

Christie's Magazine
May 2019

FORCE of NATURE

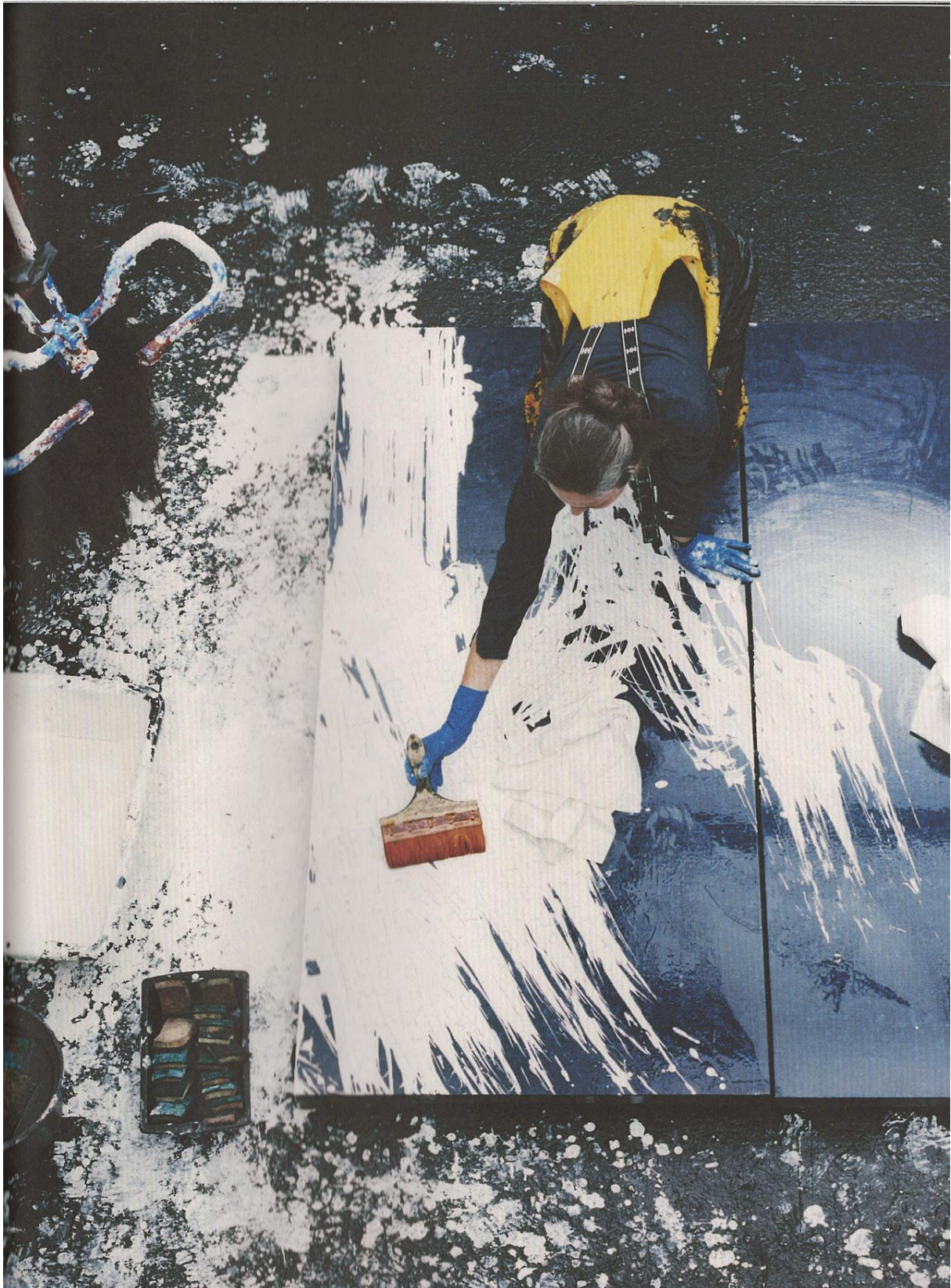


In the unique studio she has created in the countryside north of Paris, Fabienne Verdier harnesses the pull of gravity to create dynamic works that mirror the rhythms of the universe. By E Jane Dickson

Photographs by Allyssa Heuze

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There is gathered stillness in Fabienne Verdier's lean, athletic frame, a stillness dramatically at odds with the dynamic power of her paintings. 'Movement,' she says, 'is the essence of existence, of what it means to be real in the world.'

