

Interview

Claire Tabouret Designed the New Stained-Glass Windows at Notre-Dame. She's Ready for the Blowback.

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Claire Tabouret, photographed by Tag Christof.

Halfway through my conversation with the French artist [Claire Tabouret](#), we arrived at everyone's favorite subject: psychoanalysis. Twice a week for seven years, the painter would visit her shrink's book-filled Parisian office and recline on the sofa. "He would smoke," Tabouret reminisced from her brightly lit LA studio last month. "And I would cry."

Tabouret illuminates her emotional turmoil in [Moonlight Shadow](#), an enigmatic new show currently on view at LA's Night Gallery. The dreamy paintings feature many uncanny self-portraits, breastfeeding mothers, and eerie choruses of costumed children all washed in a smokey, blue-ish light. But the 42-year-old's work extends far beyond the couch. Despite an uproar from preservationists, the French government recently commissioned Tabouret to restore the Notre-Dame Cathedral's famed stained glass windows. "It's not very French to move things around," Tabouret says. "But also, I feel strong enough to go back and bring change." Earlier this month, Tabouret and I discussed Parisian squats, LA's devastating wildfires, and using art to seduce your friends.

SAMMY LOREN: Are you in L.A. right now?

CLAIRE TABOURET: Yeah, I'm here in my studio.

LOREN: Well, congrats on the show. I thought the work was really dreamy and cool. But before we get into it, I wanted to try to go back in time a little bit. You grew up in the south of France. What was your youth like? What got you into art?

TABOURET: I don't like going back to my youth so much.

LOREN: Why?

TABOURET: I think that's a common thing with people who move countries by choice. It's obviously different for someone who has to move because of economic reasons or war, but someone who migrates by choice, often they don't want to go back to where they came from. I grew up in the south of France and I moved to Paris when I was 17, which was a big jump. It was a dream to go to Paris, and I had this idea of the big city. Then after a while, I wanted to keep going further away.

LOREN: What is it about France that drives away its best and brightest? I know so many French people that are like, "Get me the fuck out of France."

TABOURET: It's not France. I love France, and I'm happy to go back, but it's more about exploration, adventure, being able to reinvent yourself. It's a common thing for anyone who grew up in a small town. So what can I tell you about my youth?

LOREN: I'm always curious about what artists were like when they were teenagers, at this formative moment. There are these kinds of tribes that every kid migrates into, in America at least: the jocks, the punks, the goths.

TABOURET: I was not in any of these groups. As a teenager, I was already really drawn to drawing and painting. I liked the solitude. I liked not using words, and I also knew I could attract people and create connections, which was not an easy thing for me. I was very shy. I would decide in advance who would be my friend, and then I would give them a drawing, and I would use this as a way of creating a bond between me and others.

LOREN: So you would use your art to make friends?

TABOURET: To seduce and to be loved. I think that's a common thing. It could be true for musicians, for writers. You also want to show the world through your eyes. For me, it's still true. Through painting, I'm sharing my experiences to create connections. But I didn't really create any with groups of people in music or fashion or anything. For me, it was more of a one-on-one thing.

LOREN: I want to know about this one aspect of your career that is infamous, which is when you were living in Paris and you were kind of hustling and struggling, like any other artist. And this very wealthy collector just bought out all your work, right?

TABOURET: Yes. I was in my early thirties, so I had been painting for a long time, and honestly, I felt so old. I felt like, "When is someone going to take me seriously?" And I had this show in a small gallery in Paris, and I previously had shows where I didn't sell a single thing. So I sent an invitation to this very famous collector, François Pinault, without knowing him. I just Googled the address of his office building and sent a little note. Really, it's like sending a letter in a bottle into the ocean. But it did reach his desk, and he came to the show. He didn't come for the public opening, he came beforehand. First he had his assistant come check it out. She left, a half-hour later he came in person.

LOREN: And then he bought out the show?

TABOURET: Yeah. He bought like 90% of it, and he spread the word. Usually he's kind of a discreet buyer, but I think he wanted to help me, knowing that a lot of people would be influenced. So it shed a tremendous light on what I was doing, and in the next few weeks everyone just came to my studio and bought things. And I made this mistake that often young artists would do, when they have their first big moment and sell everything too fast. I could have clung to some more of my work, but I have no regrets about it.

LOREN: How did that change your life?

TABOURET: Well, it changed it in a very practical way that I was able to rent a studio for the first time. I was in a squat before that, so I didn't have that uncertainty any more, when you didn't know what you would wake up and find in the morning. It felt absolutely great, just to have the safety of the space with no interruptions. And the privacy, that's something I was really craving.

LOREN: How did the privacy affect your work?

TABOURET: At the time, it gave me the freedom to work at my own pace and to spread my work all over. I think a lot of my practice has to do with searching for as much freedom as possible and breaking every block I could have: mental blocks, physical blocks, time blocks, making myself completely available to letting things arise.

LOREN: What brought you to L.A.?

TABOURET: That was in 2015, so 10 years ago. I had been in the spotlight for a year or so in Paris, and it started feeling a little small for me. I still wanted to climb and to struggle. But my fame was not big enough to get me all the way to America, so I thought, "If I go there, I'll just start struggling and climbing again." And I had not been to L.A. before, so that was exciting. The unknowns, the strangeness, and honestly also the nine-hour time difference, all of that was intriguing to me. And when I arrived, the city was so strange, so different. I didn't drive at the time, I didn't know people. So I had to invent, build and learn everything.

LOREN: I cannot think of two cities more dissimilar than L.A. and Paris.

TABOURET: I agree. I was also tired of the density of Paris, how it can be draining socially to see so many people in one day, just running your errands and bumping into people. So I appreciated being here, being able to be in the city but also have peace and quiet if I need it.

