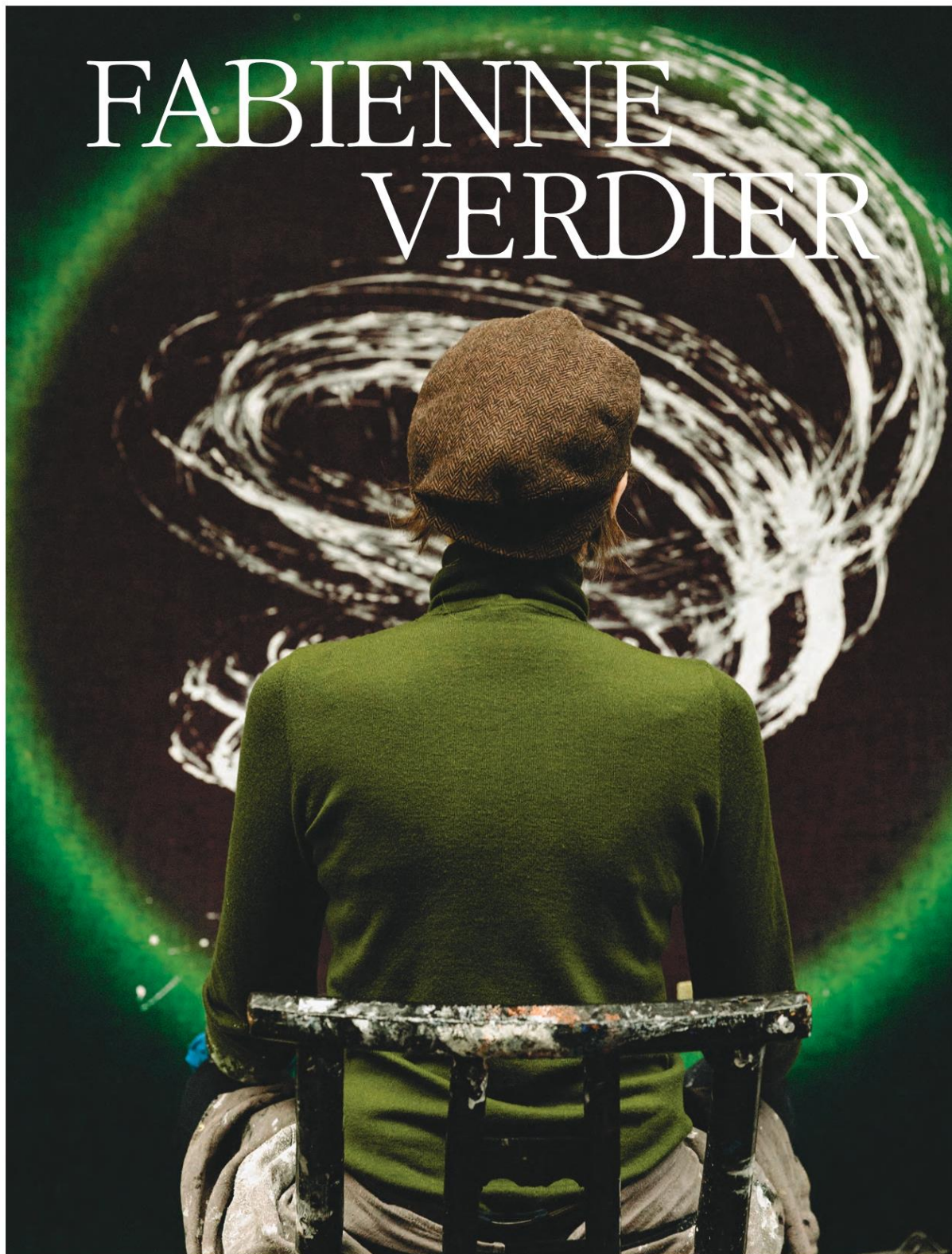


Plus, 2021



Galerie Lelong & Co.