The words are delivered with the finality of truth, backed up by a lifetime's searching. The paintings featured in a major retrospective running from June to September at Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence are an engrossing record of Verdier's quest. The kinetic impulse of the universe – from the cellular process of sap rising, to lightning flashes and the billion-year action of geomorphic forces – is told across monumental abstract canvases in a graphic line that is never less than urgent.

Impermanence, the artist argues, is our earliest apprehension. 'As babies in the cradle, before we can focus, we're aware of moving shadows, we sense this movement of living things. Later, we learn that everything, every single thing in the world around us, is made up of atoms in motion, molecules in flux. To capture this constant "becoming" – this is what drives me on and drives me mad.'

It's a dizzying thought, certainly, though Verdier scarcely fits the mould of frantic genius. Her home, tucked into a fold of the gentle Vexin countryside an hour's drive from Paris, has the minimalist peace of a temple, with its sun-splashed wood and clean lines. Across a spring garden, minimalism gives way to curated chaos in the library, a magician's cabinet crammed floor-to-ceiling with books, bones, geological samples, animal pelts, sculptures, shells,

feathers, fossils, driftwood and, in pride of place, rows of antique Chinese calligraphy brushes laid out like surgical instruments. Here, projects are patiently researched, albums filled with an intricate découpage of photographs, drawings and diagrams pasted in with snippets of poetry, mathematical theorems and philosophical pensées. Works of art in their own right, these cahiers are an intriguing snapshot of the artist's mind.

'I live a little like a monk,' Verdier explains. 'Every morning, at first light, I paint for four or five hours in my studio. After that, I'm intensely busy with the notebooks, reading, cutting out, reflecting. It's a kind of dynamic meditation.'

Painting, conversely, is an act of strenuous devotion. Verdier's unique process, involving enormous brushes charged with up to 100 litres of thickened acrylic paint, evolved from Chinese calligraphy. At the age of 22, disenchanted with her studies at the École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Toulouse, where she was required to paint 'busts of Beethoven and other dead things', she enrolled at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute only to find a no less moribund establishment in the grip of Socialist Realism. By dint of sheer persistence, and an exceptional gift for friendship, Verdier managed to track down masters of traditional Chinese art sidelined or suppressed by the Cultural Revolution and, over 10 gruelling years recounted in her memoir *Passagère du silence*, she learned the discipline and philosophy of calligraphic painting. 'The masters gave me a piece of white »

The exterior of Verdier's studio. Opposite, the artist working on her notebooks of cuttings and, previous pages, in the 'painting pit'



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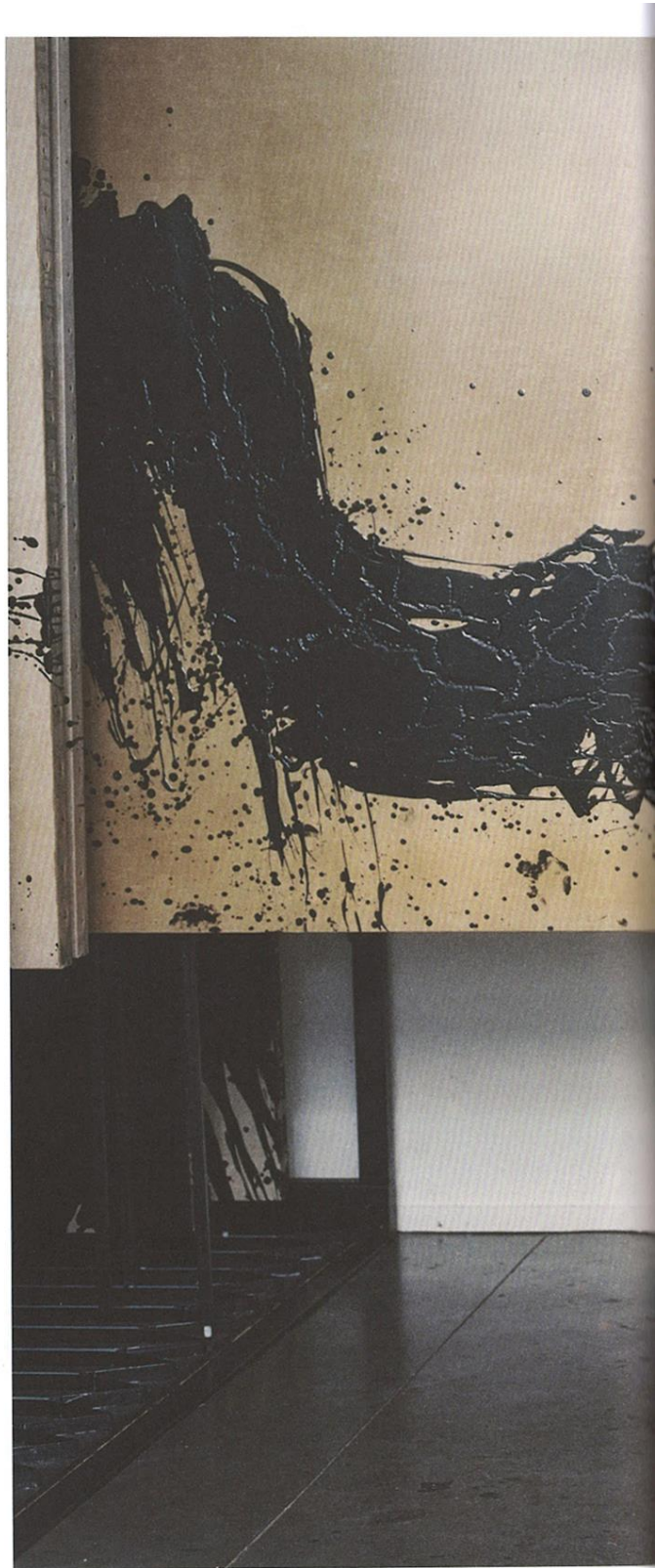
‘I had to reread the whole of art history and reprocess it’

