



Saint Clair Cemin - 29.10.2020

Saint Clair Cemin good morning! We are here sitting in your new solo show *All About Woman* opening today at the gallery in Brussels. This is your first exhibition with Baronian Xippas, could you tell us how this collaboration started?

I know Renos for a long (long) time and we finally hooked up couple of years ago during a show in Venice, at the Biennale in which I participated. Then, he invited me for a show here at the new Baronian Xippas gallery. I met Albert at the FIAC in Paris where I had a very large piece. I had something already with the gallery. That's it, this is how it started!

Great! So, you started your career as a printmaker in New York City, right?

Yes, that's where it begun.

How does it have influenced your work as a sculptor?

Well, when I was making print, I was actually making graphics. I didn't consider myself as a full-time artist (a real artist with all the weight that carries the word "artist"). I was more like an illustrator, but I was very good at what I did. I had a very good technique which helped me immensely when I started making sculptures because when you acquire good technique in one domain, it's not so difficult to pass to another one.

Engraving, it's already dealing with a third dimension. You are digging into a metal, into plate, you are biting it with acids. So, it's already getting close with sculpture, it's not like painting.

Do you still draw every day?

Yes, I do draw a lot. I draw and I write things that are completely absurd! But the drawings are good. I pass between one and the other and I fill in entire books. Every month, I have a new book that I fill up with either notes or drawings and sketches and ideas. It's very personal, it's not something that I would like to show.

***All About Woman* is the title of your exhibition opening at Baronian Xippas today. Why this title?**

Well, I have been making women for a long time. I don't even remember when was the first one I made; it was the first year I was making sculptures.

I always made a woman with the idea from the inside out, not from the point of view of a man that sees a woman with her shapes and all that... but more as a sort of energy. I always like to express this type of energy as a "sculptoric" form, giving a sort of dynamism to it.

I've always been surrounded by women. My mother had two sisters. We were three kids (I had two brothers) but there were always women in my life, and always very strong ones. It's been very important to me. My mother thought me everything I should know. The first six months of school, we were in the countryside - I was five or six years old - and I learned everything I had to learn until I was ten. So, when I arrived in school, I was bored to tears! The kids were learning how to read, and I could read novels! It was ridiculous! She was a strong influence in my life.

She even introduces me to music and to art. We didn't have much access to books in the small village where I lived, so she used to cut all the pages of art that came out in magazines about contemporary art, as well as the renaissance and the impressionists. She made albums and albums, and the beginning of my art culture was based on that.

Is it a kind of homage to women?

It's an homage to women. And mostly to my wife and my daughter. I enjoyed twenty years with them but now, my daughter went out for university and my wife is working a lot. We don't see each other as we used to. I wanted to make the show as an homage to them but also to all the women that were part of my life.

It's a kind of a special one then?

Yes, definitely! I also made pieces that were abstract women like *La Femme Moderne (The Modern Woman)*, another one is *La Femme Escalier*.

I had a teacher when I was thirteen, and she was huge. She was a very tall woman, very beautiful but she was two meters. She was a tall (tall) person but the amazing thing about her was her love for mathematics. She was so enthusiastic that she transmitted it like a bug! We were all the students in the class feeling we were mathematicians because of her influence. This type of influence is important because it's so emotional. So, I made an homage to her and to all of those women who were enthusiastic teachers. They teach you; they bring you to another level of - not only of understanding - but also of enthusiasm for learning.

What would be the three words that defines your exhibition?

Monument because they're monumental.

The second is the soul because I've been dealing with this problematic of the soul for a long time. I tried to figure that out in my work all the time.

The other one is the self: "what is to be oneself?". When I'm dealing with the woman, it is not the woman from what I see from the outside, it is the self from what she feels. It is a mystery to me, I'm not a woman but I'm enough of a human being to know that there is a mystery in being that. There is a mystery of being a woman to the woman. That is the most mysterious thing is "what is to oneself?". I think men know much more about women that they know about themselves and vice versa, because we are much more mysterious to ourselves. We don't know how closed we are.

Regarding the more technical aspect of the exhibition, we can see here that you work with marble, with steel, with bronze, different material for a similar approach. How did you choose?

I have made a whole collection of small pieces that is the entire life of Oedipus. I made it in bronze. I had a conversation many years ago (before I started making stainless steel) with Jeff Koens about stainless steel. He was telling me that bronze is like paper, it takes in, it absorbs energy, it takes your attention, and it does not give anything. The stainless steel really gives and push away all the reflection, it sends you all the reflection. It made me curious and few years later, I started working myself with the stainless steel.

Indeed, it's a fantastic material and it's like a mirror! Mostly when I achieved the polish and the metal to the most degree, it's perfectly a mirror. It becomes darker because it reflects shadows. When it's not as polished,

the shadow is not well reflected, and everything is kind of silvery. But when it's polished like a mirror, it acquires a new profound, a new depth. It's an incredible material. So, I decided to make those pieces and seeing it in the gallery is very interesting. They are very small but there are very powerful. They have the energy of a bullet: they're strong and small.

