

## *Christian Lacroix in conversation with Beatriz Milhazes*

**Christian Lacroix** — *When looking at your work, I wonder where you start. I imagine you doing a smaller preparatory drawing before launching into it. I also think about the notion of chance: Is your preparatory process reasoned, planned, and organized, or do you save room for last-minute inspiration? Do you choose the dimensions first, or do you just start and allow the pattern to grow?*

**Beatriz Milhazes** — My work undergoes many phases. I paint directly on the canvas with no preparatory drawing. I start out in different ways. In general, I decide on the dimensions and then I lay a very diluted color a bit everywhere on the canvas, but sometimes I also begin with a very small pattern or with small dots, which I build upon.

**C.L.** — *Like cells that divide and grow.*

**B.M.** — Exactly. In my mind's eye, I have a vague image that guides me. For instance, I began a series in which I wanted to include a white painting. It's something I never succeeded in doing. But I nonetheless continued to follow this idea in order to attain a white atmosphere. I also use more common images such as landscapes or still lifes, or ones that are even more obvious, like a tree for example.

**C.L.** — *There is often a line that suggests the sea or the horizon in the middle of your paintings. It gives coherence to something that, when we catch sight of it, seem like an explosion—in fact, an explosion very well thought out. I get the impression that the horizontals help you seize everything. We began to talk about your approach when you start with a first motif, which then grows bigger and bigger, but you explain that you had already chosen the dimensions.*

**B.M.** — Normally, yes. I have an idea, as if it were a landscape, but I don't decide to add the horizontal line until later. I make use of very simple things and, even if that is part of a process, chance comes into play as well, but all the elements present in the painting have their logic. I can work for a week, two weeks, and even more, before making a decision. I often take a month to finish a painting, and I've already spent a whole year on a single piece.

**C.L.** — *Do you work on many paintings at a time?*

**B.M.** — Yes, because my paintings are composed of a multitude of elements that require an enormous amount of time to think them through. My technique also takes a large part of my time, but it's not just about technique. I take on several paintings at once because I need to maintain a dialogue with each, to listen to them, to stand back and look at them. But this does not always work. I often trash everything and start over again.

**C.L.** — *That was a question that I wanted to ask you. Do you often start all over? Come back to paintings? Or add new collages? Are there many strata, as discovered by an archeological excavation?*

**B.M.** — The technique that I use in painting relies on the principle of collage. I paint patterns on a plastic sheet and I glue this finished image onto the canvas. Then I peel off the plastic, like a decal. My paintings are made of the adjustment of these small pieces, each of which I paint separately. So there are

indeed many, many layers. Moreover, I have been using the same sheets of plastic for about ten years now. These sheets are imprinted with a memory, and their use can lead to irregularities.

**C.L.** — *Are you interested in thickness?*

**B.M.** — It interests me, but I prefer to avoid it. I really love painting in general, but not to the point of allowing brush strokes to appear. If you were to touch one of my paintings, you would feel that it is totally flat. I like this relationship to homogenous painting. There is a trace of the hand but there is no thickness to the paint. All of the paint has taken on the texture of plastic. It is smooth to the touch. I also began to play more and more with sheen and contrast, and to further work opaque and matte surfaces, which allow me to achieve different textures.

**C.L.** — *Can you detach an element and reposition it somewhere else or are you obliged to work over it once it is glued?*

**B.M.** — Nothing can be detached. Once the element is glued, if I do not like it, the only solution is to glue another element on top of it to hide the first. But that does not always work. Accidents often happen. The plastic, however, is transparent, so I can see exactly where I am placing it in relation to what's already there, and that helps a lot.

**C.L.** — *Have you ever had the desire to break out of the canvas and paint directly on the wall? Your work is so unstinting that the paint looks like it wants to brim over onto the wall and that the cells could invade the windows, the lights, or play with transparency. Have you never felt an urge for wall painting?*

**B.M.** — I've really never thought about it. Personally, I have a preference for white, smooth, square spaces. Of course I could imagine working three-dimensionally one day but, for me, a form cut out is something strange. It doesn't really belong to the composition. I think that depth is lost in the cut. On the other hand, I think it's more difficult and interesting to solve specific problems and to use that atmosphere with the canvas as a support. The use of elements inseparably tied to the decorative arts or to folk art has set in motion a debate among artists. Turning my attention to architectural space would oblige me to inverse the concepts.

**C.L.** — *Do you play with transparency a lot?*

**B.M.** — Yes, I make use of transparent colors, above all in my prints. They help increase the quality, mystery, and vitality of the colors.

**C.L.** — *You consider yourself as a painter, you love painting, you proclaim painting, and so you stay within your frame, but if you were to work directly on the wall, would you feel as though you were no longer in the realm of painting?*

**B.M.** — Perhaps. For me, painting is on a canvas stretched over a frame and bound by a square or rectangular space. When one leaves this structure, the issues of abstract painting or of decorative art are transposed onto the architectural space. A round canvas would divert the viewer's gaze to its form and make one forget the events within the painting. But outside of painting, I am interested in decors.

**C.L.** — *This relationship to the decorative, which you fully acknowledge, is a very important issue in your work. We are far from the*



*decorative but you exploit the decorative to the point of making it abstract or conceptual. It is not minimal, but I think that by dint of being so maximal, it becomes minimal. It also brings to mind the way universes are connected, as are planets. You mentioned the idea of population, and I had the impression that each pattern was inhabited by its own life, its own story, connected to that of a neighboring planet. There's also the story that you tell yourself, even if it is a bit vague, it guides you. It hasn't been decided on in your mind but you advance. But ultimately, perhaps we couldn't care less about the story. It is not a literary story. If one is to look for a correspondence in your work, you seem closer to music than to literature. Or is it the opposite?*

**B.M.** — I have difficulty with literature. Even if literature can be very abstract, first and foremost, it defines things; it is very close to the real. I think that painting and art in general have more freedom. It is a human tendency to want to explain everything. Everyone tries to establish connections when there isn't necessarily one to be made. I have stories in my mind, and I think they are the sentiments, sounds, and smells that guide me. As far as I'm concerned, this is transmitted by my paintings and by the titles I give them, but the title comes after the fact.

**C.L.** — *Like the last word, a period . . .*

**B.M.** — Exactly. It's another motif, another work.

**C.L.** — *Your painting is not directly linked to the musical tradition of Brazil. It's just something that pushes you forward, a little bit like a trampoline, an impetus. I'm thinking of the Pythia at Delphi, who would take a substance that made her go off on other visions and to other universes.*

**B.M.** — For this painting, entitled *Urubu*, 2001, I started to think about music, about staffs, as something organized. I am deeply bound to certain Brazilian musical movements, such as *Bossa Nova*, which emerged in the late 1950s, and *Tropicália*, in the 1960s. But for this painting, it was something that sprung to mind spontaneously. I began to work with stripes two years ago because squares and straight lines presented a serious problem for me. These forms have a finished quality, whereas the circle has no end.

