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From Monet's Water Lilies to Notre-Dame's stained-glass windows, Claire Tabouret's sacred journey

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PROFILE | Many expected Daniel Buren or Philippe Parreno, but 43-year-old Tabouret was chosen to create the cathedral's new stained glass windows. This bold choice consecrates and challenges the resolve of a tenacious worker who was drawn to her artistic destiny at the age of four.

The door didn't close, rain dripped from the ceiling. A brazier served as a heater and the water she fetched from the café next door froze in a glass. Those who knew Claire Tabouret in the early 2010s recall a frigid studio in Pantin, on the outskirts of Paris. There, amid towering canvases of worried faces, the young woman with her calm voice and decisive brushstrokes would explain, in front of the worn-out sofa where visitors took their seat, why she needed to be there. And why they did too.

Laurent Dumas was one of those early collectors who frequented the sofa: "It all told the story of how invested and inhabited she was by her work," said the still enchanted president of the Emerige real estate group, which is planning a major cultural hub with a contemporary art center on the Ile Seguin in Boulogne-Billancourt, a wealthy Parisian suburb. "The first thing she did in the morning, before launching into these large formats, was a self-portrait. I saw it as a form of introspection, a way of marking the trace of her days."

At the time, Tabouret was not yet 30. Just over a decade later, it was this *mezzo voce*, this ethereal way of claiming one's place without demanding it, of affirming without proclaiming, of painting without imposing, that led the jury, gathered around Bernard Blistène, the former head of the Centre Pompidou, to entrust her with creating the six contemporary stained glass windows for the chapels along the south aisle of the nave of Notre-Dame de Paris. It's quite an honor to be part of a history that goes back a thousand years. And an immense responsibility to carry out this €4 million project, wanted by the government and clergy, but fiercely contested by heritage defenders who see the replacement of Viollet-le-Duc's 19th-century geometric stained glass as nothing short of blasphemy. What was meant to be an artistic endeavor has become a media-political storm.

