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DON'T YOU HAVE ANYTHING ELSE TO TALK ABOUT THAN THE COLOUR OF YOUR CAR?

Vanessa Safavi in discussion with Pauline Beaudemont,
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pictures by Pauline Beaudemont, translation by Jeanne-Salomé Rochat

Pauline Beaudemont — Hello Vanessa Safari!!!

Vanessa Safavi — Heya, how are you?

I'm good. I'd like to climb Table Mountain today. What's the time in Cape Town?

It would have been the perfect day to climb this rock! It's 6pm here. But the sun will soon go down, it's Autumn. In New York, you're probably having lunch.

I'm having coffee. You spent the Summer in the South hemisphere, while others were freezing. So I wonder: why chose Cape Town?

You mean European Winter?

Yes. Because Cape Town is still infested with sharks and the ocean is freezing.

I guess for several reasons, one among others, that you just mentioned! Cape Town, or South Africa, was the furthest I could go, it was one thing and also because Summer was about to come (so what??). More seriously, I had imagined it would be an ideal place for wondering, or find answers to earlier questions. The journey, tourism, «local» language, culture, are subjects I am into, that I find interesting. And I might be a little addicted to such experiences.

Did you expect this?

Uh, probably not. I knew nothing about South Africa, or very little. I was a teenager when apartheid fell and I did not care about it, honestly. Thinking about it, it was an evidence to try to get this residency.

It is strange to find oneself in a country with such a powerful history.

And so young... One does not always understand, it's a very complex social scheme. But I have good guides!

Especially as except a few Townships, one thinks this could be California, at first sight. It's almost disconcerting.

It's all new, apparently Cape Town was completely different 10 years ago; a harbour city, dirtier, gloomier and

DON'T YOU HAVE ANYTHING ELSE TO TALK ABOUT...

harder, where crime and prostitution were way more present. I suppose that contradictions are even bigger in the States than in South Africa...

I don't think so, the social scale is very well organised in the States, everyone has their spot. South Africa is still nonsense. They follow a strange example.

Politics absolutely want to open to tourism, therefore one puts flashy things around and pretends everything is fine. And it works!

Yes but everything is corrupted, and it's very strange and very hard to understand. We would need to devote a complete issue of Novembre to that question, and I'm not sure they are tempted by that idea!

You had a show at the BLANK PROJECT gallery in Woodstock Cape Town, in this awesome neighbourhood between two crack houses. How did you manage to conceive it in such an environment? I mean, without commenting on the country, you somehow took position. Already in the title, 'No More Ice Cream', this broken neon piece.

The crack house ambiance is not everywhere. And this is what it's all about: want some flashy you get it, want some trash, some African exoticism or British tavern ambiance bars, tourists wearing shorts climbing Lion's Head, you get them too. There is a little bit of everything and among it, artists, like us, black, white, yellow, green, who try to make things. I haven't done anything but deal with all this. Go to the beach, smoke joints, read in my panties, think and eat sausages. But I guess I ended up doing much more. To climb the hill, South Africa was a good choice.

But as an artist, you would not do the same show in Jamaica or in Belarus. Over there, this provincial mood mixed up with the ambient aggression create a weird energy.

Ah! Yes and no. You see, in three or four months of residency, you might become familiar with the country, but you don't know it enough to judge or make conclusions out of it. What I wanted to avoid above all, was to produce a «critical» show or a «South African» show, therefore I tried to take things the other way around. In my works, each object is sent to a symbolical resonance and its contradiction. I wanted to turn away from criticism as much as possible. I am well aware that we cannot avoid being critical, or involved in a way or another. The exhibition at BLANK is a rather easy* and coloured and happy* exhibition. But things always belong to a context. South Africa is an interesting context in terms of what it would raise for me as an artist. In another country, I would probably adopt the same attitude, the same approach.

On behalf of a certain distance towards strong subjects and rather violent symbols.

Exactly. And a bit of darkness too. I don't believe in complete detachment either. If you don't believe in anything at all, you get depressed!