**C.L.** — *You can't bounce off the corner.*

**B.M.** — Exactly. It's a question of optics. I want intense visual elements. I don't want to give the viewer a center. I started to implement stripes because they provide me with a schema, they can create the same optical effect that, until then, I obtained with circles. These things border on the ridiculous, but they only happen after ten years of work . . . Stripes have allowed me to start and to stop. When you draw a straight line from left to right, there is a point at which the gesture stops, but the right has no end. The square somewhat produces this effect, but it delineates a surface really.

**C.L.** — *And yet, in this piece (pointing to Maresias, 2002) the eye is attracted here. It's not often that there's a center in your work.*

**B.M.** — That's true, there is a center, and there's a movement in the center. It holds such intensity that, at certain moment, you lose the center.

**C.L.** — *It's true too that we drown in the center.*





**B.M.** — And I provide a stop through this square, which is more defined.

**C.L.** — *We all have days of doubt or anxiety. Do you work just as well, better, or less well under such conditions? Are there days that you can't work?*

**B.M.** — My mood has relatively little influence on my work process. In Rio, where I keep my painting studio, I am rather disciplined. I spend about seven hours a day in this place because I need to be with my paintings. Now and then, I spend an entire day there doing nothing, but that's where I think. I'm incapable of resolving a painting problem while taking a walk on the beach.

**C.L.** — *Are you more or less physically calm when you paint? Or are there very sensual moments or, to the contrary, very energetic, dynamic, almost erotic moments, as in Brazilian music? Are you very focused or are there moments when you're afraid that your movements are slower than your thoughts? You use a technique that requires a long process. Do things ever escape you along the way?*

**B.M.** — I'm always afraid of the rapidity of my thoughts and of the images that come to mind. However, they are slowed down by the slowness of my process and technique. When I work, I stop at a given moment and ask myself: what is happening now that I have four paintings on a white wall? Ideas surge. I concentrate on the one that seems most developed and I choose the route that appears to be the most clear.

**C.L.** — *Does this mean that you work in series? Or do you prefer to avoid the principle of the series?*

**B.M.** — I make an effort to avoid the series. When I work on several paintings at a time, it is easier to resort to the same palette. But that's not what I'm looking for. I need to go from one atmosphere to another, from one palette to another, and above all to continually change the givens of the problem. When I do a solo show, I like to show the pieces that underscore these variations.

**C.L.** — *Have you ever been tempted to use a graphics software? The process you describe here comes very close to that of working on a computer.*

**B.M.** — I don't use a computer for my paintings because the screen is too small. I have a compulsive need for physical contact with my paintings. My studio is small. I still have the same one as when I began painting. I bought another part of the house, but, after a few years, I realized that I preferred working in a tiny space.

**C.L.** — *If you don't look up close at the material quality of your work, which definitely has a physical presence, one could think it was composed on a computer. I find it really interesting, the idea of making something very contemporary by hand. And perhaps it is fitting to discuss here your relationship to tradition and to your country, which has nothing to do with the mindset of a museum of folk art and culture. At the same, one wouldn't think that you're Scandinavian. I'm not saying that we immediately think of Brazil, but I believe the viewer very quickly gets a sense of Latin culture, the Mediterranean, Spain, something that we share; it's something that is moving forward and that is here in "modernity." Many elements in your work come from churches, costumes, and textiles. Where does your relationship to this come from? Does it go back to childhood, to affinities with a country that inherited Portuguese traditions but that is nevertheless a young country?*

**B.M.** — Brazil is also a very culturally mixed country. I have consciously used this factor from the very beginning. This relationship to the past interests me, but it is complicated because painting comes from Europe, then from the United States, and then it looped by Brazil in the 1930s through Brazilian modernism. How can one go about making a link between this history and my culture, the things I see, which come out of my city and my interests? The decorative arts, for example, fascinate me. At first, I used fabrics and made collages. My work was more geometric. I gained more freedom with forms from the early 1990s. That was when I did my first exhibition that really counted. I had just discovered my technique, and I could do my drawings. I recently began to use industrial elements in my collages again.

**C.L.** — *At the same time, your work possesses an incredible independence. I wouldn't say that you go against the tide—we won't get into the debate about whether painting is dead or alive, but rather, still present—nevertheless, your work seems to correspond with what had happened here at that time, that phenomenon related, not to Spanish movida, but to a need for sensuality, after years of minimalism, of nothing, of conceptualism, of white on white and black on black. I imagine you had your issues with that.*

**B.M.** — Of course. I had difficulty getting people to accept my work. I think of my work as geometric, yet I can't put everything in a square or a circle.

**C.L.** — *I imagine that the people you went to school with were following what was going on in New York, whereas you had your line of thought and your textile cutouts. You must have been the only one.*

**B.M.** — I was completely alone in Brazil. Contemporary art in Brazil is captivating, and there are some very good artists who are internationally renowned, but we don't find them in painting. They are more into objects and conceptual art. In the beginning, I felt isolated, I felt tied to Brazilian modernism. Later, a door opened for me in the United States. People were drawn to this style, which was perceived by American art critics as abstract painting with new things to offer.

**C.L.** — *Is there a complex with regard to the use of folk references?*

**B.M.** — Absolutely, above all in my milieu. These references are associated with the country's poorest social groups and they don't concern intellectuals and people in art. They have a pejorative connotation, but I've always used them. But I think that this relationship has changed a bit today. The elite have begun to attach importance to the fact of being Brazilian, of having Brazilian art, and these folk references are increasingly accepted.

Generally speaking, the visual arts are very elitist. This is not so much the case in Europe and the United States, where people go to museums, institutions, and galleries. It's different in Brazil, where museums and institutions have only been around since the 1980s. It's my generation that incited people to go to these sorts of places. Contact with the public was indispensable for us. When I was teaching, my students would tell me that they couldn't set foot in the galleries because they were too restricted. Now, the public has grown. There are also collectors, but they're a separate group. Paying 40,000 dollars for a work of art seems normal in the United States and Europe but, in Brazil, it's something really strange.





**C.L.** — *I don't have the impression that it was about claiming roots for you, but simply that these patterns spoke to you, that they are part of you, your customs, your family, the atmosphere you grew up in, without trying to politicize or to find an alternative. Even if there is a bit of alter-globalization in your paintings, an element of going against the tide of the established rule, whether on the art market, in politics, in the economy, or in American-dominated society at large. Your work obliges us to step back from this prevalent context. Is the notion of "exoticism" at all important to you?*

**B.M.** — If you're thinking of the clichés of exoticism, obviously not. But I am drawn to *Tropicália*, as I had mentioned earlier.

