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An honest performance

ROBERT JANITZ and ZOË LESCAZE
go for a walk in Central Park

Photography by TIM SCHUTSKY

ROBERT JANITZ is a German-born artist whose paintings capture the balance between exposure and obfuscation, the private and the known. He met writer ZOË LESCAZE at the West 67th Street entrance to Central Park on a bright fall day. When ZOË arrived, ROBERT was sitting on a bench reading about the vice-presidential debate (which had taken place the night before) in the Madrid newspaper El País, to practice his Spanish. He was about to leave New York, where he had lived since 2009, for Mexico City, where he spent most of 2020. They went for a walk in the park.

ROBERT JANITZ

What I find most interesting about this way of doing an interview is the pacing – you cannot walk too fast.

ZOË LESCAZE

[Laughs] Are you telling me I walk too fast?

ROBERT JANITZ

No, probably I tend to walk fast.

ZOË LESCAZE

Impossible. I'm a born New Yorker. We charge around getting from point A to point B with our heads down. You won't scandalize me.

They meander toward Sheep's Meadow, which is one of ROBERT's favorite places in the park.

ZOË LESCAZE

So you're leaving for Mexico City in a few days.

ROBERT JANITZ

On Sunday, yeah. I spend most of the year in Mexico. I discovered it a couple of years ago when I went to visit a friend who lives there.

ZOË LESCAZE

Where were you staying, Roma?

ROBERT JANITZ

I just got the cheapest hotel on Google and it was called Manolo Uno. It's in Centro. It's probably a brothel.

ZOË LESCAZE

[laughs] Hourly rates?

ROBERT JANITZ

Almost. No, I think the room was like \$19, but it had this enormous double bed – nothing more than that and elaborate moldings with lots of mirrors.

ZOË LESCAZE

Just the essentials.



*Manolo Uno.
Via TripAdvisor.*

ROBERT JANITZ

I was like okay, I get it.

ZOË LESCAZE

They must've given you funny looks coming in and out alone. So this was just a short visit?

ROBERT JANITZ

Right. Then I went back a couple of times – a week, two weeks – just to explore a little and found a kind of inspiration walking around. I dropped hints to friends, “If you hear of anything, let me know.” And then in December I got a call: “We found this great building, we could share this huge place with a patio.” So I've had that place since December and now I've actually moved somewhere else.

ZOË LESCAZE

What attracted you to Mexico City when you first arrived?

ROBERT JANITZ

I mean, I'm European. I grew up in Germany, I lived in Paris. Places that have old buildings, you know? And then I came to the U.S. and it was fascinating. New York seems new to a European. L.A. is basically from 50 years ago.

ZOË LESCAZE

It's so flimsy compared to the East Coast and the East Coast is, of course, nothing compared to Europe. Especially a city like Rome or something.

ROBERT JANITZ

Exactly. Mexico City also has a long history. I find it refreshing. I also thought maybe because I was in Paris for about 10 years and now I've been in New York for 10 years, that it would be interesting to find another culture. It feels like a Faustian thing – I have to move on to avoid the devil. So lately, wherever I've gone, I've thought, “Oh maybe here.”

ZOË LESCAZE

You've been shopping for cities.

ROBERT JANITZ

I was in Hong Kong and I was like, “Oh great maybe Hong Kong!” Then I was in Japan, in Tokyo, and I thought, “Wow, amazing, the future! I want to live in the future.”

ZOË LESCAZE

But now you'll be living in the past.

ROBERT JANITZ

Exactly.

ZOË LESCAZE

You once compared French culture to a corset. I was wondering, if American culture were an article of clothing, which garment would it be?

ROBERT JANITZ

Sneakers.

ZOË LESCAZE

Okay, so France is a corset, America is sneakers, what about Mexico?

ROBERT JANITZ

I think immediately of a tight top, like a t-shirt with an odd décolleté.

ZOË LESCAZE

Were you involved with fashion much in Paris?

ROBERT JANITZ

In Paris I was working for Maison Margiela but not as a clothing designer. I didn't have much money, so one of my side gigs was making food for the showroom seasons. There are four of them and each one is like 10 days. There was money but we also got paid in clothing.

ZOË LESCAZE

You got paid in clothing? We're having the next interview in your closet. Do you have a favorite piece from those days you still wear all the time?

ROBERT JANITZ

He did a really cool AIDS T-shirt and I have one of those. I mean all this old stuff, the original Margiela. I have a pair of pants that kind of fell apart but I still like them. They fall really well when you walk – it's a flowy fabric, dark blue with a little shiny quality to it. It looks very nice.