If you are open to something new while keeping your integrity. But if you stay «on vacation». What is there to say about your buddies at the YOUNG BLACK MAN or BLANK PROJECT art spaces, who are from South Africa and evolve

in an artistic milieu that is different from ours?

I don't make distinctions, their milieu is the same, according to me. Tendency is a bit different but globally speaking, the art world, in Cape Town or Ulan Bator...

The milieu maybe, but the artistic environment, the access to culture, the art market, the discourse... are clearly different.

Indeed, they are still fighting their old demons and it is true that subventions are almost inexistent, and it is a very small milieu, but Johannesburg seems quite different already. I don't believe that the access to culture makes a big difference today. Well it depends for whom maybe, in Europe we're especially spoilt.

How is it over there?

Johannesburg is neatly bigger! The scene is more international and simply... bigger. The provincial side of smaller towns is much less present, and I don't mean this in a bad way.

Does it groove in Johannesburg?*

Johannesburg was really super cool*, completely different from Cape Town! The scale is different. Generally speaking, there are a lot of paintings and drawings, rather «sensitive» materials. There are still a lot of artists who criticise the South African society, the (post) apartheid, women's conditions, AIDS, etc. Young Black Man do really good stuff.

Yes, but they complain about the lack of money, they are thinking of closing even though what they do is great. They are looking for their audience.

I heard that Ed and Matthew were playing records after the opening. It's not easy to be an off-space* in general, even harder if you really become successful*, but without money. You need to accept the end of things, but it's terrible.

You need to take them on a merry-go-round ride, give them a refill of energy and hop! Back to the fold for the happiness of South African art.

I really met super artists and great people.

The non-proximity with an aggressive art market might make them more sensitive, more accessible as artists.

Everyone struggles, from North to South. It's a tricky question. «South Africa, the art world's forgotten country», but anyway amiss labelling «poor Africans who cannot afford to travel», from a general (and not «political art») point of view sucks, it's bullshit.

Au bout du monde, ça chatouille l'Antarctique. (At the end of the world, it tickles Antarctic.)

According to me, those people travel, most of them have several nationalities and it's not North Korea! We need to ask a South African and/or their (complicated) relationship to the (art) world, I don't know!!

So, you're staying for some time in Cape Town but you're preparing your future solo show at Kunsthhaus Glarus. What does the influence of South Africa have in the heart of Switzerland?

Glarus is Ostschweiz (the eastern part of Switzerland)!

The scenery is different!

Yes, and it's good that way.

Since your work is linked to a certain vision of the «other»

figure, of the expression of origins, of our modern relationship to the ethnic, South Africa is a country full of contradictions, of intense multi-racial history, and an impossible mix of cultures. What did you learn? I felt like understanding was only possible through diving into this «bain de mixage».

What I learnt...

Your research, tour readings, the shock when you go back to Berlin...

I will probably answer that after eleven beers, but certainly not right now...

!

But definitely a good dive into this «bain de mixage» but no, no shock!

Armoured with hard skin...

Yes buddy*...

But that's what we like, bootie. By the way, are you improving your Afrikaans?*

How do you say «fuck your sister», again?

I don't remember, I know how to say 'fokk pompe' and 'yo puss'.

Ah «dankkie», South Africa is big, you need to see more!

It's a little Die Antwoord, they know how to do it.

Impossible haircuts and an incomprehensible language, humour and a certain decadence.

And a lot of violence.

What is your last hit on the Kimberley Hotel's juke box?

Something by Neil Diamond, Oh Carolina or something*!

Put a little LL Cool J on for me next time.

Ahah! Did it give you the wish to come back?

Certainly, I'm thinking of organising Tour Guides in sexual tourism for disillusioned young occidental women.

Did it pump biceps up?

It put back in place, head on the shoulders, no more roof for bullshit and superficialities. It's not really a question of inspiration, but rather of true values... humanity and sincerity. And it's a really beautiful place. Drinks are cheap.

And people fight.

When it's rough-tough, it removes the elitism.*

Don't you have anything else to talk about than the color of your car?

This is a good title.

Hehe!