**C.L.** — *In an essay in your catalog entitled Mares do Sul, Adriano Pedrosa draws a parallel to Gauguin and the idea that one must go to the tropics to regain a sort of paradise lost. This seems very pertinent.*

**B.M.** — What immediately comes to mind when I think of the tropics and the tropical being is an image of beauty, sensuality, and primitivism. That is a vision that enchants me; it's a pure fantasy, dream, or desire for unknown pleasure. Gauguin made the voyage to seek out "paradise lost" and he brought these elements into his paintings. The Brazilian modernist project did the reverse: it nourished itself with European art in order to disseminate it in the tropics. Beauty entralls me, but I think that, even if my work can be pretty, it represents a world of claustrophobia.

**C.L.** — *I wouldn't say that it's pretty. It's very restive. Maybe there isn't an anxiety . . . but a labyrinthine side, an organic search as if you were strolling through a body or an eighteenth-century maze garden in which you were following Ariadne's thread, but in search of the Minotaur. The ranges are perhaps the red thin line that saves you from getting lost. There are some impressions where, personally, I recognized myself in moments of melancholy, when it makes me a little ill. I would not say that it's pretty . . .*

**B.M.** — I perfectly understand this sensation of claustrophobia and of the labyrinthine. The claustrophobia comes from an excess of juxtaposed images, of simultaneous contrasts of intense colors that can be breathtaking. The labyrinthine aspect is what you described: a stroll through an eighteenth-century garden, which can induce claustrophobia or not.

**C.L.** — *We can go all the way to the idea that it eats us, attracts us, and absorbs us. You, too, feed yourself with things, and after you ingest and destroy other things. What I find striking is this kinetic force. It is in this centrifugal force that you find the balance of this explosion/implosion . . . When we stand before one of these paintings, we have a simultaneous sensation of explosion and of unity. There is something that is keeping this big bang in place, which keeps it from being completely disordered and that ultimately renders your entire repertoire imperceptible and unidentifiable but coherent. It is a whole, a unity. I'm not saying*

*that there is a serenity; that varies from painting to painting. However, one cannot affirm: there is a flower, with a pearl and a little bit of 1960s textile pattern. Never. In the end, we have only one impression. Do you try to tell your story to its fullest or do you wish that the viewer read something in particular?*

**B.M.** — There are at least two kinds of viewers: amateurs and the specialized milieu composed of art critics and artists. I'm lucky enough to know specialists who come to see my work in my studio. Paulo Herkenhoff, an art critic, has always been a constant source of advice. I have artist friends with whom I also carry on a dialogue. American and European critics published in the specialized press on one exhibition or on my work in general are valuable to me. Their articles often step back from the work to propose unexpected readings. Public opinion surges in a direct and spontaneous way, which is something that always fascinates me. Sometimes, it even raises issues. Children also have a special relationship to my paintings, they easily identify with them and the reactions they express are unfiltered.

**C.L.** — *And how does it affect you when the criticism is negative?*

**B.M.** — Negative criticisms, if they are honest, are often justified and they therefore play a positive role. It is always irritating to read a negative critique but it can have something to offer. When somebody tried to persuade Maria Callas to start giving concerts again, she said that even if she started to bark, the concert would be sold out. But she refused because she knew that her voice had lost its power.

**C.L.** — *So what I am hearing is that you need to show your work, to confront others, to talk, to listen . . .*

**B.M.** — Yes, I need to be in contact with others, I need exchanges. The spontaneous backing of the general public pleases me enormously. In Venice, people were coming to my exhibition to take snapshots as souvenirs. It's surprising, especially when we know that the visual arts mainly address a specialized audience.

**C.L.** — *On the topic of Venice, how is the artist representing Brazil chosen?*

**B.M.** — The curator, chosen by the São Paulo Biennial Foundation, is the one who takes care of the Brazilian selection for the Venice Biennale. In 2003, Alfons Hug was the curator.

**C.L.** — *Do you think you were chosen for your work's relationship to the theme Dreams and Conflicts – The Viewer's Dictatorship?*

**B.M.** — I don't know, but the relationship between dream and conflict suits me perfectly.

**C.L.** — *You show only recent works in Venice. Were they made especially for the occasion?*

**B.M.** — Aside from one piece done in the year 2000, the works are recent. But they have already been acquired for collections. I also did three paintings especially for the Biennale. I created a tie between all of these paintings but each has a very different story.



**C.L.** — *Of course you already knew the exhibition space of the Brazilian pavilion but, when it was announced that you would represent Brazil together with the photographer Rosângela Rennó, did you never have the urge to do a specific work in relationship to the light, the walls, or the volume?*

**B.M.** — The Brazilian pavilion is a modernist structure. Its natural lighting and the fluid passage from one space to another and between the interior and exterior are perfect for showing my work. I really like showing works that have been acquired for collections. I don't produce a huge amount of work: ten to twelve paintings per year. When I show a painting and it becomes part of a collection immediately afterward, nobody sees it. When I participate in an exhibition organized by a museum, an institution, or a biennial, it's an occasion to bring them out and show them again. Of course, it is not always easy to borrow these works, as they are often scattered in different parts of the world.

**C.L.** — *In Venice, there is no rupture but, at the same time, it's difference that makes the story, between coherence and incoherence. With regard to this, your repertoire is not repetitive because it is extremely rich, but is it constantly renewed?*

**B.M.** — I always use the same elements, but I continually add new ones.

**C.L.** — *Do you keep collections of pearls, daisies . . . ?*

**B.M.** — Yes [laughter]. I keep a repertoire of isolated motifs that I repeat, such as rosettes, as if they were dressmaking patterns. I can use a motif today and not repeat it for five years. I can also reutilize a drawing by changing its color. It depends on the composition. I am constantly creating new motifs but I like to expand on the ones that are rich and to implement them in new compositions. Others, which have less potential, are used at a given moment and then abandoned. These models are only used for one part of the composition.

**C.L.** — *They are created just because you need a particular form in a particular place?*

**B.M.** — Exactly.

**C.L.** — *Does the new motif belong to a family?*

**B.M.** — The rosettes and bouquets have become a family.

**C.L.** — *There is a playful aspect in your work, with the idea of family that is set out in your pavilion in Venice and, at the same time, one can easily imagine your paintings in one's home. I'm thinking of that space in traditional Japanese houses, where one's most beautiful possessions are presented. It can be a ceramic, a flower, a painting, or a print . . . And thus presented, these things invite the viewer to meditate them. Your work is very solid. It could withstand this kind of meditation everyday, as it contains so many strata. It kindles a walk within oneself and throughout the universe. Earlier we were talking about the cosmos, planets, and the story of the interior labyrinth that we never escape. It's important to roam throughout it all the time. The first few times I saw your pieces, they conjured up the idea of a carnivorous plant for me. You walk by and you are sucked in, hypnotized. You are obliged to look and the more you look, the more you are glued to it, and the more you discover leads and these absorb you even more and make you ricochet on other signs. We are in the realm of art, not the decorative.*

**B.M.** — If there is one thing I like about the decorative arts it is their way of reflecting human activity. One could write the history of humanity through the decorative arts. We need this form of expression. One could live in a white square of course, but it would be difficult without this sensibility. I think my interest in art began with this observation. What is behind the beauty? And why would we need to do that?

