

BACK TO THE ESSENTIAL: ABOUT BEING THE FUTURE
INTERVIEW BY SINA BRAETZ

Meeting Nicolas Lefebvre feels like diving deep into a world full of beauty. It is almost overwhelming to be introduced for the first time to the beauty of the artist himself, his Haussmann-style apartment in Paris's fourth arrondissement facing the Seine displaying his art pieces in a huge, open, sunlight-flooded living room and – above all, his incredible sculptural assemblages that combine various materials, cultures, histories and soulful energies. There is not even much knowledge needed to feel the stories Lefebvre's art pieces talk about, maybe just some sensibility and imagination. The 40-year-old Frenchman, born in the western Paris suburb Boulogne-Billancourt, grew up with a deep interest in culture and art, especially as his grandfather was an art collector. He was introduced to the Surrealist worlds of Breton and Miró at a young age, but what really struck him most was the magic of Primitive Art. After studying art history at the IESA and the Ecole du Louvre, he started collaborating with gallery owner Jacques Lacoste. Upon gaining his trust very quickly, he went on a mission to Peru to find furniture by French decorator Jean Royère. Collaborations with other art dealers followed, including Axel Vervoordt. Lefebvre planned to become an art dealer himself until things unfolded differently when his mother died when he was only 25 years old. An urge to create came over him and this is when it all started. In 2008, he opened up his first art gallery. Today, the multidisciplinary artist follows his experimental curiosity. In every work, he integrates his deep love and fascination for femininity and the mysterious power of the sea. I meet him on a Wednesday afternoon in his apartment in Paris with some coffee, cigarettes and music. A stimulating conversation about mother goddess, consumerism, and why there is so much hope in young generations.

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Objets Morts (installation view), Tristan Hoare Gallery, London, 2022. Photo: Ben Westoby



Sina Braetz

You grew up with a grandfather who was an art collector, so you were always surrounded by art and objects. Is there one object in particular that really left an impression on you?

Nicolas Lefebvre

When I was young, I attended many auction sales, so I saw a lot of objects from different periods. I always felt very connected to Primitive Art. One day, I saw this doll of fertility with a red pearl and lots of wood - I think it was the first object I collected, I was like 14 years old. This was the starting point, it all came very natural to me. Now, twenty years later, I still do the same thing and it feels almost like a puzzle. I need to create the way I always used to, even if sometimes, I want to do other things, it always brings me back to it. It is just an automatic thing, I don't even have to think about it.

SB

What is it that makes an object interesting to you, that much that you want to work and create a new object with it?

NL

Sometimes, there is some beautiful object but I don't feel the energy. The first part of my job is to find interesting objects, then I might leave them for a long time in my studio. One day, I find another object that just connects, this can also happen years after I found the first object. Usually, when I clean and organize my objects, the connection may happen.

SB

Where and how do you find the individual objects?

NL

My first passion was to be an antique dealer - I loved it. I would go everywhere in Europe, to Morocco, Tunisia, to auction sales and antique galleries, but also to beaches and forests. I then started to mix various objects, combining precious antiques with a piece of nothing, like wood or coral. Like this, I created a mix of creatures, and through the combination of these antique pieces and random elements I would find at the beach or on the streets, the magic happened. Sometimes, a piece of plastic had stayed in the ocean for like 20 years and changed its color or surface - this is so beautiful and really unique, really like witnessing the travel of an element. This is what makes my art.

SB

When it comes to antique objects, do you sense energies or even old souls?

NL

Yes, each time. Each object has a piece of soul and it holds a reminder of older civilizations. It literally speaks; you can feel its past. In general, I love to work with old pieces that human hands haven't touched for a long time - it is really emotional. When you buy a new piece of wood from a shop, for example, you feel no emotion at all, it is clinical, like most of the world nowadays is. Not in Africa or India or in the Southern Hemisphere, where they don't replace old things with new ones as much; for me, it is way more beautiful over there. You could create a stunning vase out of an old petrol container, for example, and it is magic. Here, everything is brand new but has no soul.