Charity AIDS
T-shirt. Maison
Margiela, Paris.

ZOË LESCAZE

It sounds like you're describing one of your paintings. How has your work been lately? Is it hard to be in the studio with this imminent departure looming over you or are you still able to get into a work mode? I was going to ask you how a sense of place contributes to or shapes your way of working.

ROBERT JANITZ

The work did recently change. It was very colorful for two or three years and now during this past month in New York, the shapes in the canvas are monochrome gray-purple. Very different – maybe because Mexico is so saturated with color. But it's not really explicable. You conceptualize your work, you analyze your work, you strategize your work. But I kind of find that sometimes an idea just steps out of the subway and surprise, "This is actually something I thought of years ago and it wasn't really present, but here it is."

ZOË LESCAZE

It's funny to think it's been traveling with you this whole time. It was just in another car. You know, there are those times when you're waiting on a platform in a daze, and then the train pulls up and the doors open and you look up and there's a friend of yours, framed right there. And if he had gotten out a couple cars down, you never would have seen each other. Every time that happens it makes me wonder whether all the other times I'm on the subway, there's someone I know somewhere else on that train. It always seems like such a miracle when you encounter someone, but maybe people are there more often than we think and thoughts are the same way.

ROBERT JANITZ

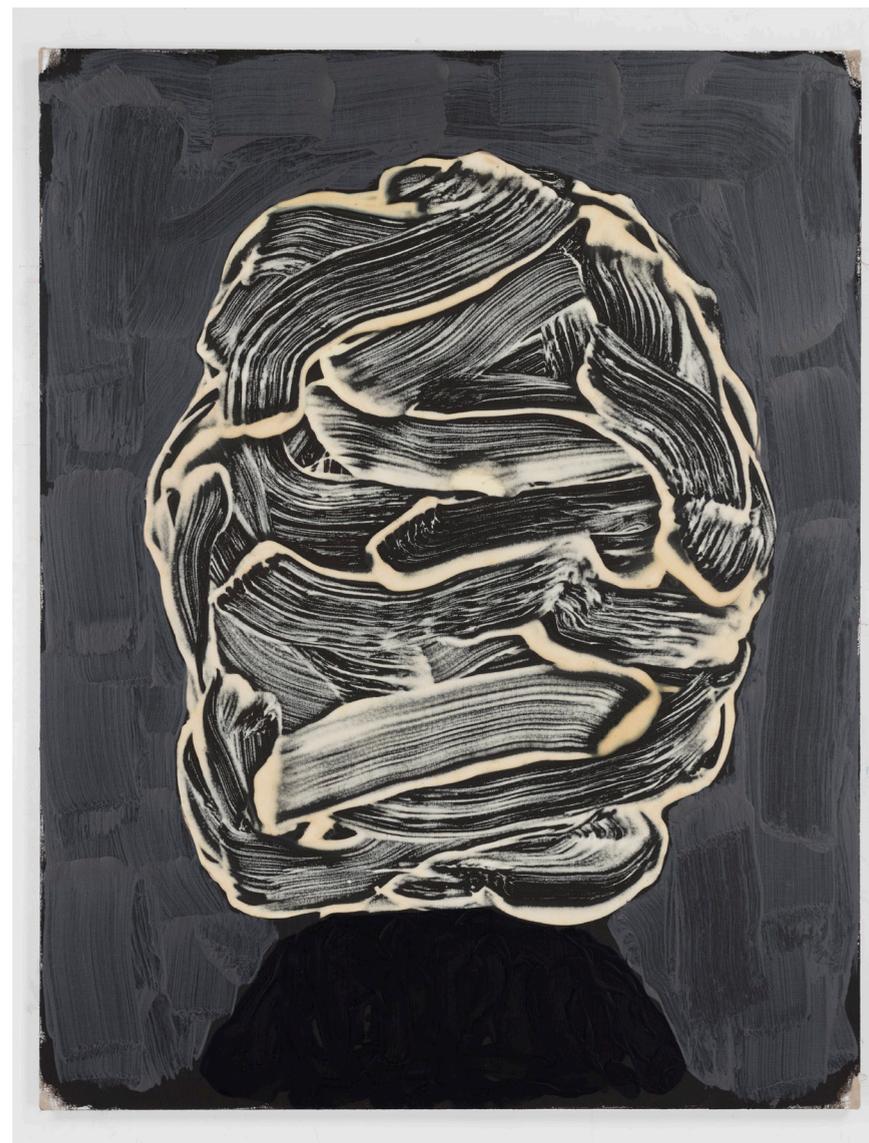
Are you familiar with the concept of synchronicity?