**C.L.** — *Before pattern, it starts with color, almost the desire to eat it, to have a physical relationship to it.*

**B.M.** — Color is the core of my work. It's by color that I begin and finish a painting. That is, by the way, the first thing that drew me to your work. The first time I saw photographs of one of your fashion shows, I had an attack of vertigo! It was as if a painting had swept over a three-dimensional body. The extremely complex and detailed relationships between colors, the exhilarating surprises that sprang up from a precise location on the piece of clothing, golden pink with a green contour and small aubergine appliqués—all that laid out on off-white lace!

**C.L.** — *I haven't talked about my work yet, but I think it's in perpetual contradiction: that's what keeps me standing, like tightrope walkers on their wire. It is between high and low, going not toward the Zen but toward meditation and the universe. That's an important aspect in your work, always containing two extremes: Spain and voodooism, Catholics and the pagans. I was raised as a Catholic; that's one strange religion. In the South of France, the churches were built on ancient temples dedicated to Venus. There's still something very sensual about them. But I don't think that spirituality can exist without sensuality. I need to apprehend life through touch, I need to breathe, I often speak of smells. When I was a child in nursery school, I would put goblets of paint in my mouth. I wanted yellow, I wanted red, I wanted to recharge myself with them, the way I imagine a prehistoric hunter was charged by the strength of the animal he killed and ate. Since I'm not very violent, I preferred to guzzle paint [laughter]. This aspect is something I really like in your work, this transatlantic and perpetual work that talks about your family, your people, your tradition. Maybe that's why we recognized ourselves in each other's work, I, with my decorative or applied art, I don't really know what I do. I think we spur this same process of encounters between things that have nothing to do with each other. Taking something very raw and very baroque, very primitive, primal, disgusting, dirty, human and rubbing it with gold, precious stones, things that glitter. It is true that this appeals to children, and that it is not purely a work of impulsion.*

**B.M.** — All of these contradictions are fascinating. They function like a motor, just like fear, really. I'm scared of many things. The carnival, the beach, the forest, the decorative arts, kitsch, churches, and even colors—all that both scares and fascinates me. People often tell me that I'm courageous to do what I do. I think it's the exact opposite: I do it because I'm afraid.

**C.L.** — *We keep a safety rope tied around us [laughter]. Fear of drowning in things, of being sucked up. That's why I don't look at voodoo, nor the circus, nor fashion even [laughter]. It's something that scares me a great deal. I can't recognize myself in that world. But tell me something, do you have a desire to attain more simplicity? My impression is that, more and more, you are clearing away discernible things in order to move towards abstraction.*



**B.M.** — It's true. In the mid-1990s, I dove into Mexico, blood, baroque churches, colors from costumes, Spain, more than Portugal, which is calmer. At the time, I was working more with lace and crochet and on references to costumes. This interest then disappeared and I moved toward abstraction.

**C.L.** — *I was under the impression that you integrated ruches that you had embroidered. You had explained that you began with textile. Today you have a desire to return to fabric through the ribbon.*

**B.M.** — It's a very slow return. At first, I did collages with fabric. Then I drew on fabrics that had already been printed with a pattern. I was very interested in embroidery and in handmade pieces in general. And then, in 1994, I prepared an exhibition in Mexico. And once it was hung, I had the impression that I had "overdone" it. I suddenly became aware of an excessive contrast and I turned to abstract art, op art, geometry . . .

**C.L.** — *That happened to me too, in 2000. I did a collection with no printed fabrics and very geometric lines only. Clients ordered from the older collections because there was no lace or embroidery in this one, rather there was plastic. I wanted to see how I was doing. It worked very well with the press and the professionals, but many people couldn't understand. It allowed me to take a new turn, and I would have never been asked to work for the TGV or for Pucci if I had staying in kitsch, which, by the way, is not a pejorative term for me. When I was a child, my father would say to me: "find the taste before saying you don't like it." I do everything this way. Which brings to mind Théophile Gautier, who said that things become interesting when one starts to look at them for a long time.*

**B.M.** — I wanted to ask you, where do your fabrics come from?

**C.L.** — *That depends on the season. I try to discern, identify my desires, as diffuse as they may be, and to bring out a theme, directions, a tendency. The materials are my departure point, which is very decisive, a very strong factor of identity. And today, one must be recognizable at first glance, even if that may be perceived as reductive. And it is increasingly difficult to exist in the midst of so many other fashion houses. In fact, less and less continue to do true haute couture collections. And more and more newcomers or emerging talents are on the prêt-à-porter calendar. It's one more reason to radically and viscerally be yourself. Between 1995 and 2000 the trend was Zen minimalism, "less is more." For me, "more is never enough." So I continued to pursue maximalism with the conviction that those who have liked my work since the beginning would follow, from south of the Loire to Florida. But, to come back to fabrics, in order to guarantee the indispensable exclusivity in haute couture, where each piece must be unique, apart from solid-colored fabrics, I prefer having everything specially made for each new season: the silks are hand painted, the tweeds are made on manual looms by artisans of all ages and horizons, people that I have worked with for a long time or new ones. I entrust them with a file containing the themes I mentioned earlier, so that, like in a game of tennis or ping-pong, they return their interpretation, which, in turn, can make me collide with or branch off into another direction. These themes are, at the outset, my "image bank," as, everyday, I toss around photos, drawings, paintings, like a vampire. I feed on the images of others. I try to make scrapbooks of collages. One day, Patrick Mauriès, an editor and friend, saw one of these scrapbooks and convinced me to published part of it. So that season (summer 1994), I kept a very sincere logbook, from the*

very first inspiration to the final fashion show. My starting point was an engraving that I have, which represents all the monuments of Arles in the early nineteenth century. I love these transitional, hybrid periods, where we get the sense of a gestation toward something not yet defined. In fashion, that found expression at the time in a raised waistline, hesitating, between the hips and the breasts, giving the Arlesian attire in the engraving a proportion that it is hardly known for. And every season, I need to revisit this vision of the Arlésienne, Alphonse Daudet's character who, in essence, is pursued but never shows herself. I've always seen a nice metaphor of my trade there. In some respects, I've always felt a need to confront this costume with other periods or lands, like striking two flint stones together to make a fire. And this season, it was the war years and time of occupation, which troubled me yet again. They were traumatic for our families. I was born in 1951, six years after the liberation, but through the persistent ruins and the unsaid, we still felt the violence, the gnawing repercussions of the



*Collaboration and the Resistance. A child feels that. And as a teenager, I kept this fascination that "occupied" me still, collecting magazines and newspapers, photos of that period, like Patrick Modiano whom I was bound to encounter through the same fantasy that obsessively inhabits all of his novels. Yves Saint Laurent, too, was inspired by this period for a collection that caused quite a stir, in 1971 I believe. Today, it's more the work of contemporary artists that I confront with what comes to me from Provence and the Camargue. Architecture as well. Brazil has had great figures in architecture. Are you at all influenced by them?*

**B.M.** — Yes, it's the tie to modernism, the lines, and the very gentle curves that make a drawing in space. Oscar Niemeyer and Roberto Burle Marx designed gardens together. I took a close interest in the work of Marx. Before, my relationship to nature was more bound to reproductions of nature rather than to nature itself. Now, I'm starting to become more attentive to this relationship. It's like the natural light that makes me think of churches.

