

French artist Mireille Blanc paints still lifes—ostensibly, at least—often on a larger-than-life scale, zoomed in with a tightly cropped composition. Balancing on the border between enigmatic beauty and alluring bad taste, they feature a repertoire of everyday paraphernalia, including half-eaten cakes, empty yoghurt pots, kitsch knick-knacks and faded sweatshirts.

Yet they aren't really paintings of objects at all; they're paintings of photos—and paintings that question the very idea of painting itself. Blanc never works from life, but instead takes pictures of a scene that inspires her, and then translates the image of that photo onto canvas in gloriously thick, undiluted oil paint.

We visited the artist in her studio just outside Paris to see her paintings up close and in real life, replete with their visible brushstrokes. While her beagle sidekick Brownie snored peacefully at our feet, we discussed the reproduction of images, genres of art, and Manet's *Sprig of Asparagus*, with a palette covered in years' worth of paint—layered up high like the gloopy icing on one of Blanc's birthday cakes—sitting on the table between us.

KIM LAIDLAW: Perhaps we could start by talking about your process. You take photos of objects, rework the photos on the computer, print them, let them live in your studio, and then paint the object that this document becomes. How does the first step come about? Is there any staging involved?

MIREILLE BLANC: No, hardly ever. Generally, it's something real, from everyday life. It's always connected to what I'm experiencing: it might be a moment, an object or a situation, something that grabs my attention and triggers the desire to make a painting of it. It might be because of the strangeness of the thing—I like the term “the unseen”—or, in any event, something strange enough to derail you slightly. Sometimes it's the fact that the object might be a bit kitsch, a bit tacky, or simply quite enigmatic, that makes me take a photo of it.

I take several pictures and then, a few days or sometimes even weeks later, I rework them, which means I crop them. That's why I don't really stage anything. It's more about photographic framing—there's a strong link to photography.

But there are two sources for the images. There are these photos I take myself, and then there are also sometimes old family photos that I reuse. With those, I focus on details. I zoom in and extract a fragment.

KL: So sometimes the photo itself is the found object.

MB: Exactly. I see it as an object or a document. And there is always the question of re-framing: often the object is tightly framed or sometimes it even goes beyond the frame; it's about the detail or the fragment. Then I spend quite a lot of time reworking them on my computer. Sometimes I adjust the colours a bit, but not that often. Then I print them out on my printer here in the studio—I like having these poor-quality documents. Some painters zoom into their images on a tablet, but I like to have something low-fi as it allows me to stay quite free. Once I've printed them out, sometimes I rework them: for example, I'll cut off an edge, sometimes I'll use spray paint on them or work into them with charcoal, directly onto the photo. Then for the small formats, I paint onto a stretched canvas. For the large formats, they're just on raw canvas pinned to the wall.

KL: And do all these stages create distance?

MB: Yes, it's a way of putting distance between me and the subject, of creating a gap. There are many layers between the initial object, the subject, the photo being taken, the cropping and my way of reworking it. I like to make it visible that what I'm painting is already a representation as a photograph. That's why you often see the tape



MIREILLE BLANC, LÉONARD AU MASQUE, 2024, 200 X 150 CM

marks from cropping or spray paint marks [included in the painting]. That adds another layer of distance, making it clear that what I'm painting is a *photo* of a cake, for example.

KL: It's not a painting of a cake; it's a painting of a photo.

MB: Exactly. There's the idea of photography and, at the same time, I paint with a lot of texture. I'm not trying to achieve the smoothness of photography. It's more about adding a kind of sensory dimension and translating all of that into materiality, playing with the creamy quality of the paint—the oil, the painting—and making that visible through each brushstroke.

KL: And the materiality of the paint shows the human gesture, distancing it further from the original photo and making it very much a painting. Your approach seems to be about reproducing images and questioning what an image is.

MB: And what a painting is, too. The painters I've always been interested in are those who fully embrace the fact that what they are doing is a painting, rather than a smooth trompe l'oeil approach.

