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"Colors were never strong enough for me" A visit with Nicolas Fontaine

Nicolas Fontaine's paintings are like a cross between glam rock and the ancient Egyptian cult of the dead. "Pimp My Ride to Heaven" is the title of his exhibition at the Studio of the Deutsche Bank KunstHalle. Oliver Koerner von Gustorf met with the Macht Kunst winner in his Kreuzberg studio.



• Nicolas Fontaine



• Nicolas Fontaine, Pimp my Ride to heaven, 2014. Courtesy the artist.



• Nicolas Fontaine, Satana yo te

Nicolas Fontaine is a chameleon. When, on a cold spring afternoon, he opens the door to the huge pre-WWII Kreuzberg apartment he shares with other artists, I don't recognize him. At the awards ceremony for the "Macht Kunst Prize" in April 2013, he was still cultivating the Berlin-Mitte bohemian look, with dark hair and beard, drainpipe jeans, and silver sneakers. Now it's like I'm meeting a completely different person: a peroxide blond, androgynous dark waver. "It often happens that people don't recognize me," Fontaine says a bit later with a faint grin. "Every time I run into them, I'm wearing a different hairstyle or color or a new outfit. I don't notice it anymore, because I've been doing it since I was eighteen. Back then, I used to go to glam rock parties four times a week with my girlfriend in Montreal. Our motto was: never the same outfit twice! We really had a lot of fun."

One half of Fontaine's studio is bright white, the other painted in black. The loudspeakers are booming with an electro house mix by Rihanna. And it's true: at first glance, the paintings on the walls look as though they were clothed, or more precisely dressed in drag. Heavily caked in glitter, they sparkle in the spotlight like costumes from some glam rock band or an act in a Las Vegas show. *Pimp My Ride to Heaven* is the title of a huge painting Fontaine is currently working on, a painting he conceived especially for the exhibition at the Deutsche Bank KunstHalle. The Canadian, who has been living in Berlin for five years, decks out his heavenly trip with motifs that look like they come straight from the radiator hood of a souped-up car. A naked woman emerges from a stylized pillar of fire into a trashy beyond; notes from Mozart's Requiem wind out between her legs, while one of her pumps slips off her foot. Alien-like creatures and new wave symbols buzz around her, giving off a kind of Miami Vice feel with bubbling bottles of champagne, palm trees, and orange slices. Beneath her is a boat resembling the ship that carries souls to the netherworld of ancient Egyptian mythology. Yet the golden lion-headed doorknockers gripping locked chains between their fangs look like the guards to a netherworld ruled not by Osiris, but by Versace and Chanel.

Death and mortality have always been key themes in Fontaine's art. In the exhibition of the same name at the Deutsche Bank KunstHalle, he will be showing his *Pimp My Ride to Heaven* piece in a kind of burial chamber. The focus of the exhibition consists of a coffin "pimped up" with car enamel and neon and ostentatiously decorated with repetitive motifs from his latest painting series. The titles of the paintings, for instance *Satana yo te boco* (2014), sound like they were taken right out of the songs Pedro Almodóvar performed in the 1980s with his electro punk band *Almodóvar y McNamara*. And just like the Spanish director's films, Fontaine's painting sails clear over the cliffs of "good" taste.

Yet in an extremely fascinating way, his paintings convey both complete superficiality and subtle depth. When you take a closer look at them, the motifs come across as associative placeholders in a kind of semi-abstract, basically highly formal composition. Surprisingly, they're not necessarily inspired by wave kitsch, but by the tectonic, synthetic compositions Wassily Kandinsky developed in Paris in the 1930s. The proximity is astonishing: in Kandinsky's late work, semi-abstract forms reminiscent of objects or living beings float before colored or black backgrounds; he also mixed fine sand into the paint to achieve a different kind of surface texture. While Fontaine was studying art, Kandinsky and Miro were two of his biggest role models, but at the time, "it was forbidden to paint that way in

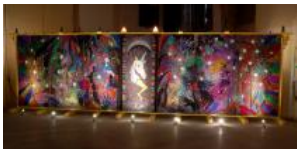
boco, 2014. Courtesy the artist.



• Nicolas Fontaine, American Delight, 2014. Courtesy the artist.



• Nicolas Fontaine, Burning Lotus of the Quantum Gate, 2013. Courtesy the artist.