James  
Cohan



**C.L.** — *There is a stained-glass window aspect to your work.*

**B.M.** — I've never done any.

**C.L.** — *It came to mind while looking at some of your paintings in relation to light. That's where we return to a sort of spirituality and meditation. I have the feeling that you could do fantastic things in architecture.*

**B.M.** — I've already considered it, but I also have a lot of things to do in painting.

**C.L.** — *Choices must be made, but were you able to get something out of making banners for the MoMA in New York?*

**B.M.** — Yes, it was fascinating, and I would like to repeat the experience, but it also allowed me to realize that I need to make choices based on the amount of time that these kinds of activities take up.

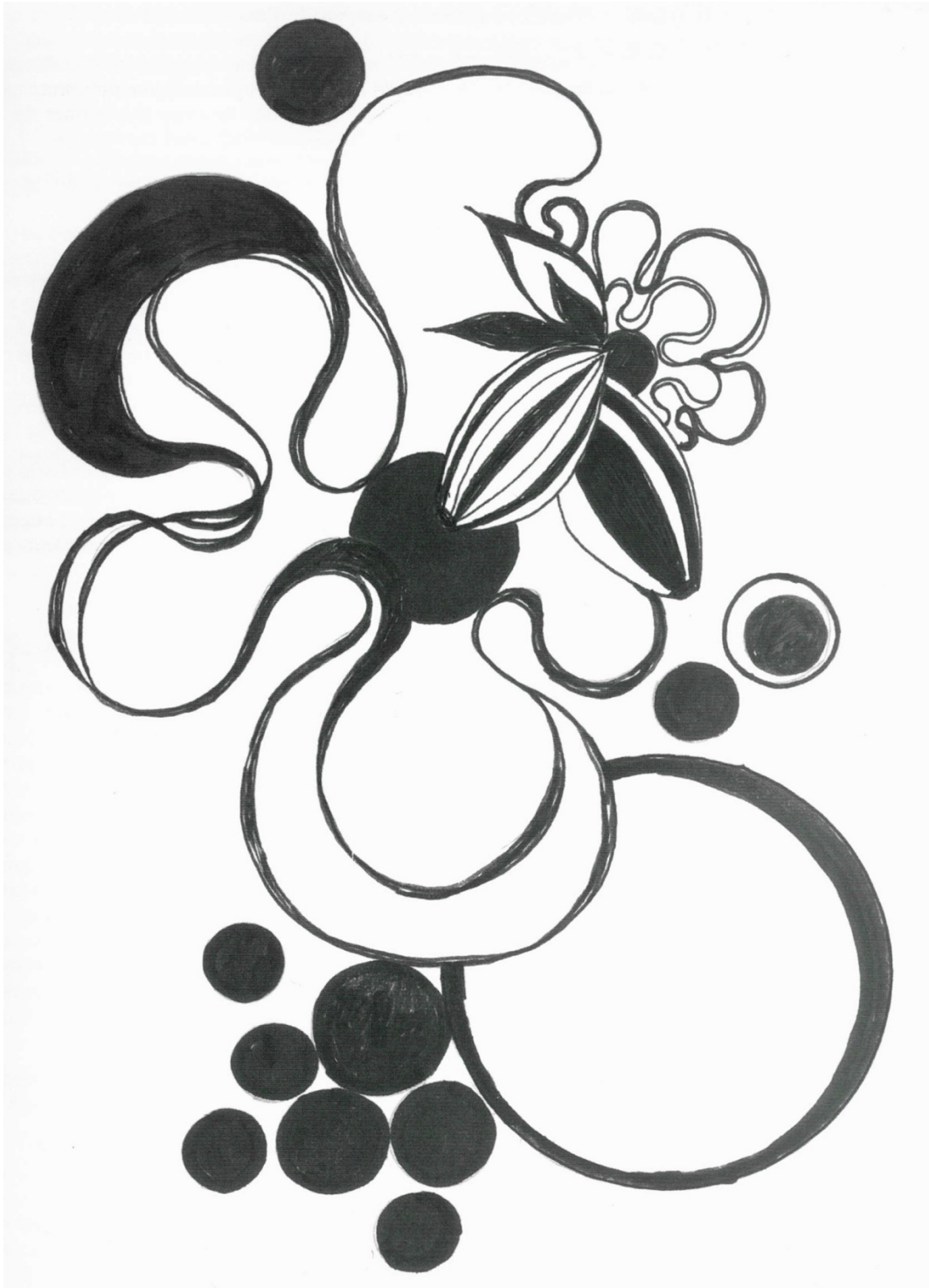
**C.L.** — *So that you don't spread yourself too thin?*

**B.M.** — Exactly. After the Venice Biennale, I'm going to stop everything and concentrate on a new series of prints in the United States. Then, for a month in Brittany, at Kerguéhennec, I will be working on nothing but collages on paper. However, it is rare that I have the luxury of doing one thing at a time. Last year, I did a set design for my sister's dance company, Marcia Milhazes Dança Contemporânea, I did an artist's book and a banner for MoMA in New York, and I designed a piece of jewelry for a private collection. All that on top of my paintings for an exhibition in London and for the exhibition *Mares do Sul* at the Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil in Rio.

**C.L.** — *That's one thing I'm very bad at. I don't know how to say no. In 2003, I worked on the interior of the future Atlantic TGV, on the future uniforms of all Air France personnel, both on board and on the ground, I completed the costumes for Mozart's Il Re Pastore, at the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels, and went on to the costumes for William Christie's Arts Florissants at La Villette and began those of Eliogabalo, an opera by Cavalli that has never been performed, for the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels again. Not to mention the Pucci and Christian Lacroix collections, and some fifty initials for the 100th anniversary edition of the Petit Larousse Illustré 1905–2005. I hope all this can meet the same level and that these works fuel one another. I think I will also accept the commission of decorating some hotels in Paris. So we meet up here with the decorative arts and architecture. And stained glass too (which I never did but which fascinates me): I almost participated in a competition with a marvelous artisan from Toulouse, Atelier Fleury, but our submission arrived a few minutes too late: destiny said "no" to me . . . But we were talking about stained glass, architecture, and the decorative arts . . .*

**B.M.** — There are gardens too. My gallery in London, Stephen Friedman Gallery, faces the street and one can see the paintings when passing by. Artists often close this window but I like to open up the possibility of a double reading, of seeing the interior when one is outside and vice versa.