Paris – New York

Fabienne Verdier is an unconventional painter. Gripping an enormous paintbrush suspended from the studio ceiling, she applies paint to the canvas vertically, using a traditional Chinese technique that exploits the forces of gravity. What seems like electrical pulses, these meditative, energetic strokes invite viewers to lose themselves in detail.

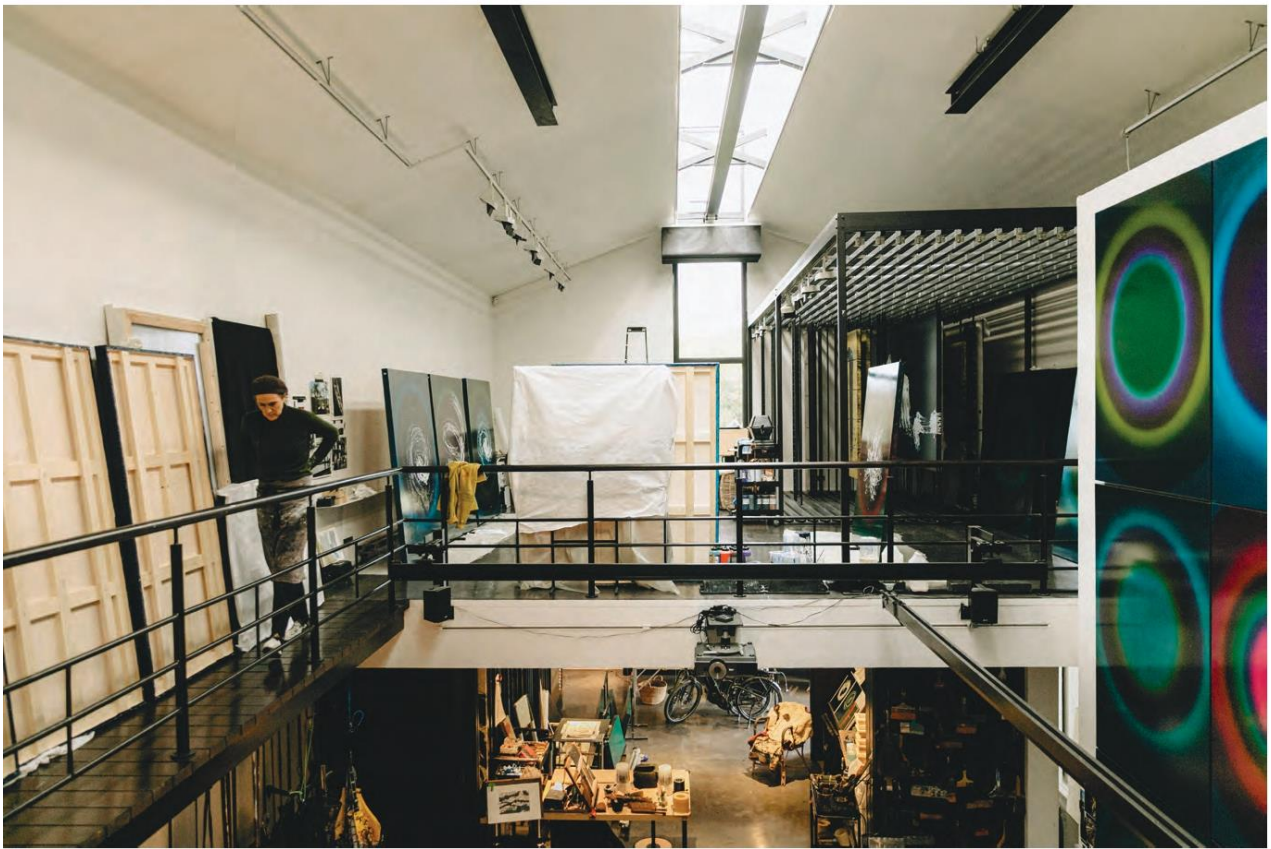


Photography by Laura Stevens

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In 2014, Verdier decided to challenge herself and became the first visual artist-in-residence at the Juilliard School in New York. At Juilliard, she sought to fuse music and painting, drawing on visual sound waves to create her work. To this day, she is constantly reinventing her practice, and is a painter whose spontaneous artworks are alive with energy.