• Nicolas Fontaine, Inazuma no Haru, 2012. Courtesy the artist.



• Nicolas Fontaine, Viper Hyper Heart Riper, 2013. Courtesy the artist.



• Nicolas Fontaine, Through the

art school, because it was too ridden with cliché."

After years of adhering to one-point perspective, his latest series is another step towards a painterly liberation in which construction and rhythm are the determining elements. Fontaine actually looks back over a kind of family tradition; his great uncle **Jean-Paul Jérôme** was one of Canada's first geometric painters and became internationally known in the mid-fifties as a member of the artists' group **Les Plasticien**. For Fontaine, the glitter so often associated with "queerness" in today's art establishment is more a formal means: "At first I worked with acrylic and oil, and always tried to make my colors as intense as possible. But they were never strong enough for me. With the glitter, I get this intensity of color and brilliance, and in addition an interactive aspect, because every movement on the part of the viewer changes the coloration and sense of spatial depth."

For Fontaine, paintings are always objects, too. He is a painter through and through, but he has always presented his paintings in room-sized installations in combination with objects and sculptures, or in opulent frames studded with **Swarovski** crystals. It's amazing how casually he approaches painting, how he charges geometric abstraction with elements of pop culture, outsider art, art history, fashion, or spirituality. The light refractions of the crystals onto the still-wet painting surfaces remind him of the meditative process, in which mandalas play an important role. For him, the glittering particles of glass carry a very special meaning: "When I was small, I had a collection of stones and crystals. Some of the stones were geologically interesting, and others had a specific healing effect according to **New Age** culture. At the same time, I was always fascinated by the elaborate **Baroque** painting frames that were covered in jewels and crystals. A lot of importance was placed on the choice of materials, such as stone or velvet. This valuable accoutrement also figures highly in folk art, for instance in Cambodia, where my ex-girlfriend comes from. People are extremely poor there, yet despite that, it's very important to them that their temples are beautiful. They're decorated in gold leaf and paintings. That's something that endures. If an object is made in a very beautiful and delicate way, then it lasts a much longer time, beyond death, and for others." I ask him if he's afraid of death. "No," Fontaine says, "because death is not an end, it's just a period in a text. A period following a sentence, and as long as you're alive, you want to write the most beautiful sentence possible."

Fontaine is connected to the outsider artists who have influenced his work through the premise of a lovingly decorative art that arises out of an urgent inner necessity and spirituality, as a life's work. Among these outsider artists is **Augustin Lesage** (1876-1954), who as a 35-year-old miner in 1911 heard a voice in the dark that announced to him that he would become an artist one day. Lesage, who had only visited a museum once in his life, sought contact with the realm of spirits, and a voice from beyond gave him precise instructions as to what he should paint and how, which colors and materials he should buy. Certain aspects of his detailed style can be found in Fontaine's work, for instance symmetrical and ornamental forms that recall Egyptian and Oriental cultures.

As with Lesage, spirituality, formal daring, and commercial success are not mutually exclusive for Fontaine. After only a few years, Lesage was able to support himself exclusively through his art. **Jean Dubuffet** discovered him in 1948 and purchased one of his "historical" canvases for 50,000 francs for his collection of **Art Brut**. Fontaine, too, is already very successful. He just completed his fine arts studies this year at the **Kunsthochschule Weißensee**, and already he is connected to a network of collectors and institutions in his hometown of Montreal. Last summer, still without gallery representation, he sold nearly 30 paintings. And Fontaine is a workhorse. Here in Berlin, he has concentrated mainly on his studies and is only now starting out in terms of the market. He is currently making contacts with painters and gallery dealers in the hopes that they will come to the KunstHalle; a museum director from Zurich has already purchased one of his works. In this sense, his exhibition *Pimp My Ride to Heaven* is coming at just the right time. As Fontaine explains, at the time he happened upon the flyer to "Macht Kunst," he simply thought, "Why not?"—and then went without sleep for two days in order to create a painting for the event. He stood in line in the bitter cold for an entire day outside the Deutsche Bank KunstHalle. Time, money, passion—it goes without saying that Fontaine pours everything into his work. When I ask him why it's so easy for him, he answers: "I take my work very seriously, but not my own self."

Nicolas Fontaine. Pimp My Ride to Heaven

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Quantum Gate, 2013. Courtesy the artist.