I like to show that it's a painting, the way the Impressionists did with their paint. I don't dilute my paint; I don't use any thinner—it's just the thick paint straight out of the tube. But, at the same time, there's a conceptual dimension, or a contemporary update through the choice of subjects.

KL: I'm glad you mentioned the Impressionists as I wanted to talk about the fact that your work was recently exhibited at the Musée d'Orsay, next to Manet's *Sprig of Asparagus*!

MB: That was incredible. And what's also interesting is that Manet painted brioches and lots of still lifes with food. With the piece I exhibited at the Musée d'Orsay, *Idole*, there's a slice of cake, but also this very contemporary detail of the purple manicured fingernail right next to it. I like this idea of twisting or updating the still life—that's something that really interests me in my work. There's always an object, but I like it when things go a bit awry, when it jars slightly, and there's an element of bad taste. For example, the cakes I paint are often already half-eaten and misshapen—I like that tipping point. So I thought it was interesting to show a contemporary still life next to Manet's asparagus which, for me, is pure painting: the subject has been stripped away to make room for painting in its purest form. I love that.

KL: What I also find very contemporary about *Idole* is the effect of the camera flash. Does that mark an evolution in your work, or is it something specific to this piece?

MB: I took that photo at a party where there was very little light, so I had to use the flash. But often the photograph—the document, the source image—indeed becomes visible in my painting, and when there's a flash, it can make it even clearer that it's a photo.

A flash also creates very strong shadows and I like that dimension, which I sometimes describe as haptic—so there's the tactile, thick paint and, at the same time, I like subjects that play with their materiality, with their almost sculptural quality. With *Idole*, the fact that there are such pronounced shadows makes the cake stand out and gives it that sense of volume.

KL: Is there also a temporal dimension? A flash marks a precise instant and I was thinking about the passing of time in relation to your work. We're placed in a specific moment: the cake is already partly eaten, so we know it's a certain point in the evening. We're situated in time; there was a before, and there will be an after.

MB: Yes, the cakes have usually toppled over a bit—I rarely paint a cake that's still intact. I often paint objects that are marked by a sense of time; the photos sometimes come from old photo albums, as I mentioned, so they belong to a kind of shared past, or at least to something linked to childhood. So there is, yes, a temporal dimension that interests me—it might be a connection to the past, or slightly outdated or kitsch objects. I like that this sense of time is something you can feel. And it's true that even in the photos I take myself, as you said, there's that in-between moment, in the passage of time.

KL: And you fix these very fleeting moments not only through photography—and the flash emphasizes that it's a captured instant—but also, ultimately, through painting, a medium that will outlive us by many centuries.

MB: I find that hard to think about but it's there. And also the idea of fixing [a moment] or sometimes trying to transfigure [the subject]. There's something about subjects that are somewhat “poor” or don't deserve attention. And still life is the lowest genre—it's not history painting; there's no narrative, the subject is somewhat humble. I like that.

I also quite like the idea of making a painting that requires the viewer to spend time looking at it so that the subject can come into focus. Some images aren't apparent straight away, and you're not quite sure what they are. And again, when it's a subject that isn't necessarily worthy of atten-



MIREILLE BLANC, *IDOLE*, 2023, 150 X 117 CM



THE ROSE THAT GREW FROM CONCRETE,
MUSEO SANT'ORSOLA, FLORENCE,
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SPECIAL THANKS TO LOUISE DAVIOT AT GALERIE
ANNE-SARAH BÉNICHOU

tion—a cake that’s been half-eaten, or a somewhat modest subject—there’s this idea of needing time to look, and I find that very interesting.

KL: You mentioned still lifes—do you consider your work to be in that genre? Because there is also sometimes a human presence. We see a sweatshirt shaped by the body of the person wearing it, but we don’t see that person in an identifiable way. Or in *Léonard au masque*, we glimpse the hands and the hair of the boy behind a mask but not his face. The human figure is implicit but never fully revealed.