I want to discuss your early life and career. Can you share what sparked your interest in painting?

When I was young, I studied music and played classical piano, but the prospect of auditioning in public made me so anxious that I had to give up music as a whole. Being on stage, facing the audience terrified me so much that I just froze up there. It was then that I started to take an interest in painting which my parents encouraged me to do as well.

Your father wanted you to become a figurative painter, but you were always skeptical of that, right? Do you think that this was because you and your father perceived the world in very different ways?

Well, my father graduated from one of the most renowned art schools in Paris, and he wanted me to learn painting in the same way that he did: starting with the theoretical and practical foundations of drawing and then moving on to oil painting. He absolutely wanted me to familiarize myself with artistic concepts that he considered essential—perspectives and vanishing points. But very early on, I had this intuition that our visual perception of reality and of the objects surrounding us was much more complex than Western laws of perspective. So, I began to rebel against that traditional view, and I followed my own way.

After studying at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts of Toulouse, you left France to study in China. What drew you to make this choice?

As a painter, I was always interested in the question of what life is. Life is movement, and movement is spontaneity. But I wondered, how could I possibly paint this reality? I knew that I couldn't find the answer in France. It was through reading Chinese and Japanese textbooks and painting books, that I realized that nature didn't have to be painted according to Western classical rules. I told myself then, that by going to study on-site with painters trained in this aesthetic thought, I might find teachings that would correspond to my intuitions. So, I left France and went to Sichuan Fine Arts.

What was it like there?

I was in an art school where the Communist Party ruled almost every aspect of social and academic life. It was not easy for me as a female foreigner. I initially planned to stay for a year, but I ended up staying for 10 years. I began to look for traditional teaching, which of all my new peers found very strange. According to the Maoist dogmas, it was necessary to make a clean sweep of the past, and it was thought that the study of "old aesthetics and philosophies" no longer had its place in new china.

How did your experience studying in China broaden your perspective?

In France, the teachers at my art school told me that painting was dead, outdated. But in China, the teachers had been trained in the vein of Soviet socialist realism, and they asked their students to paint like Gustave Courbet, for instance. My Chinese peers, of course, had a hard time coming to terms with this and some of them resisted their teachers by imitating the style of Andy Warhol and Rauschenberg, which they perceived as a critique of American consumer society. I wasn't very interested in either of those practices.

Instead, I wanted to transpose an ancestral Chinese pictorial tradition based on fluidity and spontaneity of form. After a bit of convincing on my part, the painter Huang Yuan agreed to pass on his knowledge and practice to me. He allowed me to work alongside him for almost ten years and explore, with exceptional richness, a traditional technique that was disappearing.

Was this tradition the vertical painting method?

Yes! Huang Yuan taught me to hold my paintbrush vertically and paint in a flow of movement. When strokes are made vertically, the ink contained in the bristles of the brush drips in the direction of the stroke, matching the original gesture. This method is based on a simple concept; all forms of our universe are governed by the laws of gravity. Painting in accordance with these laws and not in opposition connects the brush with the forms that resonate around us.



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“Everything that surrounds us is animated with moving energy in a constant transformation.”



How have you incorporated these principles into your practice?