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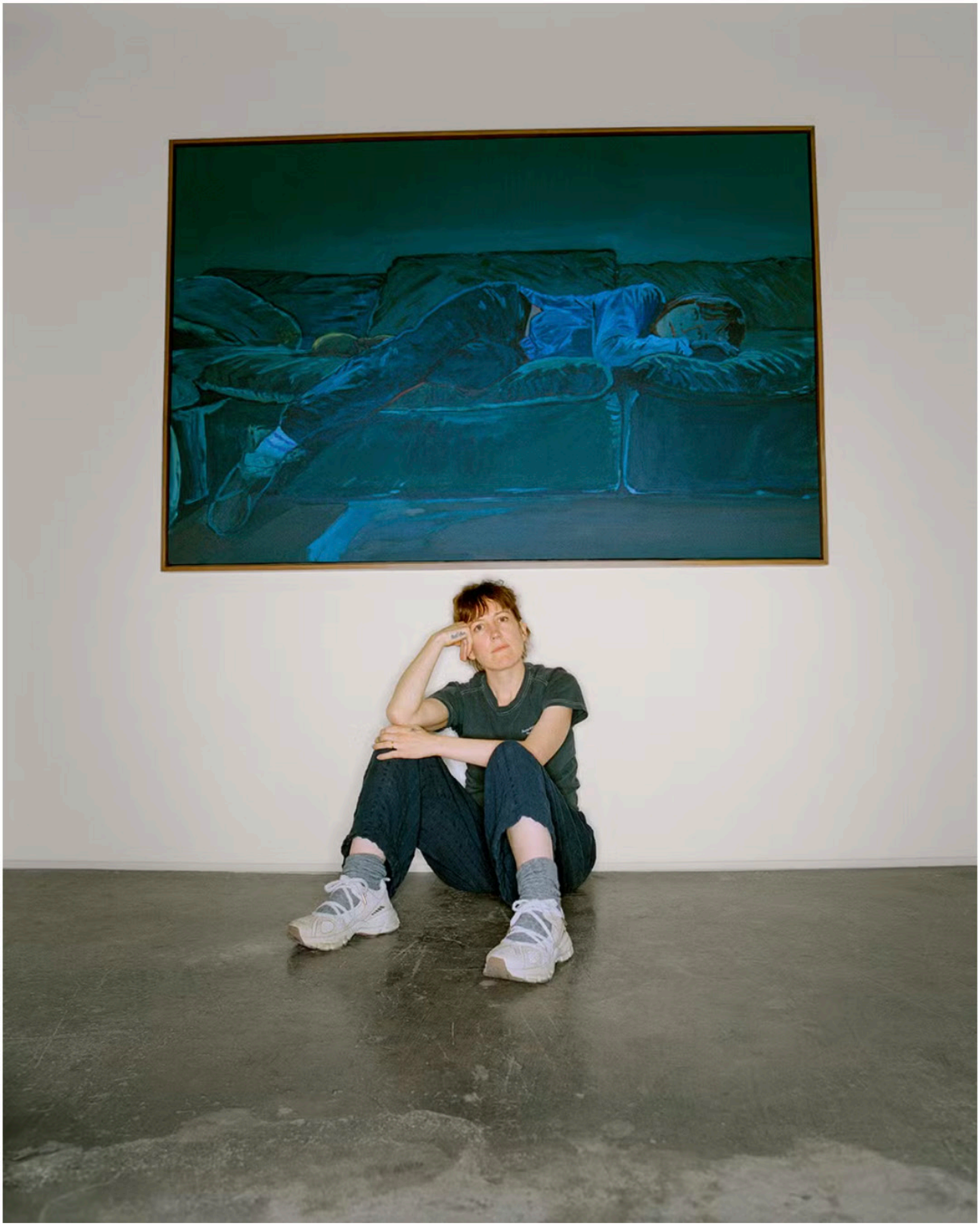
"My mother is English, my father French," said the young woman, not at all fazed by the situation. "Two close countries where making fun of the other is a national sport. Two social classes too [well off on the British side – with a grandmother

who ran an extraordinary garden – and communist and anticlerical on the French side]. So, since childhood, I've wanted to bring together, to say: 'Wait, I'll explain what the other side is like.' To find myself today in a project that's stirring up controversy and trying to bring people together, without arrogance or certainty, I say to myself that maybe this is my destiny. That this is why I'm an artist: because I can embrace doubt, human ambiguity, the fact of not knowing."

A controversy she considers excessive

On that day in February, Tabouret was sitting on the second floor of her home in the Hollywood Hills, where she has lived for the past 12 years. In the neighborhood of Los Feliz, where stars had their homes built between the wars, hers carries the old-fashioned charm of that era. She completely refurbished it with her partner, Nathan Thelen, a former musician with cabinet-making skills. He built the table where she placed the computer for our remote conversations. She painted the frescoes on the ceiling. During the latest wildfire that swept through Los Angeles in January, they left town with their two daughters, Mattea, three, and Liona, one, and stayed with friends in Santa Barbara. Their home was spared, as was her studio located in Pico-Union. But all that is now history: In the spring, the family is moving back to France.

"The idea of moving predates the Notre-Dame project," said Tabouret. "Nathan was fed up with the United States, and I realized that I wanted my daughters to be able to share a culture with me. It would terrify me to have little American girls who didn't understand me, to be the slightly strange mom." We smiled as we listened to the soothing voice of this unpretentious speaker. You have to be a little strange, with one foot on each side of the ocean and a hefty dose of self-confidence, to take on the challenge of these much-contested stained-glass windows.