SB

Is there one specific country or time that you feel most connected to when it comes to art?

NL

I am very passionate about archeology and I love Egypt, it is one of my biggest sources of inspiration [pointing to one of his art pieces]: This cross with a circle you can find in all of my sculptures, it is the key of life [Ankh]. It symbolizes fertility, mother goodness,

it is the origin of everything and really speaks to me - and by origin, I really mean the beginning, before our creation of God.

SB

Did you travel to Egypt a lot?

NL

Not a lot, but I dream about it. I am working with this inspiration since over 20 years so I think it is a connection from another life.

SB

How did this connection develop? Was there a certain moment?

NL

Yes, when my mother died. I thought about this symbol a lot.

SB

This is also when you started creating art. Was the process of creating objects a way to communicate with her?

NL

Yes, it helped me a lot because it was a connection with the invisible, just as the connection with my mother was as well. I also think that if you want to create something, you have to be personal, you cannot speak to everybody. Rainer Maria Rilke once said, "A work of art is good when it has sprung from necessity." So, after this internal necessity, you can share it with the world and they can understand. But, in general, it is really naive and simple, you know. We all love the most simple things, but we always try to complicate it. This is when it does not come from the heart anymore and loses its beauty. To me, everything is beautiful, you just have to take a lot of layers away. Just like Buddha took away all these layers until you could see the gold.

SB

So true. The beauty lies in the pureness and this actually leads to our issue's theme, minimalism. What does minimalism mean to you, in your art, or in art in general?

NL

I find it in the essential and the radical that art suggests. It is easy to put a lot of things together, but it is not easy to just focus on a few. That, is art itself.

SB

In the past years, we experienced that the way we live does not work anymore. We have to find new ways. How can art or culture help us with this?

NL

There is the philosophy of sobriety and the pursuit of happiness. We should not worry too much. I, for example, I used to worry a lot, about gas, about flights, etc. A lot of things are actually logical, we just have to listen to what is around us and be minimal about that. We all know, for example, that eating too much meat is not good and this just makes a lot of sense. We cannot just walk through this world with our eyes closed. We have to focus on the essential again.

SB

Absolutely, and it is not easy, especially when the system tells you something else.

NL

Yes, it is very important now for the young generation to try to find a good balance between this old capitalism system and the new world. We have to connect with the past and the ancestral traditions. **The 20th century was really good for evolution, but what it did to the planet with its ideas about consumerism destroyed the planet in such a short time. We have to learn how to live like we did before.** Now, everything is too fast; the speed, but also the internet, separated us too much.

SB

Do you feel a responsibility as an artist to push that conversation?

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NL Yeah, for sure. It is our job as an artist to work with the message of oneness and to remind people that we are all connected, just like Bob Marley said: It is one earth and we are all one. There are many ways to show this. But, you know, right now, I don't speak too much. I used to work a lot on foundations and organizations because I felt my work was speaking to all these topics. But, at this moment, I feel I should not speak too much, a lot has not been interpreted well. It is a hard moment, I think, a lot of things happened that we did not control, so now, we have to prepare the future. We are the future. We are the only way to survive this civilization. It is so important now to live minimal and to accept the change. We are standing at the edge, at the maximum of consumerism and we have to speak about this.

SB Why don't you feel like speaking currently? What is holding you back?
NL: People are not open to listening. For the moment, they listen to Instagram and LVMH. But, they will change.

SB You have hope in the young generation?
NL: Oh, yes. I think the young generation, like the 14 - 18-year-olds, they are great. They are on the streets, they speak about ecology, they want a better future. But they need to be the right time so we just have to surrender the present now.

SB How old is your daughter now?
NL: She's 13.