ZOË LESCAZE

I'd love to hear you explain it.

ROBERT JANITZ

As a young man, I studied some Jungian psychology. Back in Germany there was a real disciple of Jung who was still alive then and he would give a lecture at the university every Friday, and over the course of several semesters we went through the basic writings of Jung, the archetypes, and one of the concepts was synchronicity – when two events correlate, but in a regular fashion where you think, "Why is this crow always sitting at my window when I think



about this?" I keep flirting with time now as a more fluid concept, not just a linear time of then and now. It feels more parallel. So there's this person also on the subway, and maybe you don't really need to meet, but that person is there anyway. So, you know, the weaving, it happens anyway, the subconscious weaving.

ZOË LESCAZE

Well I noticed you titled one of your recent paintings *The Aleph*, which is the title of a Borges story I've loved for a long time.

ROBERT JANITZ

It's one of my favorite stories.

ZOË LESCAZE

In it, a man discovers a sphere containing the entire universe and everything in it, from every perspective all at once. This feels related to what you're describing in terms of thoughts and different layered timelines all being simultaneously present. One of the things I love thinking about when I look at your paintings is how these brushstrokes are sort of the negative space of brushstrokes. Absence becomes presence.

ROBERT JANITZ

In 2011 I made one work that was a slice of toast with – it wasn't butter, I used this mix of wax and butter color – and I spread the butter on the toast. And I think that opened up a door, you know, of approaching painterly gestures very differently. A lot of things changed with that. It kind of blurred high culture and low culture – everybody spreads butter on their toast. In France, I always looked at the sauce traces when you have a meal with a baguette and swipe your plate. So I thought it's a good idea to make some permanent stains, paintings like used plates.

ZOË LESCAZE

That's amazing. It connects a bit to your chef experience in the Margiela showroom.

ROBERT JANITZ

That's true. I forgot that I have all these culinary connections. But cooking is so much work, honestly.

ZOË LESCAZE

Yeah well, as a freelance writer, I spend a lot of time eating tuna fish out of the can.

They had walked to the edge of Bethesda Fountain at this point and were looking at the petals, coins and other objects lying in the water. ROBERT gave ZOË a dime to make a wish.

ROBERT JANITZ

I think you have to do it this way. Over your shoulder.

ZOË LESCAZE

Really? I've been doing it wrong my whole life.

She turns around, makes a wish, and they sit down by the edge of the water.



ZOË LESCAZE

You've described how you found a sense of freedom in New York, compared to France (and Europe in general), where there were more rigid social parameters. That it was looser here and there was more room for self-invention. But I was also curious, was there anything hard about moving to New York? What were the challenges or difficulties?

ROBERT JANITZ

Well, I guess my work really changed. It was ready to change and I couldn't make that change happen in Paris. I don't know, it's hard to answer. I think I left a lot of things behind when I came here. So in a way I wasn't missing anything. And I kind of just embraced a new life. I was surprised how with a few friends you could kind of establish yourself. Emotionally, I felt all of a sudden that this was my home. I guess to me acting was the tool. You said it better – you kind of reinvent yourself. The tool for me was living in my own imagination. I remember I stayed with some friends who were doing a film project on utopian communities. I was sleeping in their studio and at some point it dawned on us that the script of the movie and what was actually happening in real life was very similar and we both knew it.

ZOË LESCAZE

When you can think of yourself as a character it's like everything is happening to someone else. Do you ever feel that you have to adopt a persona or alter-ego when you paint? Joan Mitchell spoke about how she had two versions of herself in her mind – there was "Big Joan"



and “Little Joan.” Little Joan was the artist and Big Joan had to go out in the world and fight their battles so Little Joan could paint. It was this sort of compartmentalization of self that she had to perform.



Chavela Vargas

ROBERT JANITZ

I tend to create a stage for painting as a kind of event, this kind of imaginative ensemble. For example, when I was in Mexico for a couple of months, I was listening to this one particular Mexican singer, Chavela Vargas. It's extremely dramatic and super cliché, but I don't know, it helped me. I felt I was in some kind of tragedy. Now I am hitting on something interesting – two sides of the coin, one side drama/comedy, another real tragedy. How they kind of flip back and forth.