**C.L.** — I take it that the MoMA banner moves. Is this an aspect that interests you?





**B.M.** — That's what fascinates me: working with the movement of colors. 53rd street is very polluted visually and I wanted the flag to dialogue with the landscape. I did a rather simple drawing with colors that could seem shocking: gold, pink, and some shades of green. In addition to movement, there was the change of colors, which was a nice surprise. MoMA decided to keep the banner up until the end of the year, whereas the initial idea was to keep it up during the summer only. With the arrival of autumn and the rain, the banner lost its vividness and, without the sun, it was different again. It took on a light of its own.

**C.L.** — *If I were the archbishop of Brazil, I would commission you to make stained glass windows for a baroque cathedral [laughter]. I can just picture your work in light.*

**B.M.** — My work has a light of its own. It works under intense lighting and I think natural light is the best possible condition for showing it. The painting's surface changes with the movement of bodies that passing by, which give glossy/opaque, golden/matte, smooth/rough contrasts. One day, I would like to do an exhibition made to be seen in the half-light. I have a vision of entering my studio at night and feeling something like the light within a church. A stained glass window? Why not!

**C.L.** — *Regarding the collages you are planning to do during your residency at Kerguéhennec, are you thinking of showing them in the exhibition?*

**B.M.** — I hope so, but we'll have to see if it works because I've never really done any.

**C.L.** — *Will these collages follow the same process as the paintings?*

**B.M.** — No, for these collages on paper, the process will be different. I will be using materials of industrial origin: paper wrappings for chocolate and candies, tissue paper, transparent and printed, and even ribbons . . .

**C.L.** — *Do you look for sources in the newspapers? Where do get all of these elements from: the garbage or stationary stores and papermaking businesses?*

**B.M.** — For the time being, I am making a true collection of paper wrappings, but not just any kind. I prefer not to mix the wrappings, to limit myself to those that express seduction, pleasure, and exaggeration. The meaning would be completely different if I used candy wrappers with soap packaging.

**C.L.** — *In papers for candies, you have gold, silver, metallic colors, not just transparent papers?*

**B.M.** — I have a few transparent papers.

**C.L.** — *Do you keep the letters, the names, the drawings?*

**B.M.** — Yes, everything!

**C.L.** — *Will you arrive over there with things already prepared?*

**B.M.** — No, only with wrappings and some ideas.

**C.L.** — *I may be mistaken but it seems to me that today you use colors that are more fluorescent than you did a few years ago. At once whiter and closer to highlighters.*

**B.M.** — Yes, they have intensified with time. The relationships between the colors are very complex. The ones I used in my early work were simpler. Then I began to intensify the relationship to form, patterns, juxtapositions, and of course the contrasts between colors.

**C.L.** — *We both just looked at a color called chartreuse. It's the color of a liqueur made by monks from herbs and flowers. Chartreuse signifies the yellowish-green of certain plants: between anise and lime-green.*

**B.M.** — I prefer lime-green. It's a color that I use in many tonalities. It goes very well with the other colors in my paintings. And yet, it often causes problems for me, because green is a difficult color in painting. As a matter of fact, many painters are afraid of it. The use of green is a recurrent question when talking to art critics about my work.

**C.L.** — *Could you expand on the reasons why green is such a difficult color for painters?*

**B.M.** — Like brown, I think it's a color that generates confusion. It doesn't go with other colors, and yet it is a total amalgamation. It's embarrassing, a bit dirty. But it is also the color of nature, and certain painters have the tendency of greening their work upon contact with nature. I work just beside the botanical garden and that may be why I spontaneously use it. Moreover, Rio is a city of violent contrasts between greens, blues, and yellows.

**C.L.** — *Did you know that, for the French and notably for the people in theater, it is an accursed color, a bad omen. When designing costumes for theater or dance, one must first ask if green is allowed. As a rule, it's prohibited. The actor Alain Delon, for example, can't stand green in a place of performance, even if it's just the green of a leaf or flower. If there is a bouquet of flowers, he takes out the leaves so that nothing is left but the flowers. On the other hand, it is the color of dressmakers whose patron saint is Saint Catherine, who is also the patron of unmarried girls. The colors associated with her are yellow and green, which very often that results in yellow-green. We can say that green does not leave one indifferent.*

**B.M.** — This relationship between green and theater is interesting, I had no idea.

**C.L.** — *It's a question that I always ask myself. I have a client who wanted an exceptional dress. After showing her various things, I showed her some chartreuse that was more green than yellow. She liked it and I added some golden lace to it. It gave her a very pretty reflection that made me think of your work. She said to me: "with the gold and this green, I want you to put a third color to give it depth." I thought she had the thinking of a painter.*





**B.M.** — What's really exciting with painting it the mystery. I constantly work with colors, I know them, I've created and developed an extensive range of colors, and yet there are always surprises. If you put a small touch of pink, the entire painting takes on another dimension. It is absolutely magic. A painting can at once be destroyed or saved.

**C.L.** — *I'll make a final parallel with fashion: it's often happened to me that I see a design and think that I should just trash everything, that I was mistaken. And then, I say to myself perhaps it's a different color that will save this dress.*

**B.M.** — From time to time, I prefer making ties with closer tones. Gradation gives a feeling of vibration and vertigo.

**C.L.** — *In French, we use the term s'évanouir [to faint, to fade] for a color that disappears in a gradation.*

**B.M.** — But a gradation can also be produced without white. I often play with complementary colors.

**C.L.** — *To conclude on the subject of green, I remember that when I was a child, all the fashion magazines said that one should never mix green with red. It was the worst thing possible.*



**B.M.** — That's why green is problematic for me, because, in itself, it is not difficult to use. I think that all colors go well with green. The problem is that when it's too easy, it becomes pretty.

**C.L.** — *Indeed, we know of color combinations that work well and are seductive. I've always had in my mind the image of a carnivorous plant that attracts and charms you and once you're caught, you aren't really uncomfortable but something perplexing happens. There always has to be a danger, a risk taken.*

**B.M.** — I have a hard time using green without it being pretty. I try from time to time to form an inversion, to make it less seductive.

**C.L.** — *Have you ever made a painting with no green?*

**B.M.** — I don't think so, but it can appear in my paintings only in small touches, just to paint the petal of a rose for example. White and black, however, are colors that are a real problem for me. I used them together for the first time in 2002. I have a preference for colors like very dark purples, greens, and blues.

