continue changing by small degrees as it dries, contrasts with the ever-increasing pace of the art world. She is concerned it is moving too fast, driven by the number of artists now producing work. “What is interesting to me is that you have to keep coming up with ideas fast in the art world – you have to produce fast, and react to whatever requests you get from museums or galleries. But with the wood, you have to take time and be gentle, because it cracks. You cannot push it.” It is the immutable nature of the wood that captures her imagination. “My fascination with wood is simply that it represents the biggest resource worldwide, it’s a material that was here long before us. Its artisanal quality suggests a counter trend and thus its so interesting for me to use. This material grows so slowly in comparison to the speed we communicate and do things today in our digital age. Its heavy in essence and I am trying to make something precise, radical, and humorous out of it.”

The artist started her career at Ecole Cantonale d’Art de Lausanne (ECAL). It was a rite of passage for her and where she determined her destiny as an artist. She went on to do her Master’s at the Haute école pédagogique (HEP), while also teaching art at a local school. The experience taught her how to sequence the creative process, much in the way that you have to sequence the learning process when teaching teenagers, she explains. She believes the experience has made her more efficient, providing her with systems, rules, and characteristics for each project she works on.

For 10 years, Comte also worked weekends as a cashier at the Musée militaire in Morges. It gave her an insight into the commerce of exhibition. “When I was still at the school of art, I proposed an exhibition, where I invited some friends from class to participate. It was good for me to have the experience of organising a show, even if it was in a military museum.



Video still from 'La Dance Macabre', 2015.



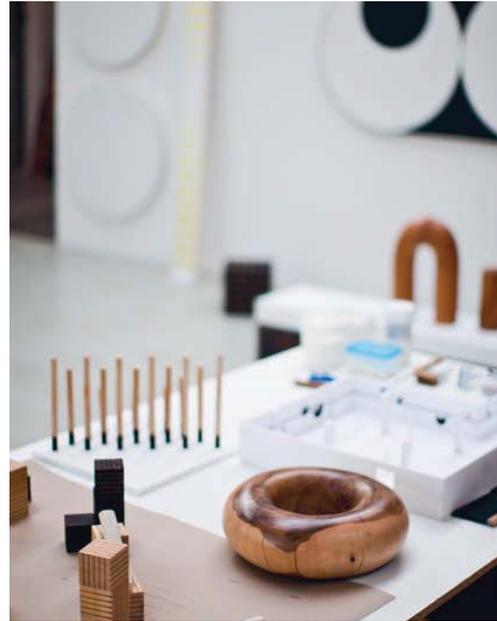
Inside the wood workshop.



'Outdoor Wall Painting' at Domaine de la Muy, 2015.



Comte with her cat Minus outside her Berlin studio.



Models of Comte's future projects and finished woodwork.

It was still an institution and it helped me to understand how it all works. You just don't learn that at school." It was her year-long residency at the Swiss Institute of Rome, surrounded by the world's greatest art, that she believes had the most impact on her work – though she finds inspiration just about everywhere. While in South Africa, at the Pro Helvetia residency in Johannesburg, she discovered new and exciting woods to add to her stock. Just today, Comte says she has bought a special piece of African ebony. Her passion for the material shines through as she excitedly describes the depth of the black along with its distinct structure.

Comte is unconstrained by a medium. "I am interested in a wide range of basic forms, their make-up, and structure, how their shape – both in science and in nature – can have a beautiful poetic and mathematical consistency." Her latest medium is video. One work that captures her new direction is called HAHAHA. Using 18 pine trunks, she erects the lettering of the three Hs and As. She then describes 'activating' the sculpture by setting it on fire while two pianists in front of it play the 'Danse macabre' by the French composer Camille Saint-Saëns. "It is very funny because at some point a motorcycle jumps through the burning letters and between the pianists, doing a wheelie in front of the burning sculpture, all of which is then videoed."

Comte is now applying the precision of process she uses when working with wood to her new London sculpture. Although this time, computer generated-design is her medium. By using a specialist company based in Zurich, she

plans to perfectly reproduce – through a complex 3D scanning and milling process – three caged bananas in aluminium. The human-sized fruits will be held aloft only by the side structures of a 4-metre-tall rectangular frame, and so will look as if they are floating at the top and bottom. The bananas will be slightly 'squashed' or indented by the frame, bringing to mind the tension and texture of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculptures. She describes it as "scanning life" and a homage to Leonardo Da Vinci's 'Vitruvian Man'.

"The sculpture is called 'The Three Graces' in reference to the painting from Raphael of the same title from 1505. In that case they are holding apples. This is a funny version with the bananas," Comte says. "With this project I want to move away from the traditional wood sculpture that sits on a plinth. Here, the plinth is an integral part of the piece, and the sculpture and the plinth are merged. The frame around the fruit sculpture illustrates the proportions of nature and it becomes a study – a scientific rendering of what we consume. It is about life."

Ideas pour out of Comte as she shares her thoughts about her chosen path. "I love to produce, if I had two brains and more hands I would accept more projects because I just love to create and experiment all the time."



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