When I returned to France in 1992, I started working on a much larger scale. I went from using paintbrushes the size of a pencil or screwdriver to brushes the size of a garden rake. The diameter and weight of my brushes became so large that I had to fasten them to bicycle handlebars and hang them from the workshop ceiling with ropes. After my return to France, I also began painting on linen canvas rather than the traditionally used mulberry fiber paper. On canvas, I could revise my brushstrokes when I wasn't satisfied with them without having to destroy all the background preparation work. I also put my canvases on the ground, perfectly flat. I wanted to make sure that the energy breathed into the canvas through the act of painting would freeze rather than drip down too much. I wanted to keep that initial fluidity and dynamism. Overall, I would say that I designed these new systems for working because I didn't want to paint just my hands and arms, but with the energy of my whole body.

How do you think this energy manifests in your work?

Well, what I'm trying to do is make the force that underlies a form on a canvas visible. Too often the force that births form is hidden or invisible. I remember skipping school to go to natural history museums, and I would study the skeletons of animals to understand how they moved—what was behind the curves of bird flights or the trot of a horse.

Everything that surrounds us is animated with moving energy in a constant transformation. For me, reality is not fixed or frozen, but in flux. When we observe a pebble or a tree, a blade of grass or a mammal, or even the tectonics of a mountain, it is interesting to look at it from the angle of an organism or a moving structure whose shape or shapes are the result of the different natural forces that have shaped it down to the appearance we have before our eyes. It is this strength, this energy of the foundation of things, that I seek to capture.

French poet William Wordsworth said, "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its emotion recollected in tranquility." I couldn't help but think of your practice when reading it, and I was wondering if this statement resonates with you at all.

The universe we share is in danger, and it seems to me that it is up to all of us, including, of course artists, to tirelessly speak and paint the poetry of living. To evoke this poetry, it seems to me that spontaneity is one of the possible ways. This is the reason why I spend countless hours observing the waves of a river, the lines of a landscape, the volutes of a cloud, and the curves of a modest blade of grass. Everything sings the vibrations of an undulatory life. I am constantly overwhelmed and amazed by it and I try to convey this joy.

When you paint, you tend to stay silent and focus on the flow of the brushstrokes, which is interesting given your interest in music. What's the power of silence to you?

Silence, when in the process of painting, is essential. My work is based on the intuition that an abstract shape painted on a rectangle of linen canvas can be ripened and simplified, evoking a very real thing. And for that, silence and deep concentration are the two essential companions.

I'm interested in your residency at The Juilliard School, where you explored the possible correlations between pictorial waves and sound waves. What did you learn from this experience?

Working with musicians has been an incredible opportunity for me. I had the chance to work with Kenny Barron, William Christies, Philip Lasser, Darrett Adkins, Edith Wiens, and many of their students. When working with musicians, you have to learn to let go of yourself in order to think differently. It was a real new challenge for me, and it taught me the importance of taking risks in my work. This is what Hölderlin told us: "But where the danger is, also grows the saving power".

During my time at The Juilliard School, I kept asking myself, how do I establish a dialogue between music and painting, between sound line and pictorial line, without one being subject to the other, and at the same time ensuring that this "in-between" is born a spontaneous concomitance? How do I produce something that spontaneously expresses a certain aspect of life and constitutes the very essence of both music and painting?

During the joint working sessions, we realized that it was possible to exchange without going through words but rather through abstract forms that seemed to come straight out of experience and memory.

More broadly, I have seen that the musician does not just listen, they see; the painter does not just look; they listen. If the eye can listen, the ear can also see. This possible simultaneity between music and painting, too often questioned, was therefore at the heart of these experiments.



Dove sono i bei momenti di dolcezza e di piacere?, 2020. Courtesy of Waddington Custot and the artist.

FABIENNE VERDIER

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Your *Vortex* works were initiated during your time at The Juilliard School. Can you talk more about this series?