The artist in front of her painting "Self-Portrait on the Couch at Night," exhibited at the Night Gallery, Los Angeles, February 14, 2025. KALEB MARSHALL FOR M LE MAGAZINE DU MONDE

Claire Tabouret, in her Los Angeles studio, February 14, 2025. KALEB MARSHALL FOR M LE MAGAZINE DU MONDE

"I must confess that my first reaction, even before the controversy began, was to say to myself, 'It's not French to do that.' In the US, it would seem normal to trust a living artist in this way, to march with the zeitgeist. In fact, when I talk about it here, nobody's surprised. But in France, this kind of impulsive, daring approach is surprising. It's real risk-taking. I liked that. Especially as I was about to return to

France. I said to myself: 'This is fantastic, we need this in our country, to get things moving like this.'"

Among the eight artists in the running were Daniel Buren – already entrusted by the presidential couple with the glass roof of the Elysée winter garden – and Philippe Parreno, the other favorite. Jean-Michel Alberola and Gérard Traquandi, both experienced in stained-glass windows, were also mentioned, as was Yan Pei-Ming with his large-scale figurative projects. Tabouret was chosen.

Read more 'Notre-Dame's stained-glass window dispute is not a battle between the ancient and the modern'

Her name, associated with the Atelier Simon-Marq in Reims for the creation of the stained glass, "was the one that came up most often in our discussions," said a member of the jury, whose first choice was not her. Some of the 20 or so representatives from the clergy, government and heritage protection groups had initially hesitated to sit on this commission fearing the decision might be influenced from above. But in the end, they admitted, almost with surprise, "there was no outside pressure."

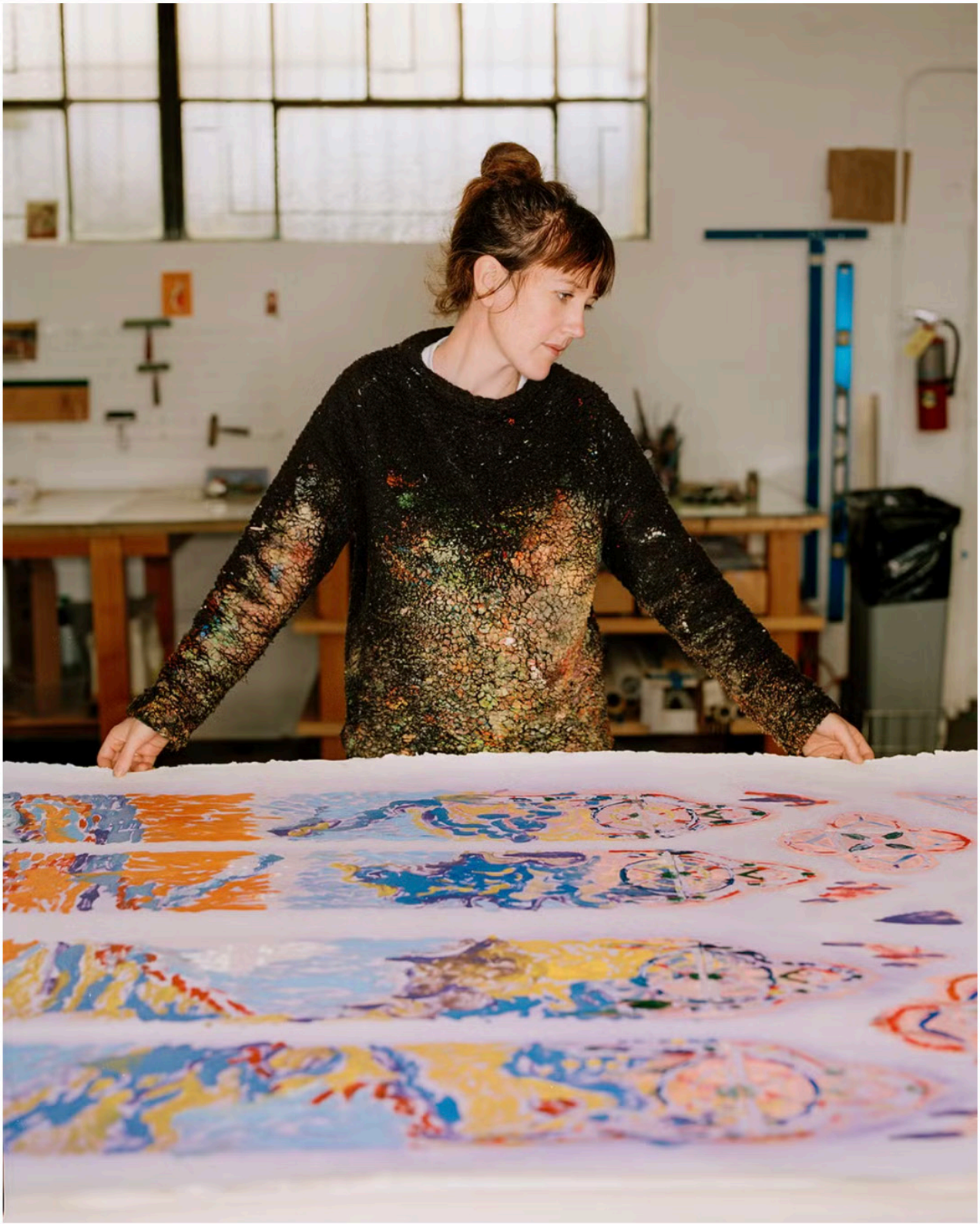
"I wondered about the merits of my candidacy," Tabouret recalled. "There was starting to be some controversy. That's when my mind was drawn to this desire to bring people together. When you're at Notre-Dame, facing the seven bays in question, and you see the Tree of Jesse in the second bay [which, splendidly, will remain as it is] and the geometric motifs in the others, it's clear that the argument of Viollet-le-Duc's vision doesn't hold water, that it wasn't his choice, but rather a decision by default – a question of budget? It's intellectually dishonest for people to criticize the project when they know that, and then to use their words to fuel futile barroom discussions."