ZOË LESCAZE

Another instance of that sort of absence/presence.

ROBERT JANITZ

I studied Buddhism for a long time and I thought a lot about emptiness, whatever that is. It's interesting that you point to the absence in the actual brush marks. I think I found the right material – that's where flour came in – which allows me to make these brush marks look like they are kind of there, but so brittle they're also not there.

ZOË LESCAZE

It's interesting to think of you painting with this very overwrought emotional music going on in the background. I read one interview in which you alluded to Susan Sontag's essay on camp. You brought it up in reference to there being a kind of theatrical quality to the work.

ROBERT JANITZ

I kind of respond to the French version of dandyism from Baudelaire and Huysman's *Against Nature* – this 19th-century idea of the dandy. I think Sontag is very well aware of that and builds her notion of camp on that.

ZOË LESCAZE

It's fitting that we're taking a walk. Do you feel like a flâneur?

ROBERT JANITZ

[Laughs] Of course.

ZOË LESCAZE

Walter Benjamin described the flâneurs of Paris allowing their pet tortoises to set the pace of their strolls. We should have brought one to guide us around the park.

ROBERT JANITZ

We're too fast.

ZOË LESCAZE

Exactly. Sontag also describes this kind of play with gender that accompanies a lot of camp, at least in the way she was writing about it. How would you talk about gender in relationship to your work? This is something I've been thinking about lately – why we think of some paintings as masculine and others as feminine. Is gender or sex something you experiment with as you're creating these personae?

ROBERT JANITZ

I experiment with different versions of myself, sexually also. But I feel I cannot identify myself through gender because I think it would limit how I feel about myself. Now, when gender is such a darling topic of conversation in the art world, maybe utopia could happen. You can be who you want. But what's uncomfortable is that, for me, it is not the most relevant question. The more relevant question is the question of death – whoever you are in this life or how many times you change or not, it's only transitory.

ZOË LESCAZE

That's fitting, given your imminent trip to Mexico. As a whole, I think they're on another level of celebrating death as a necessary part of life and keeping it visible. In the United States, we don't really talk about death and have taken to shoveling old people out of sight and boarding them up in discrete places so they can die out of sight.

ROBERT JANITZ

It's interesting, I was obsessed with [Antonin] Artaud because he did a trip to Mexico City in the late '20s. He was invited to speak mostly about Surrealism and theater and I guess he was already really crazy and on drugs and he would give these lectures. In a way he fantasizes about Mexico as being this alternative to the Judeo-Christian



Antonin Artaud



Western civilization, that Mexico would be this culture of the sun and the culture of death. There's something really interesting about these Mexican skulls all over the place.

ZOË LESCAZE

How long do you think you're going to be in Mexico? Is this an indefinite, forever sort of move?

ROBERT JANITZ

It's clearly not forever, but now that I've made this decision, I feel almost like I am a tourist when I'm in New York. I can see the things that I had forgotten I like. I like people's frankness here. You can get to know somebody and that makes it a very open place.

ZOË LESCAZE

It must have been startling when you came from Paris. That openness couldn't be more opposite to the sort of reserve people maintain in France.

ROBERT JANITZ

Now I'm learning Spanish. I'm almost there. I think I need a couple more months, I'm not really fluent yet but I've been studying diligently for a year now. I imagine I will go to Chile, Peru. I'm thinking maybe I split my time between here and Mexico. I'm trying to push the limits of who I can be, but maybe this will be the limit and I'll say, "No, I have roots there now, I can't just cut them again."

ZOË LESCAZE

I guess it's a question of when an act of self-reinvention feels generative and fulfilling versus when it drains you and leaves you feeling spread too thin.

ROBERT JANITZ

Right, right. That Faustian thing again where you're just haunted. I guess as long as I can make work, I think I can keep on spreading.

ZOË LESCAZE

Do you think of painting as work? It's a word we use a lot in the art world but also in American English – so many expressions reflect this very capitalist concept of existence, like "time is money" and they often betray a very narrow concept of what counts as work. Do you think of being in the studio as work?

ROBERT JANITZ

I find that I'm totally obsessed with my inner monologue and the actual studio part seems just a rehearsal of the play that I'm staging constantly in my head. I don't think of it as work. One thing I cannot get myself to do is have real assistants. And that's work – when I have to deal with technicalities and logistical stuff. But I think I also cling to these tasks – maybe because they give my theater a little ticketing booth.

ZOË LESCAZE

Yeah, keeping the lights on and everything else.