MB: If I had to choose a genre, then yes, I’d say still life. They’re objects, things. But even when there’s, for example, a sweatshirt like you mention, it’s a body wearing a sweatshirt. The presence of the body is there, but always on the margins.

KL: Has that always been the case in your work?

MB: In the beginning, when I was a student at Les Beaux-Arts, the human figure was always present, but already in slightly enigmatic and strange actions. Little by little, I started to close in the composition. That shift happened when I went to London [to study at the Slade], which was a really important moment for me. People were much less inhibited there when it came to painting, whereas in France, we tended to carry a whole theoretical baggage. As a result, I felt much freer over there, and it was when I came back from London that I started working on smaller formats, using much thicker paint, and I removed the human figure altogether.

KL: So the focus is rather on inanimate objects. And you find beauty in these objects, these humble things. Have you always had this ability to see the beauty in the ordinary?

MB: It’s hard to answer that. I think it’s also about where you come from—I grew up in Lorraine [a region in northeast France]. I took lots of photos in my grandmothers’ houses, of family trinkets and things like that.

The subjects I work with might fascinate me and I can find beauty in bad taste, in the kitsch, in things that aren’t necessarily worthy of attention. At the same time, I might find them disturbing—and that’s what I find interesting. There’s this element of fascination, attraction and repulsion all at once. It’s always there.

In the cakes I paint, there’s that same dimension—in the sense that they’re at “the limit”. I like working along this boundary: the boundaries of what’s recognisable, at the edge of abstraction. I like being on the borderline of bad taste. For example, for the cakes, there’s so much texture and something almost sickly about them. One might ask, *are they inviting?* Yes, perhaps, but you don’t

necessarily want to eat the cakes I paint. I like being on that boundary.

And the slightly kitsch subjects, like the shell ship [*Bateau coquillages*] isn’t an object I find beautiful as such, but there’s something that interests me when it comes to objects that have a slightly ambiguous status, that’s what I mean. Objects that try to resemble something else. Like those weird, improbable cake moulds you can get. And, actually, the cake we were talking about in *Idole* had a photo of an actor printed onto it.

KL: Of Timothée Chalamet, right?

MB: Yes, exactly! The cake is all broken up, so it becomes this formless thing, and I like it when it shifts like that: when you no longer recognise it, or when the subject slips away and there’s something that gets lost.

KL: And these cakes that represent something or someone else add yet another layer of representation. I’m also thinking of your painting *Aussière* with an inflatable in the shape of a monkey.

MB: There are definitely several layers to it. There are these objects that imitate something else, like that little monkey-shaped float you mention, for example. And at the same time, when it’s placed in a certain way, you don’t really understand it anymore. I like it when there’s that strangeness to the subject and also this aspect of it being some kind of visual trickery.

KL: And we’re reprinting photos of your work alongside this interview, which brings an additional layer of representation to the whole process! I suppose in a photo of your work though, the texture and matter are less visible.

MB: It’s that gap between the real object, the actual painting, and its representation. You can still feel the materiality, I think, but it’s true that, yes, it’s better to see the paintings in real life.

KL: So where can our readers see your work next in real life?

MB: There’s an exhibition in Florence, at the Sant’Orsola Museum. There are twelve of us artists, and we’re showing our work in a place that used to be a convent. I’ll have eight paintings there, and I’m doing a collaboration with artisans who work with *scagliola*, which is a kind of marquetry work using stone. I sent them photos and they’ve interpreted two of my paintings using that technique. It’s the complete opposite of how I work, painting quickly—it took them two months to make the two pieces. And they are polished like marble, so they are completely smooth. I haven’t seen them in real life yet, but I can’t wait!



MIREILLE BLANC, *BATEAU COQUILLAGES*, 2024, 230 X 150 CM



MIREILLE BLANC, *AUSSIÈRE*, 2016, 41 X 60 CM