Nan Goldin, a decisive encounter

Tabouret's story is one of a determined little girl who let nothing stand in her way. Born in 1981, she grew up in a village on the outskirts of Montpellier, where her parents were music teachers. Her father taught musical analysis at a conservatory; her mother gave piano lessons at home. Tabouret, by her own admission, said she sang terribly and was "very bored" at school. Legend has it that, at the age of four, while on vacation in Paris, she discovered Claude Monet's *Water Lilies* at the Orangerie. She had an epiphany. She'll often tell anyone who

will listen that she had trouble grasping that it was a painting, she just wanted to get inside. She smiled.

"When you recount a memory 3,500 times, it's hard to remember what it's really like. Where I can feel something authentic, on the other hand, is that it still happens to me, when I go to a museum and find myself in front of a work I love – by Matisse, Manet, Courbet – to feel that same sensation that takes over my body and makes me want to run and paint in the studio. It's somewhere between ecstasy and pain. It's a physical thing that I felt for the first time with *Water Lilies*. After that, you spend your life trying to recreate your first emotions, don't you think?" She reflected. "Later, there was something else that began to interest me in the act of painting: narrative. I fell into a search that became absolutely addictive for me."



Claire Tabouret in front of preparatory drawings for the future contemporary stained-glass windows of Notre-Dame de Paris, Los Angeles, February 14, 2025. KALEB MARSHALL FOR M LE MAGAZINE DU MONDE

With her arts-focused high school diploma in hand, she headed for Paris: "My dream was the Beaux-Arts. But I was a bit out of touch because I wanted to paint landscapes. I was going to paint outside with my little easel. Very 19th century. I didn't really know contemporary art, I didn't have the codes. I was rejected. It was

a big blow. I'd told everyone I was moving to the big city. I didn't expect anything to go wrong with what I had planned for myself. But it made me want revenge."

The following year, she was accepted. Even so, she felt out of place, provincial. "I didn't enjoy my studies very much," she said. "It was hard for me to relate. Other people were interested in things I didn't necessarily understand. That's a constant in my life, always putting myself in the wrong place, where I have to convince and reconcile."