paper and a brush, and told me to paint my spiritual view of tree branches,’ she says. ‘When I wanted to go out and paint what I saw, they laughed at me. They explained that there’s no good looking at a tree, or a landscape. You must, by force of contemplation, be at one with the thing you are painting. It took me a long time to realise that if I wanted to bring something new to painting, I would have to learn this thousand-year culture. And when I returned to France, I was very unhappy for many years, because the contemporary art market dismissed what I was doing as “chinoiserie”. I had to reread the whole of art history, reprocess it through my notebooks, to create a synthesis of these two cultures.’

With the devoted help of Ghislain, the French businessman and Sinophile she married in Beijing, Verdier devised her ‘painting pit’, a system of pulleys suspending a three-metre calligraphy brush above a horizontal canvas. (Ranged along the wall, brush heads composed of up to 30 horsetails are an almost live presence, like fetish objects for a tribe of giants.) It is, to her knowledge, the only artist’s studio in the world arranged specifically to exploit gravitational force. Subsequent modifications have included the removal of the brush shaft and the attachment of bicycle handlebars that allow the artist to guide the brush, with precise modulations of direction, touch and speed, over the canvas. More recently, she has done away with the brush altogether; her ‘walking paintings’ are made by standing directly on the canvas, dispensing paint from a funnel-shaped reservoir. Footage of Verdier at work in industrial dungarees and plastic overshoes demonstrates the immense physical effort and concentration required to produce a fluent line; hunkered behind the handlebars in preparation for each pass of the brush/funnel, she finds the fierce, inward energy of a woman in labour.

‘You know there are times when you “get” something completely,’ she says, ‘and it’s like an electric light in your head? Sometimes there is this moment when the life of the material and the life of your own spirit, the respiration of the world and your own life force come together.’ Sometimes, but not often. Verdier estimates that a good 80 per cent of her work is destroyed in a ritual fire pit in the garden. ‘I watch them burn,’ she shrugs. ‘It’s a kind of purification.’

There have been moments, too, of unexpected vindication. ‘One day, out of the blue, I received a letter from the great Vietnamese-American astrophysicist Trinh Xuan Thuan. “*Chère Madame,*” he wrote, “I’ve been given a book of your paintings, »



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Fabienne Verdier moving
one of her paintings

'I have all these forms in my brain, in my bones, in my blood. Painting just made me understand it'

and I need to come and see you." Of course I was delighted, and he turned up at the door with two enormous plastic bags full of books he'd written about the origins of the universe. He thrust them into my arms and, without even a "bonjour", demanded to see my studio. I took him to the pit, and he was blown away. "Madame," he said, "you have invented something extraordinary here. You've positioned your brush to create forms in an act of vertical painting, and since we know that all the forms occurring on this little earth of ours are fashioned by the laws of gravity, it follows that the forms occurring in your pictures are in total harmony with these natural forms, the same patterns, the same fractals." Deepening friendship with Trinh Xuan Thuan inspired *Vide Vibration*, a series of paintings based on the void in the universe – fathomless grounds of silver, ultramarine, cerulean and carbon black, overlaid with whorls and waves of energy.