**C.L.** — *There are no pure whites in your paintings either, it's always a white that dithers.*

**B.M.** — I do sometimes keep a primed canvas as is, as a base for white, but it is indeed never pure. I often think about white, but I hardly ever use

it. At the moment, pink and orange function in opposition for me. Earlier this year, when had almost finished preparing my exhibition at the Max Hetzler gallery in Berlin, I suddenly realized that my studio was invaded by pink and orange. So I forced myself to change colors for the last painting. Despite the fact that I am constantly looking for a new palette, sometimes color gets the upper hand and leads me.

**C.L.** — *Are accidents voluntary or is it a question of chance, which you decide to keep on the canvas?*

**B.M.** — There are voluntary and involuntary accidents, both of which I make use or not. They are bound to the memory of the plastic sheet used, to what happens when I remove it from the canvas.

**C.L.** — *How do you know when a painting is finished?*

**B.M.** — As a rule, the final point is closely bound to the instant I feel that the colors are balanced. I must do anything but go to the next stage, wherein the addition of elements becomes decoration. When I find things that create a rupture in the viewer's gaze, but which remain organic, open, that's when I stop.

**C.L.** — *There is an apparently unfinished aspect that is interesting in your work. There is always an area that is not covered. And it is true that if that area were painted, it would become like wallpaper and would no longer be painting.*

**B.M.** — Exactly, I want to maintain the idea of composition.

**C.L.** — *Have you ever come back to an unfinished painting?*

**B.M.** — Yes, it has happened. I do a painting in a certain place. Once it is completed, it is shown in another place. In a way, it leaves its structure, and the result is sometimes different. For my last exhibition in New York, I had done a small painting that I wasn't really satisfied with. Upon arriving there, I decided not to show it and I am going to rework it. I have also thrown away paintings. There is even a period of my work, around 1987, of which I have no paintings. Two or three were sold, but I gave the others to someone in the street. I couldn't keep them in my studio; they were like monstrous ghosts.

**C.L.** — *Do you see many artists in Brazil and in the United States?*

**B.M.** — In Brazil, I have some artist friends but their work is not really connected to what I do. In the United States and Europe, I know more artists who work in the same sphere of influence as me. It's important for me not to be isolated. Philip Taaffe, an American painter whose work I like very much, also uses the notion of the decorative. The inclusion of elements from the decorative arts in abstract painting is a recurrent subject. In the 1970s, Robert Kushner had launched *Pattern-painting* and, in the 1980s, Philip's paintings were, in a surprising manner, the best representation of that style. I am also in contact with other American and British artists like Polly Apfelbaum, Franz Ackerman, Fiona Rae, Sarah Morris, David Reed, Fabian Marcaccio, just to name a few.

**C.L.** — *But you nevertheless stay in your community through your family.*

**B.M.** — Of course. I've kept the same friends a long time and my relationship to the city has not changed.



**C.L.** — *We talked about the influence of daily life. One of the remarkable things in your work is the influence of jewelry. Were you inspired by Miriam Haskell? Or is it just a coincidence?*

**B.M.** — I was impressed the first time I came upon a book on her work, by chance, in a bookstore. The story of her life is equally extraordinary.

**C.L.** — *The Musée de la Mode, on Rue de Rivoli, held an exhibition entitled Trop [Too Much], which featured a collection with pieces by Miriam. There were incredible pieces of jewelry from the 1940s, in the form of fruits, birds, and insects. It was marvelous.*

**B.M.** — It's interesting because, during that period, a good part of her clientele consisted of American actresses. It was at that time that she met Carmen Miranda and was influenced by her costumes. Looking at books is one thing, but drawing and using a well of inspiration is different. I have already used pop and primitive references, but the forms of her pieces of jewelry don't only come from a mixture of elements. They are compositions of organic and harmonious forms.

**C.L.** — *There is also the work of Bridget Riley . . .*

**B.M.** — In the year 2000, the Dia Center in New York organized a big retrospective of her work, which was impressive because it is very difficult to see her work. Her exhibition gave me an incredible sensation of vertigo. She uses many kinds of stripes and lines. It is very physical work. That's when I said to myself it is possible to produce organic movements with lines. You know that she had practically stopped showing her work after her exhibition at MoMA in 1966 because of the dreadfully virulent criticism? But she nevertheless persevered. It's very intriguing: how can one continue to make art without showing what one does?

**C.L.** — *Do you work with assistants?*

**B.M.** — I do most of the work myself. But I have two assistants who are not artists. One mostly takes care of the inventory and secretarial work, and the other is someone with whom I have exchanges on my work. Generally, he executes what I ask him to do, but occasionally I give him total freedom. But I don't always use what he does. He has no training in art but possesses a peculiar rapport with color.

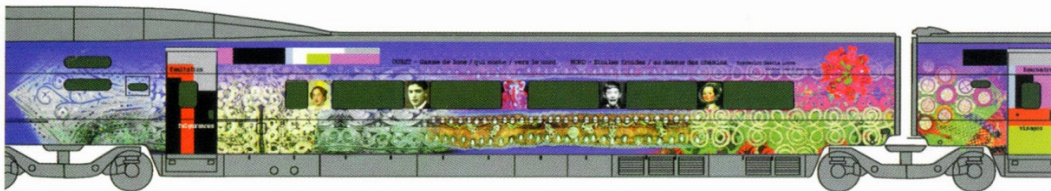
**C.L.** — *Don't you think he has been permeated with your work and that, finally, the colors he chooses are yours?*

**B.M.** — No, he has a very personal notion of color. It is surprising because he is a modest boy but he possesses a sense of color that I don't have. I sometime ask him for his opinion. I also like to shoot the breeze with people who have no relation to my work. One day, a friend came to my studio and said, "put that there," and I obeyed!!! [Laughter.] Sometimes it works. And you, do you ask your assistants for their opinions?