One evening, at a party in Paris, as a small 8mm film of the student's work was being shown – its textured images evoking a painting – the American photographer Nan Goldin walked in. "Who did this? Who did this?" shouted the photographer, dazzled. "I felt recognized, seen, it gave me incredible strength," said Tabouret. Later, Goldin would go on to support her application to Cooper Union, the prestigious New York art school she would attend for a year. "It's true that, in my life, there were a lot of helping hands like that, which opened doors for me. For a long time, I struggled with the idea that I was lucky. I used to say: 'You have to earn it, you have to work for it, blah-blah-blah...' The truth is, I've been lucky. You just have to know how to seize it and be adventurous."

An artist on the move

Tabouret has an older brother, Francis, a writer, with whom she is very close. They are barely 18 months apart. They share a taste for travel, even the need to move, and are similarly discreet about their childhood. "I don't remember much about it," he said. "And perhaps the memories are only there to act as a screen. But don't imagine anything terrible. Except that feeling of not having a base camp. If someone asks me where I'm from, I don't have an answer," he said, citing a book by Raymond Depardon, *Errance* ("Wandering"). In the book, wandering, he recalled, is defined as "the search for an acceptable place."

Francis has written a novel – *Traversée* ("Crossing") – inspired by his life. After a long career in equestrian shows – with Zingaro and the Baro d'evel company – he now works as a horse transporter, accompanying the animals by truck, plane and boat, where he finds both material for his writing and a source of income. "I feel more at home in nomadism than in sedentarism," said this alter ego brother,

caught on the fly at his home in the Ariège department of southwestern France, caught between a trip to Chicago and a transport to Monaco.

What about Claire? Is painting her only home – the one that both shelters and inhabits her? In their twenties, both siblings were fascinated by the books of German writer W. G. Sebald, notably *Austerlitz*, "the story of a man who doesn't know where he comes from and who is searching," said Francis.

In Paris, to survive and finance her painting when she left school, the young woman took on a series of jobs: supermarket cashier, waitress, live model. "I don't have a problem with nudity, and there I didn't need to talk, I could stay in my bubble, with the creative side of finding poses by quoting painters and making up my own little stories. Waiting tables in bars, on the other hand, watching other people partying, taught me certain codes, to be a little less complex or weird."

Claire Tabouret, in her Los Angeles studio, February 14, 2025. KALEB MARSHALL FOR M LE MAGAZINE DU MONDE

New artists have a tool for developing their work: the artist residency. At the time, Claire Tabouret was applying everywhere. "Twenty-seven rejections!" She repeated the number: "I kept the letters: I found energy in them." Then came a proposal from the association Shakers Lieux d'Effervescence, in Montluçon, central France. She was given a studio in a former school, a small grant to support

herself for six months and accommodation in social housing surrounded by fields. Far from the city center, with no bus, the building was home to immigrants awaiting regularization. She lived on the 17th floor of the tower.

"An island. So I painted a lot of boats, ghostly seascapes, when it's hard to do anything further from the sea." This residency led to her first exhibition. A brief mention in a magazine and a gallery owner, Isabelle Gounod, who spotted her later, and here she was, exhibiting for the first time in Paris. "I didn't sell anything, all the paintings went back to the studio," she said. "The second exhibition, I sold two." From landscapes, she moved on to portraits, first of migrants, painted from the back, after a residency in Marseille and multiple boat crossings to Algiers. Then she moved onto children and children's faces. They were impressive.

François Pinault gas pedal

And so, in 2013, Tabouret took the initiative. This time, she sent an invitation directly to the office of François Pinault, whose relentless activity as a collector is well known. The billionaire's personal assistant, Anne-Pascale Celier, opened the mail and was seduced by the cardboard box, which she placed at the top of the pile. The boss then sent Celier to the gallery, even before the opening, accompanied by his artistic director, Caroline Bourgeois – now curator of the Bourse de Commerce, which houses the Pinault collection. The two women arrived to find the young painter perched atop a ladder, hanging her own four-meter-long canvases – so large she had to push back the walls just to fit them in.

