

# Art | Basel

## Find out why painter Claire Tabouret turned to fake fur

Inspired by Paul Cezanne, Les Nabis, and Giorgio Morandi, her paintings now on view at the ICA Miami mark a new departure

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At the height of the pandemic, after museums had closed their doors, Claire Tabouret retreated into her art history books and thought often of Giorgio Morandi (1890–1964). The Italian painter had captured the soft dynamism of Paul Cezanne’s colorful brushwork and translated it into his own tonal subtlety, not by painting from life, but by diligently studying black-and-white reproductions. ‘He was retelling a story removed from the actual subject, as if he had a filter in front of him,’ Tabouret says. ‘This idea of translation – or maybe transcription is a better word – is what interests me.’

Tabouret describes her solo exhibition, ‘Au Bois d’Amour’, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, as a transcription of the work of Les Nabis, a group of artists, including Édouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard, who blurred the distinctions between Impressionism and abstraction in late 19th-century Paris. Like Morandi with Cézanne, Tabouret studied Les Nabis’ vibrant landscapes in books -

a beloved pastime of her teenage years. She then further distorted the imagery by scanning and printing them using 'a kind of low-quality printer.' She sometimes cropped the compositions, and filled in the unseen qualities of scale and texture by using her imagination. The most dramatic distortion however, was her use of colored synthetic fur in lieu of canvas, producing what she fondly refers to as her 'fluff.'

In both subject matter and materiality, the fluff paintings mark a fairly recent departure from the last decade of Tabouret's practice. She's best known for painting portraits with sheer washes of acrylic, which allow often clashing neon shades of underpainting to luminously shine through. These fluff landscapes first emerged in 2021 in Paris, in an exhibition at Perrotin, and required some trial and error, and the total reinvention of Tabouret's painterly gestures. Taming unruly expanses of synthetic fur 'is not a very forgiving technique,' she says. Paint has a tendency to sink deep into the spongelike surface, making each brushstroke 'feel as if you are trying to move in really deep snow.'



These works, however, tell us something new about the artist's approach to opacity, texture, and rhythm; her handling of paint becomes a sculptural process with the physical weight and depth of a bas-relief. As the acrylic paint dries, the fur hardens to the exact shape, length, and pressure of the brushstroke, analogous to footprints frozen in the snow. In *Au Bois d'Amour (violet)* (2023), a work transcribed from Vuillard's 1899 landscape *First Fruits*, tufts of grayish, lilac-colored synthetic fur rhythmically peek through solid currents of acrylic paint. In theory, their pastel-leaning tones would fade into the lilac fluff, but they somehow harmoniously work together; the daring mismatching of color is a signature that the artist mastered long ago.

Tabouret was born in the South of France in 1981, and graduated from the *École des Beaux-Arts*, Paris in 2006 before moving to Los Angeles in 2015. 'It was a very impulsive decision,' she says during a recent visit to her studio, a former industrial space in LA's Pico-Union neighborhood. 'I had never been here before, and I didn't know anybody here, but I was attracted by the idea of being so far away from what I knew.'



Naturally wide-eyed and soft-spoken, with a dreamy intonation to her voice, she describes the five years she spent in art school as a relatively unhappy time. 'I realized I was in a world where people talk a certain way, they know each other, and have certain codes that I don't know,' she says. From her graduation in 2006 to about 2013, Tabouret made little money from her art. The main source of her livelihood was instead waitressing or painting apartments. Working as a life model for art classes also allowed her to make ends meet. 'I liked that,' she recalls, 'I was still kind of painting in my head, and I didn't have to talk to anybody.'



Tabouret's career-defining moment came in 2013, when collector François Pinault was struck by the image printed on the invitation to her solo exhibition in Paris. It was a show of haunting portraits of costumed children, rendered in dramatic lighting and dark, muted tones. Pinault bought everything, and exhibited Tabouret's work in a group show at his Palazzo Grassi space in Venice the following year, alongside the likes of Danh Vo, Doug Wheeler, and Julio Le Parc. From there, her career has seen a steady ascent, with works entering collections including those of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Yuz Museum in Shanghai.

Over the course of the last decade, Tabouret's work has been lauded for the intimacy of her portraiture – depictions of women and children, clowns, wrestlers, miners, Britney Spears, and more – often with vulnerable expressions. There is an efficiency of form perhaps akin to early Alex Katz; the eyes are frequently the minimal but piercing gesture of a circle and a horizontal line. More recently however, LA's specific register of domestic bliss has shifted the direction of her practice, as seen in frequent collaborations with her husband, carpenter and musician Nathan Thelen. Their approach to their home as an evolving work of art, alongside the inspiration of Vuillard, whose handling of paint deliberately evoked the surface of tapestry, pushed Tabouret toward blurring the distinctions between art and decoration.



The impulse shows through in her exhibition in tangible ways; the fluff is an attempt to match the rhythm and texture of a woven surface in paint. The ICA show also includes a large-scale rug of wool and silk – a painstaking collaboration with the Odabashian weavers of India that further transcribes a fluff painting she made in 2021, based on the work of Bonnard. A suite of prints embodies the ways that the birth of Tabouret’s daughter in 2022 further dissolved boundaries between her personal life and artistic practice. These abstracted landscapes are inspired by and printed directly onto her daughter’s splashes of paint on paper – a way of ‘weaving our two gestures together,’ Tabouret says. Just before the birth of her daughter in 2022, the artist was often told that she was bound to start making baby portraits. ‘I haven’t painted portraits since she was born,’ she says. ‘At this stage of my life, I’m going towards rhythm, music, texture. Her presence is so intense, I had to match that intensity in a way.’

Claire Tabouret is represented by Night Gallery (Los Angeles), Almine Rech (Paris, Brussels, London, New York, Shanghai), and Perrotin (Paris, Dubai, New York, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Hong Kong, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai).

Claire Tabouret  
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