**C.L.** — *Always, but above all I ask my wife. She knows my work, and I need the opinion of a woman. I don't really know what a dress is, I've never worn one! [Laughter.] One can ask why couturiers are men. Generally speaking, women working in fashion create a more simple and more practical fashion, Agnès B., Sonia Rykiel, Chanel . . . Perhaps men devise a more mysterious and enigmatic fashion for women.*

**B.M.** — Normally, I introduce a problem to move forward in my work. Do you proceed in the same way?

**C.L.** — *A problem advancing? Of course. Even if I don't determine it in such a conscious manner to be sure that I advance. I believe I'm very concrete and firmly rooted in the ground, and it is true that I need to find a tangible balance between my visceral desires and the requests of my clients, between the inspiration and the aim. There are also the problems that we create for ourselves, in reverse, that we "secrete." I'm thinking of the idea of the south, which has governed in the founding of the house that bears my name since my roots appeared to me in 1987 as my principal difference, my individuality, my identity. Then over the seasons and years, I found myself prisoner to it, cramped. I therefore "shook" myself in the year 2000, with the millennium. On the evening of December 31, 1999, I decided to learn how to use a computer well enough to be able to draw with it and I decided not to force myself to rework the theme of bullfighting, Spain, and Arles. A month later, the collection was ready. It was graphical and mixed organza with cellulose acetate, chiffon and braids of found plastic bags, no lace, only primary colors on an unfinished podium, like a paused image. My friends and peers recognized me in this work, re-infused me with confidence, supported this approach thus helping me to knowingly make a tabula rasa from the superfluous to then re-instill, drop by drop, season after season, elements that are more familiar, but in weightlessness. That was a decisive collection and year.*



*In 1999–2000, a really important year, I also had to renegotiate the contract that tied me to LVMH. And I decided to go "freelance," to found XCLX, a company through which the fashion house becomes one of my clients like the others: Emilio Pucci, the theaters or operas that commission costumes, the publishing houses for which I do illustrations, etc. These different domains give me room to breathe, to tackle unexpected problems, which fuel my work. To answer your question, it is probably these challenges that allow me to advance, like the future interior of the Atlantic TGV and the "big network that will be in service sometime in 2005. That had first started with a project of "packaging" the Mediterranean TGV to announce that, in 1999, it was going to attain its highest speed between Paris and Marseille. For that occasion, I had composed a gigantic collage in which the train was "wrapped up." I wanted it to give the impression of a comet when seeing it pass by from afar, with the whole spectrum of warm colors on the front cars facing the south, and behind, toward the north, the continuation of the spectrum with cold colors. Close up, from the platform, I also wanted to provide something to "read" since, for me, traveling is synonymous with literature, with its sentences, words, and quotes. A story from a movie or play too, where we are both the actor and viewer, whether we watch the train go*



by, or we inscribe ourselves in the screen of the window, on either side of the windowpane. So, between each window, there were also portraits of anonymous people or of people close to my heart, famous or not. Such as my grandparents and my great grandparents who had worked on the PLM [the Paris-Lyon-Marseille fast train]. And all that was supported by giant enlargements of details scanned from my collections of ethnic clothes. To sum up, while celebrating the success of the project over lunch, the president of the SNCF mentioned a future competition launched for the renovation of TGV interiors. And I participated with a design team specialized in trains and a seat manufacturer. That lasted two years. We were included in the selection of finalists asked to realize a life-size model. And we won in May 2004. During the first meeting of "orals," I arrived with a photograph of a solid, reassuring vertebrae supporting the fragility of an egg, a few pieces of colored fabrics, some aquatic reflections, and the idea of weightlessness. And that's how my first technical seat realized by specialists came into being, with its foot not immediately visible, like a shell floating in midair.

In theater, I often work with the director Vincent Boussard, with whom I get along very well but whose world is completely opposite to mine, abstract, intellectual, cerebral, almost colorless. There too I am confronted with something not very usual, something not easy for me, and less clear-cut than my habitual work. So there are the problems that provoke me and perhaps make me advance: to be where one would not expect me. I say to myself everyday that I would like to take a one-year sabbatical to "fix" all of my "bits" together. Or at least a summer to think about what I am, what I do, my relationship to the world, through my personal universe and my work. But it is hardly possible and it is more improvisation that decides. How can one negotiate with reality? To make utopia and business meet? The necessity of selling and of not disliking oneself? The leveling effect and mediocrity of globalization and the richness that resides in difference, individuality, and "going against the fashion"? I often speak of altermode [alter-fashion], as in altermondialisme [alter-globalization]. My views on the period and the world we are living in today, my objectives and my philosophy are in fact opposed to those of my "main shareholder." That ultimately is the main problem . . .

**B.M.** — In painting, we are not obliged to make useful things. Which is not the case in fashion or in your work for the TGV, just as collective work is inevitable when one designs a décor. The white canvas on the wall is a space of free creation. You, you create living objects that inhabit a temporary and vital body.

**C.L.** — I have a hard time perceiving the frontier. That's why I like this problematic of the decorative. There are decorative things that are art and there is art that is decorative. I knew Julian Schnabel well. When he showed in Nîmes at the Maison Carrée, a remarkably well preserved Roman temple, he wanted me to be the first to see the exhibition. Upon entering the space, I told him: "You are a grand decorator." I think he was very annoyed, yet it was not at all meant to be pejorative. I see the decorative side of Schnabel's work more than anything else. I, personally, never thought that I could be a painter. My fuel is in the work and discourse of others. But let's come back to you. You seem to me rather shy, or rather, you slightly have the work of a shy person!

**B.M.** — It's true, that's my problem with reality. When I'm in my studio, I create a world for myself through painting. And when I leave my studio,

it's as if another story is about to begin. I'm not really fragile, but I have to make an effort. Communicating with the real is not easy, even if I'm generally at ease. That is why painting is a challenge. The invitations, commissions, décors, and jewelry are another story, another world that take time away from my paintings. I am not sure of myself and I still don't see the use of it. If these projects continue to come to me, I'll have to think about what I'll have to do to organize my practice, to devote a real place in my life to it, and to get something positive from it. But I need openings to advance in my paintings. So I need to stop from time to time, to travel, to regain energy, my personal life needs to be going well. All that is important to my painting practice.

**C.L.** — *Do you ever think about what is going on in Brazil and in the world? Did September 11 change your work in your relationship to the United States?*

**B.M.** — The big questions in life and the world we live in are part of my work in a subjective manner. My studio is a universe separate from that reality. My feelings surge from colors, forms, symbols . . . Since September 11, the repertoire of the 1970s, which interests me, has become increasingly present in my paintings. The peace and love symbol, for example, has become a constant.

**C.L.** — *I personally suffer from an anxiety of the end of the world, the end of something in any case.*

**B.M.** — A sense of respect has been lost.

**C.L.** — *That must be fought against. It is not possible to continue working in the same way, even if it means making a more joyful work, a more spiritual work. The proof is that your work has become lighter and more spiritual.*

**B.M.** — Of course. I believe in life, in the beauty of things that bring a positive energy. It is also up to art to give a certain direction to its time and it can show an alternative path. That's why I don't like exhibitions that paraphrase the world or the morning paper.

**C.L.** — *Transcending the world to go further. During the war in Yugoslavia, people asked me how I could continue to make playful, baroque, shimmering things, in view of what was going on in the world. I took out letters, which I received six months late, from young girls who wrote to me from cellars under bombardment, saying: "We saw photographs of your work in a magazine and you can't imagine how much you gave us hope. We organized beauty contests and felt alive again."*

Christian Lacroix and Beatriz Milhazes.

Paris, September 2003.

Transcription by Alexandra Gillet.

Editing of Beatriz Milhazes's comments by Sophie Bernard.

Translated by Jian-Xing Too.