SB So you feel the urge for change in her as well?
NL: Yes. They discuss so many things and create new ideas about identity. All conversations are way more open now than before. The way parents and their children think is completely different. You can feel the urge within the young generation to connect again with the tradition, with real things and not only digital and virtual realities. We can all see that there are different ways. Today, you can study marketing for five years, but once you finish, you cannot find work. The new possibilities will come with time, just like the older generations open up the younger ones for new ways. So, the younger ones will always be wiser since they receive the experiences and wisdom from the ones before them. But, of course, we always also have opposite movements, thinking of Obama being replaced by Trump. We cannot understand everything.

Democracy and justice are right next to the radical extreme and this creates fear.
SB For sure, and it also shows again that control is an illusion. We can only act to a certain extent. One of your artworks is called "Don't Forget Me, Mama Africa." Can you tell me a little bit about this one?

NL It was a big totem, up to five meters, that I created for FIAC. I put sand on the floor and cowries, thousands of them, from Africa. The object representing Mama Africa again is mother goddess - we are all from Africa, for me, the same idea as Virgin Mary and Isis in Egypt. It is all totally universal. So, for this art piece, I gave out cowries to people and asked them to make a wish for the planet. In total, it was 10,000 cowries so 10,000 wishes for the planet and humanity. You cannot imagine the big energy there was at this place. Afterwards, I kept all the cowries in a box, I have to do something with that now. The totem was actually a mix of a big tambour, a 2.5m

music instrument from Nepal, from the Himalayas, a piece of agriculture (earth and fiber), a piece of a window from a 17th century castle, and a piece of a tent from the African desert in Mali. So it was a mix of India, Africa and French agriculture - such a beautiful combination. I want to do more of this.

SB It is an amazing conversation opener as well.
NL Yes, with children but also elderly people, everybody was so grateful for it. I think this is also art, to give and share something with everyone. Another time, I did a big totem for International Women's Day and asked women passing by on the street to put plates with flower petals on the river. I love to do things like that, maybe I have to do a bigger one, like for the whole world.

SB That sounds amazing. What inspires you most about Africa?
NL It is minimal. [laughs] There we go again. A lot of Primitive African art was also a huge source of inspiration for Picasso. It's the origin, the beginning and the source, it is a magic place, they protect a magic philosophy. And we did terrible things to this magic. Sadly, these terrible things are still happening. There is too much terror and corruption. Sometimes, it is difficult to be ok with where we live and what we do. This is why I don't speak so much - I don't agree with a lot of things, rather, I try to put it into my work.

SB And this speaks a lot already, especially for someone who is willing to listen. I constantly have to stare at these pink feathers on your art piece over there, where did they come from?
NL From an old flamingo from the thirties. Very feminine, I really need this femininity in my work and in my life. You see - there are a lot of circles surrounding them, a very feminine, sweet and peaceful element. I think this world is way too square. Also, I don't agree with these ideas of traditional masculinity and power, I see myself more as a feminist. My work speaks a lot about this, about Africa and women. We have to find a good balance, also between the feminine and masculine.

SB Yin and Yang.
NL Exactly.
SB Now I am looking at this mushroom over there.
NL Oh, yes. I work a lot about the mother, but also the sea - in French, it sounds the same.

SB True. A lot of the colors you use are also a magic mirror of the sea and nature.
NL Yes, all the objects in my studio are from the same color palettes, mostly from the sea and the sand - very sweet colors.

SB Sweet and pure.
NL Yes, I like when you see that colors have been touched by time, but are timeless as well. I don't like modern colors so much.

SB Everything feels very timeless about your art.
NL Yes, because I mix so many objects from different time periods.

SB And the way I connect and glue them is special, too, I don't want you to see it because otherwise, it would not look natural anymore. It confuses the collectors a lot. [laughs]

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Objets Mortés (Installation View), Tristan Hoare Gallery, London, 2022 | Photo: Ben Westoby



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Foto: Cecilia Bertolotti

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Foto: Cécile Bortolotti







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