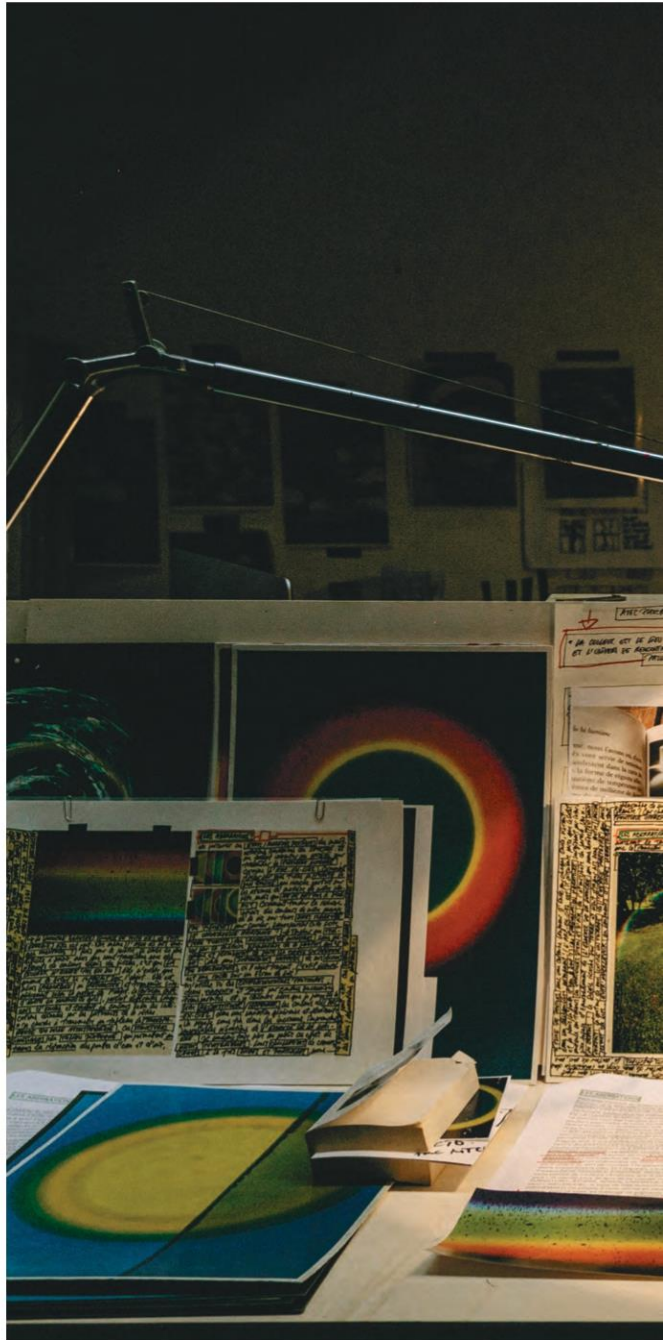
The very latest set of *Vortex* works are based on the idea that when we move around a space or talk or sing, we generate some kind of dynamic turbulence around us, invisible to the eye, yet very real. It seemed to me that these swirling forces painted on the canvas could evoke imaginary and singular choreographies of each moving body. The richness of the modulation of the voices inspired the material of the forms.

Nowadays, it's becoming harder to reconnect with natural forces and with each other. How do you find a balance and love in this current society?

The pandemic has disrupted our everyday life. I am currently working on an exhibition project for the museum in Colmar, France. I am imagining a huge installation that would be a series of consolations for all those who lost their loved ones during this pandemic without having the opportunity to say goodbye to them or to practice the rites specific to each family tradition. I am focusing on creating works that tell us about this great departure and I would like us to be able to perceive the last breath of these beings who have left us and which nevertheless leave a trace of the vitality of their existence. A gesture of compassion to the modest extent of the painter's face to face with this pandemic.

Looking forward to the upcoming exhibition! That being said, I am curious to know what love means to you.

I'm tempted to take a quotation from Paul Klee: "Form should never be seen anywhere as a completion, a result, an end, but as a genesis, a becoming, a being," but alter it like this: "Love should never be seen as a completion, a result, an end anywhere, but as a genesis, a becoming, a being."



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