In Claire Tabouret's Los Angeles studio, February 14, 2025. KALEB MARSHALL FOR M LE MAGAZINE DU MONDE

"I was fully aware that this was a rendezvous with my destiny," said the artist. "I had so much to say, everything I'd stored up since I was four years old. An inner fire. At the time, I was quite like that. The next day, they came back with François Pinault himself. He bought most of the exhibition, and we had a long talk. It was a beautiful moment, honestly, a beautiful meeting." The effect was resounding and

immediate. Not only did the patron of the arts make no half-measure acquisitions, he also invited the artist to create a work for Palazzo Grassi, one of his two Venetian museums. "What impressed me about her was this kind of calm behind the fury," said a person close to the billionaire. "Usually, people who meet François Pinault are impressed by this kind of way he has of looking through you... Not her."

From her home in Los Angeles, Tabouret listened attentively, as if searching deep inside herself for a glimpse of the truth: "In these childhood paintings, I was still sorting out a lot of things. There's a restrained anger, a muted presence, a spirit of revenge." For a long time, one of these works – *La Classe* – sat behind the Dumas' desk: "This force motivated me," he said. "But it tended to fill my interlocutors with dread." In the end, he took it down.

"The question of destiny interested me then," said the painter: "What makes some people stay in their place when others take unexpected trajectories? How do we take our place, how do we take the place of others? How do we inhabit our bodies? Questions that resonated with me at the time, less so today."

We pointed out the tattoo on her hand, wondering what it represented. "Oh, I have several. Personal stories. I don't want to put words to them. They'll always sound either too big or too small; either too dramatic or too off. But the closer you look at my work, the more you can access it in a way that suits me. There's a precision to painting that I can't find anywhere else. That's what it's always been there for: to connect, to communicate, to love, to be loved."

But also: to distance herself, to isolate herself? To conquer? Six months after her meeting with Pinault, Tabouret moved to Los Angeles. Was this a case of breaking away or crossing over? "To go where I wasn't wanted," she said. "Where they weren't looking for me, where I had to convince them all over again. It's not that I'd convinced everyone in France, but I told myself: 'This is going to go very fast.'"