There are two pieces that I've made in gold plated. I wanted to imitate the perfect gold plated that was done in 1800. It was forbidden subsequently because of the mercury, so they used to sculpt vermeil. So, with the gold plating house, we made some trials and I finally got the right way of doing it. Those two pieces that I have they look exactly like vermeil; they look like they were made in that ancient method and I'm very happy with them too.

One piece I got it carved in onyx. It's called Simone. It could be Simone de Beauvoir, Simone Signoret... there is many very interesting Simone. It's one of them.

I've read that it is important for you that people can relate to your art. How do you think the work engage with the public?

Through the form, the material and of course the theme. Sometimes there is a story. My stories are always very simple and sometimes, they're very contradictory. I used to make furniture that you couldn't possibly use. There was a lot of tension on the stories and telling.

...But mostly through the form. I think people are engaged by the form like they're engaged by music. It's as simple as that. I think about my pieces as character in a play. I take a lot from literature and I want them to be potful, pathetic, winners and losers at the same time, all of those things that a character could be. This is how we tell stories.

You're talking about characters but the gallery Baronian Xippas is preparing a group show about editions for this December and two pieces of you will be presented: one print, one sculpture. Both representing donkeys. Could you tell us more about these pieces?

It is donkeys carrying books called *El Sabio*, the wise one. My intellectual mentor in my hometown was the father of my best friend. We became also great friends. I would spend a long time with Gilberto. At that time, he was in his fifties and I was a teenager, and he thought me about philosophy. He was a genius he knew everything! He was also a farmer and when he was on the road, he always came on a horse with behind him a donkey with two huge bags filled with his books that he was reading and researching at that moment. So, he brought his donkeys carrying his library. For this show, I

made his donkeys with his books and the print represents some donkeys wearing glasses.

So, you have a rich career with many collaborations including with the Musée de la Chasse in Paris. What is your moto?

Challenge. For me, that's the moto.

The Musée de la Chasse was one of the hardest challenges, I couldn't believe it how hard it was! But I cannot resist a fight. I cannot resist having a very hard problem to solve. The idea of the Musée de la Chasse was simple. I met the curator, Claude d'Anthenaise, who suggested me to make the head of a unicorn as a bronze. I thought this could be fun! That was no great challenge there, that was just fun. I made a wonderful head and a model for it; it was approved, and it was great. But then, I started giving him ideas of what to do in the museum. Once he took the entire thing, that was a real challenge because I had to create bronze furnitures for inside the museum that comprehend huge panels of six, five, three, seven and a half meters tall bronzes and chandeliers and all sort of objects for the museum. I had to discover a style for all that: I discovered the "Rococo Sauvage". It was not easy.

Your motto is challenge, so what would be your advice for a young artist?

To get out of his/her zone of comfort. If you're making sculpture, try to copy a Masaccio. Do something completely outside of your field of your understanding. Try to learn ancient Greek, do something difficult. This is what can gear your spirit, and not make you a chicken that would please your teacher. Get out from the easy and from all these ideas of having a gallery or taking a little blue cup, polish it until it's so clean and beautiful and perfect. Forget it! You have to go to India and learn to do something fantastic there and come back. That would be my idea for a young artist. Do it while you have the energy. Challenge yourself for something outraged and that you wouldn't do. If you're shy, do theatre; if you're weak, do martial art, make your body strong, don't be a victim of your circumstances! And if you fail, even better.

What was the challenge of this exhibition, *All About Woman*?

My challenge was I didn't know what to do! I had no idea. At that time, it was COVID, so the challenge was even to make the exhibition! It was a very difficult situation.

When I decided to make the women, I was also a little bit afraid because of ideological stories because of feminism, because of the male gaze. After all I'm a guy, I'm heterosexual and I'm white, so I'm guilty as hell! How

do I dare to talk about women? So, I was a little scared of that. But I realized that I'm artist and I have a point of view that automatically transcends all this pity consideration. It's more an homage to women. What else can we do? All my work is an homage to everything. The only thing I can do is to praise and observe; create something and praise the world that is so incredible.

What would you like the visitors to feel when they walk in the space?

That I could not say. I gave up a long time ago trying to figure it out motivations and what people want, it's impossible! Because actually that is their job as a viewer: you complete the work. You complete the work by seeing it, by feeling whatever you feel. And you cannot say that one person sees more or feels more. You can only say that certain people are very used to looking at art, they will be able to look and combine with other information they have about what has been done for the past twenty, thirty or forty years. But somebody from the street who never saw anything will have a reaction as well. Maybe this reaction is not going to be savant, maybe it's not going to be with knowledge of art, but it is as legitimate as the first one. Even people that never saw art in their live, they see things that you say "waw! I didn't see that coming" and it's beautiful when that happens.