After long years of solitary introspection, collaboration plays an increasing role in Verdier's practice. In 2014, she was invited to spend a semester as artist in residence at the Juilliard School in New York, exploring a concomitance of music and art. Installed with her easel at the heart of the orchestra, Verdier worked with conductor William Christie in a performance of Handel's oratorio *La Resurrezione*. 'Riding the rhythms and sound structures of the music, I would see certain forms appear, sometimes whole landscapes. William is a terrifyingly exacting musician, and at first he didn't understand what I was attempting. He came to me and said, "Look, what is it you are actually doing here?" I explained that, on that day, in the exchange between Mary of Cleophas and Mary Magdalene, I had seen a landscape of clouds. And he said, "But I also see that when I hear this passage!" After that, we had a very rich exchange. I also worked with the wonderful jazz pianist Kenny Barron. Kenny explained that the fundamental exercise of jazz is to create something new, to prevent the work devolving to the classical mode. And this is the problem I live with every day!'

Building on the success of *The Juilliard Experiment* – the experience was captured on film – Verdier completed a series of works alongside string quartets in the Chapelle de la Visitation as part of the 2017 Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, and a film of that event will run concurrently with the Granet retrospective. Further collaborations have included a project to illustrate a 50th-anniversary edition of the French household dictionary *Le Petit Robert*. 'Initially,' says Verdier, 'I intended to read the entire dictionary and pick out single words, but of course it was an impossible task.' Instead, she chose 22 pairs of words related to her

practice – 'Arborescence-Allégorie', 'Esprit-Évasion', 'Force-Forme' – with the intention of sparking a poetic synapse between the two meanings.

Words hold an almost hermetic power for Verdier (she writes as fluently as she paints), and 'arborescence', the organic extension of structure, is one of her favourites. If the forms in her paintings read almost figuratively – as trees, coastlines or rock formations – it is because she has internalised, as her Chinese masters demanded, the intimate processes of nature: 'I have all these forms in my brain, in my bones, in my blood. Painting just made me understand it.' Nor does she claim full credit for the striking plasticity of her paintings. The play of stress and substance as viscous paint stretches, pools and folds is, she points out, no less than geomorphology in microcosm.

Even so, there are surprises. Her most recent commission, conceived as a grand finale to the Granet retrospective, is a close engagement with Cézanne's paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire. Not content to hike the hills of Provence with an easel on her back, Verdier, accompanied by her film-maker son Martin, had a portable version of her studio apparatus lugged up by donkeys to create a series of 'walking paintings'. Working through October storms, sleeping on bare boards in a monastery, she was tested to her limits. 'The weather was truly, freakishly awful; I could barely see the mountain in front of me. But the wind and rain helped me, they carved reliefs in the wet paint. By morning, these had dried into gullies, and when we looked, we were amazed to find that these mapped on, exactly, to the rivers and crevices on the mountainside. In the end I destroyed all the walking paintings made on the mountain. But I recreated the effect of the wind in the studio using a fan, and exactly the same thing happened.'

The finished series, *Sur les Terres de Cézanne*, is remarkable: Verdier's powerful line evokes not just the landscape but the telluric forces in the heart of stone. 'They laughed at Cézanne,' Verdier points out. 'He suffered greatly on his mountain, because he wasn't understood in his time. When he experimented with mass and void, they said, "But you haven't finished your paintings." In fact, he was breaking a path to new forms of abstraction, a new way of contemplating matter in the world.'

Does she feel that her own career has in some way squared Cézanne's circle? 'Ça? Non!' says Verdier, appalled and intrigued by the sacrilege. 'But I'd love to think so.' ♦

'Fabienne Verdier: Sur les Terres de Cézanne' is at the Musée Granet, Musée du Pavillon de Vendôme and Cité du Livre, Aix-en-Provence, 21 June-13 October. Post-War and Contemporary Art auctions will take place at Christie's Paris, 4 & 5 June

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