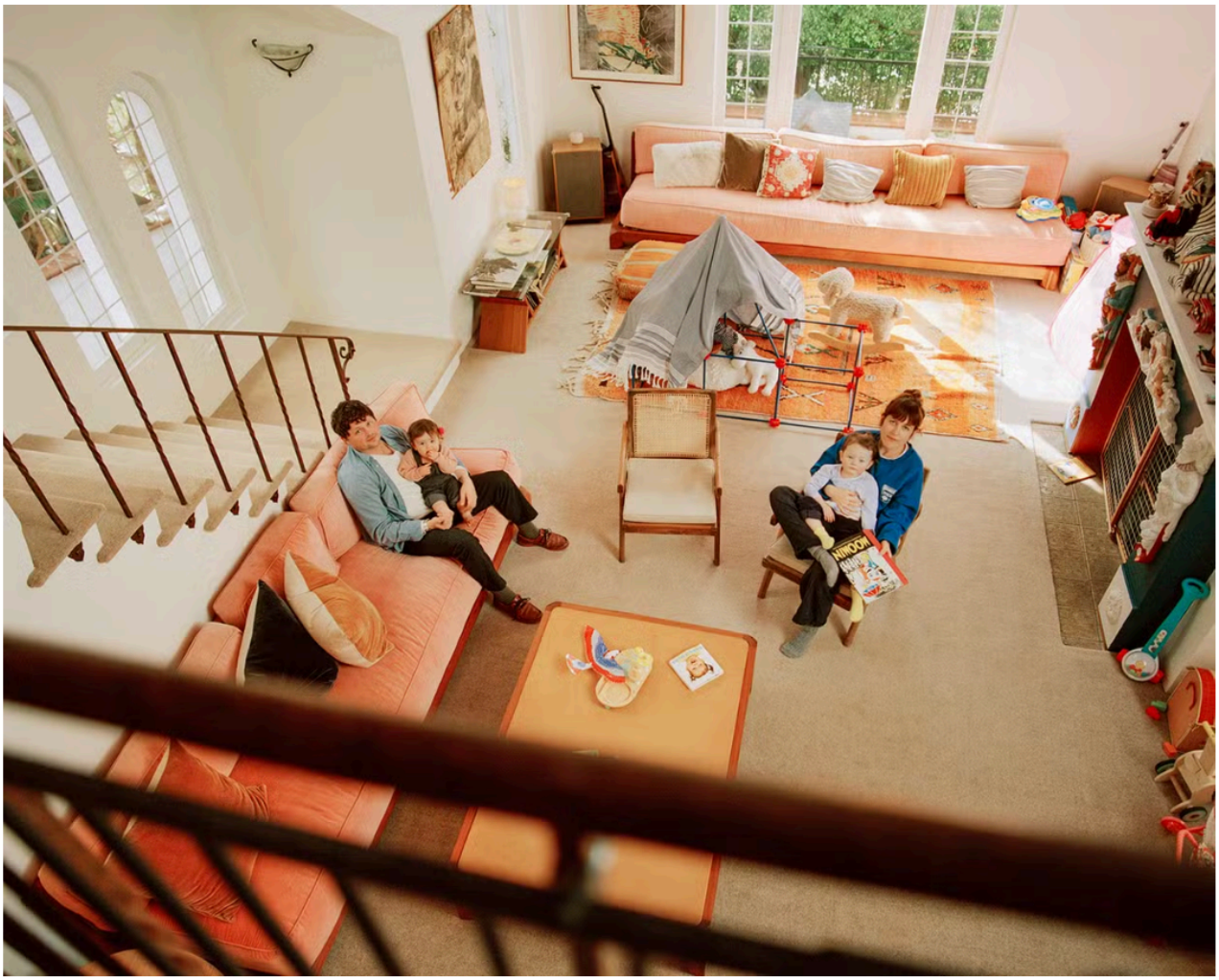
A very welcoming desert

Behind the Folies-Bergère theater in Paris, in a romantic little courtyard, the Atelier Caraco makes costumes for stage, film and haute couture. It's a three-level

hive of diligent, silent bees. This is where Tabouret once posed nude for budding artists. It's also where she once lived, on the top floor.

The owner, Claudine Lachaud, 30 years her senior, has always been a shoulder to cry on: "How can I put it? Claire is a discreet, attentive friend. Someone who doesn't weigh you down." To illustrate the young woman's pugnacity, the dressmaker recounted how she once asked her for the keys to her "ruin" in the open country of the Loiret region in north-central France, and how she saw her set off with her market cart as her only vehicle for carrying equipment and food. Completely isolated for three weeks, she painted her first large canvases there.

Some are suspicious of the artist's meteoric rise – in 2021, one of her paintings, *The Last Day*, fetched €863,000 at auction – or criticize the imperious way in which she has changed gallery owners to keep climbing higher. The couturier, for her part, simply notes that "the Parisian milieu is not kind to success. But Claire knew very early on how to surround herself, to distance herself from people who could be toxic for her as well as those who didn't suit her. She has a lot to do with the alignment of the planets around her. And on this continuous upward slope, she has always known how to remain herself."



Claire Tabouret at home in Los Angeles with her partner, Nathan Thelen, and their children. KALEB MARSHALL FOR M LE MAGAZINE DU MONDE

When she left for Los Angeles, Pinault gave her a few contacts. But the young woman enjoyed losing herself in the immense city. "In the beginning, everything was new and exciting. I was starting from scratch in a megalopolis where you can be very alone at the same time, which I liked. I said to myself: never too much solitude. And I found more and more." She sought solitude to the point of buying herself a cabin in the desert, near Joshua Tree – accessible only by a 40-minute dirt road, surrounded by rattlesnakes, scorching in summer, freezing in winter. When Pinault visited, he collapsed into the worn-out armchair by the door, just as he once did on the sofa in Pantin.