LOREN: Talk to me about your show at Night Gallery and *Moonlight Shadow*. The works are really dreamy, and there's this nice shift in your color palette. Now, it's more blues and purples.

TABOURET: I think, strangely, I'm coming back to this color palette I had when I was working in Paris. If I look back at the works at the time, they were much darker, much more like nighttime lights. And when I came to L.A., maybe because the light was so bright, I started working with these neon colors, specifically orange, a bit like the Californian light that is so bright that sometimes it blinds you. And going back to this, it's a softer palette. It's dark, and your eyes take time to adjust. Maybe at first, the painting seems so dark, and there's not as much subtlety. But the longer you spend looking at them, the longer you can see all this color rising to the surface. It came first from the idea of exhaustion. I was really tired, and I was not sleeping. I'm an insomniac. And I realized that in these moments I love laying down. Some insomniacs just don't want to be in bed. I like being in bed a lot, and I like dreaming kind of half-awake, half-sleeping, and that's when a lot of my ideas come.

LOREN: So how much do you sleep most nights?

TABOURET: Well now I have two young girls. One is one years-old and one is three, and they both wake up a lot at night. So I sleep, but it's very broken down. I think some nights I sleep two, three hours, and sometimes I reach five, but in little points.

LOREN: The work includes a lot of self-portraits. What are you trying to express by painting all these different versions of yourself?

TABOURET: The self-portrait is something that's been consistent since my teenage years, honestly. The subject matter has changed so much in my practice, and the colors and the scales, but the self-portrait is there because I was thinking if I was just going to reduce everything to one thing, that would be it because it contains everything. For me, it's about the mystery of the portrait, the mystery of oneself, the mystery of the presence of the face. You're changing every single day. I saw a show of Rembrandt 20 years ago in London of his self-portraits. He started self-portraits when he was a very young boy until the day before he died. And it contains every subject. It contains youth and life and desire and sexuality and gender and fear and death. There's a lot of freedom in painting yourself. You don't have to please anybody.

LOREN: There seems to be this Freudian influence in the work. Am I projecting, or do you practice psychoanalysis?

TABOURET: Well, I did when I was in France. Maybe that's very French. When I was in Paris, I had a wonderful therapist, and he was a psychoanalyst. So I did seven years of twice a week talking to this man. I would lay down, and he was behind me, very traditional, in a room with rugs on the floor. Books everywhere, and cigarette smoking.

LOREN: You would smoke during psychoanalysis?

TABOURET: He would smoke. I would cry. He was an extremely smart guy, and I would be slightly scared of him. But it was good because I needed to be impressed and take it seriously. And I think it did help me to become more free. But I stopped when I moved here. Obviously, painting has to do with therapy in a way because you let things arise. You're jumping into yourself, and you don't know what you're going to find. You have to have a stream of consciousness in a way. But the difference is you don't use words.

LOREN: I wanted to talk about the wildfires. I don't think people outside of L.A. quite understand how traumatic it's been for the city. Have the fires and their aftermath been reflected in your work at all?

TABOURET: I mean, traumatic is the word, because I think there was a sense of safety in certain neighborhoods that were densely populated, where we thought it would never come all the way, and it did. I think that shattered the way I would think of neighborhoods like Los Feliz, for instance, with Griffith Park just above us. And everyone living here was watching these apps and checking on everyone's home and being on high alert for weeks, so it was pretty intense. I think it definitely reinforced how important it is to have a home for me. What is the meaning of a home? What's lost when you lose the home? It's way more than real estate, obviously. And it's even harder to lose an art studio, where everything inside is irreplaceable. For example, I see myself as a researcher, and if I lose my research, it's as if my life had been pointless, nearly.

LOREN: You've lived in L.A. now for 10 years, and your practice is here, your life is here, your family's here. How does it feel now to do the most French thing imaginable, which is to go back and make stained glass windows for the Notre Dame?

TABOURET: It feels great. It's surreal, because I went back to apply for the competitions and Notre Dame was still being renovated and I just sat on a bench in front thinking about how just being in the situation of being able to present to a jury was amazing. I could just remember myself as a young 17-year-old, arriving in Paris. Seeing this building and being part of this history now seems incredible.

LOREN: I can imagine. I mean, it's the most famous church in the world.

TABOURET: Yeah, they say they have 15 million visitors a year. I think that's also extremely interesting because I've always looked to have my work outside of the art world. I love the art world, but also I love to have my work in different spaces. And this is the most interesting crowd I could dream of, because it's made up of people all over the world.

LOREN: There was some controversy in France about choosing you. How did that feel?

TABOURET: I don't think the controversy so far has much to do with me. It's mostly about the project itself. Some people are very vocally against it, and I think there's also a lot of other people who are very excited. I find negativity sometimes is louder. But I love the challenge, I love controversy. Well, I don't love controversy, but it brings forward an interesting debate and demonstrates how much people care about these subjects. It's kind of a public debate in France. It's interesting to see a whole country interested in our relationship to *patrimoine*, our relationship to history, our relationship to art and stained-glass. It's kind of a specialized subject that's taken over the public, and that's a very good sign.

LOREN: It seems inconceivable that a similar debate could happen in the US.

TABOURET: Yeah. This was striking for me, going back and forth between two cultures. I thought, "What would be the equivalent of such a public debate in America?" It's really a different culture. We could have a public debate about the halftime show of the Super Bowl or something. France obviously has a relationship to history that's very heavy, very serious, and very much part of the culture. It's not very French to move things around or to change things. And maybe that's one reason why I had to leave to keep changing. But also, I feel strong enough to go back and bring change.