"It was a cabin that had belonged to a couple of gold diggers. They died in terrible poverty," she said. "I didn't find any gold there, but I did find the man of my life." Thelen owns a cabin on the other side of the mountain. There's nothing between their two homes. On the scale of the desert, they're neighbors. Sixteen kilometers as the crow flies. Except that by car, they have to go around the mountain. A

mutual friend introduced them. "I'd reached the end of my solitude. All we kept was Nathan's cabin. Since we've had the kids, we don't even go there much anymore. But all that has changed the way I paint, the way I move, the way I think, the way I allow myself to do things."

A classic and contemporary work

Tabouret has never worked with stained glass. Nor has she ever followed specifications. For Notre-Dame de Paris, the guidelines are clear: the stained-glass windows must be figurative, their meaning accessible without an accompanying text, and they must diffuse a white light that balances the colors in a neutral, non-dominant way. "Since *Water Lilies*, I've often said how much paintings evolve and change for me. If you go to the museum regularly to see a painting you love, you rediscover it every time. For me, who dreams of a living painting that moves like the surface of water, stained glass is the ideal medium. Each visit will be a new vision, the light dancing with the weather and the clouds in the sky."

Of the 70 sketches Tabouret presented to the jury, she agreed to publicly unveil just one: a group of figures with their backs to the light. Her style is immediately recognizable. And perhaps herself? It worries her that people are writing about her. She knows that stepping out of the shadows is an inevitable part of the process. Yet she hasn't resolved the paradox of the artistic act: To paint happily, must one paint in secrecy?

Claire Tabouret, at home in Los Angeles, February 14, 2025. KALEB MARSHALL FOR M LE MAGAZINE DU MONDE

And yet, after the ghostly landscapes of her early years, after the shadows of migrants, the angry faces of children and flooded houses, we discover something calmer in the artist. Her exhibitions are multiplying – currently in Los Angeles, this summer at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rennes, next winter at the Grand Palais in Paris. At the end of 2023, eight months pregnant, she was invited to

create a work for the Vatican pavilion at the Venice Biennale, which was about to take over the Giudecca women's prison. It was a memorable experience. She asked the inmates to send her photos of their children, and created portraits of them for the exhibition.

Little Liona was just born when Tabouret began painting again, between feedings, around the clock, with the child sleeping in the studio. "I did this project in a kind of birth fog," she said. "Becoming a mother for the second time, this project seemed like a stroke of fate. I said to myself: 'This is crazy, someone's reaching out to me, giving me what I need, I couldn't have painted anything else.' It was the first time I'd felt this question of giving, of putting oneself at the service of something. All of a sudden, painting took on a special importance." For the occasion, Tabouret was invited to the Vatican, and her daughters were baptized at the Holy See. Not her. "But maybe later on?" she said, despite repeating that she comes from a reputedly anticlerical family. "Let's just say I believe in art. I've often had the feeling that art and God might be talking about the same thing."

There's a relationship that goes beyond the carnal between Tabouret and her painting. The word "destiny" often comes to mind. It brings to mind the little girl who, at the age of four, plunged into Monet's *Water Lilies* like Alice going through the looking glass. "I've often been told," she said, "how many references from classical art are to be found in my compositions. They happen almost in spite of myself. It gives them a kind of timelessness. It's a bit like Buren's columns, with which you could find many similarities: the same context of political tension at the time, the petitions, the protests, the opposition of the heritage commission which the government overruled... And then this extremely classical side. With Buren, we're dealing with antique columns and ruins. The same goes for Ieoh Ming Pei's pyramid in the Louvre. That's the intelligence of these projects: to combine the classicism of the form with great contemporaneity. We can see how, now that the columns are here, people are seizing on them, how they've become a landmark and how much joy they bring."

From the other side of the computer screen, we plunged into the artist's sure, steady gaze. From her home, spared from the flames, Tabouret struck the same humble, cheerful note: "Me, I find it beautiful."

Laurent Carpentier