ROBERT JANITZ

That's kind of something I dread maybe in this kind of idealized life I came up with. Everything circles around me. If I was really doing a movie, then it would be much more a team effort.

ZOË LESCAZE

Have you ever done more collaborative projects? As a writer who works very much alone, it's hard for me to imagine relinquishing that much control. Which probably sounds neurotic, but some people are more adept at it.

ROBERT JANITZ

I've actually done some acting.

ZOË LESCAZE

Who did you play?

ROBERT JANITZ

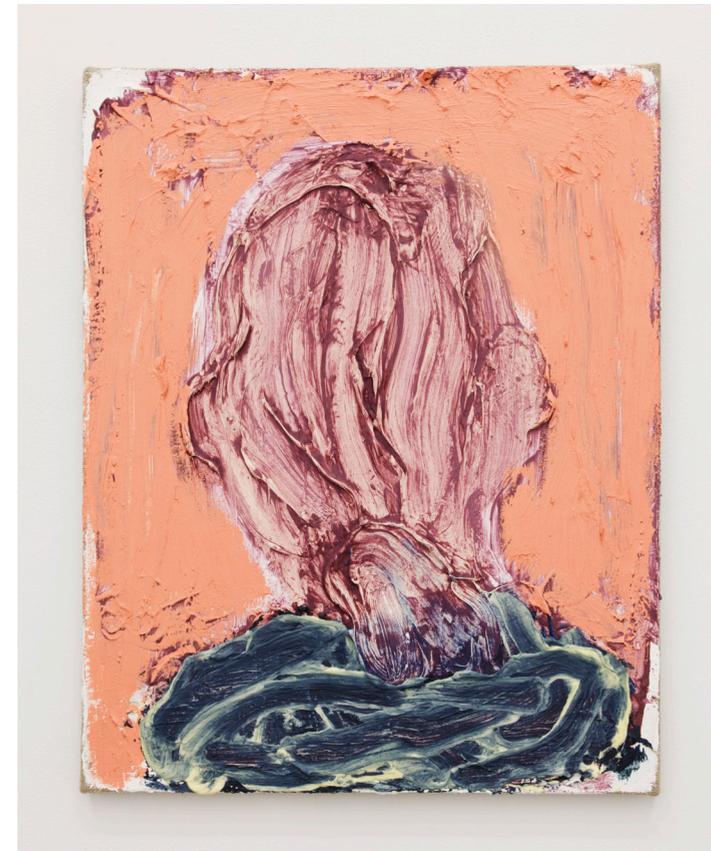
I played myself.

ZOË LESCAZE

I suppose that's what we're all doing every day. But you did it on camera. What was that like?

ROBERT JANITZ

Both of them happened in New York and I didn't really control anything besides the key lines I got to say. I can still remember how I connected with an emotion, how I could make it real somehow, it's very interesting.



ZOË LESCAZE

Actors can choose to access sorrow or joy on the spot and it points to something I find really interesting – we're always making these decisions, even when it doesn't feel like we have any control over our emotions.

They pause and think for a while. A busker is playing sad, old-fashioned songs on an accordion.

ROBERT JANITZ

Should we walk on? I think it's the accordion that gets me into this kind of nostalgia.

ZOË LESCAZE

It's a bit too much tristesse, right? I'm glad we stopped there, though.

ROBERT JANITZ

It's actually the first time I really sat here and it's great. But yeah, I'm not a big team person or collaborator. I guess that's what I like about painting, that you don't need to do it with others, it's actually a very private thing, you don't get any outside help.

ZOË LESCAZE

I knew a painter once who did everything by himself. He had an assistant to handle studio paperwork, but not to help with the painting. He was always like, "Why would I give away the electric guitar solo? That's the fun part." He couldn't imagine delegating that.

ROBERT JANITZ

Yeah, I had a friend ask me, "Oh, I want to really help in your studio. Anything. I could wash the brushes." And I'm like, "No, I like washing them myself."

ZOË LESCAZE

Getting that goopy flour off.

ROBERT JANITZ

Yeah, you need to get that out. They get really stiff. And then you need to get new brushes.

ZOË LESCAZE

You buy your brushes at hardware stores, right?

ROBERT JANITZ

Yeah. There's actually one store in Berlin, which has all the old-style handmade hardware brushes.

ZOË LESCAZE

What kind of bristles, are they synthetic or animal?

ROBERT JANITZ

I guess it's probably boar bristles. It's not plastic. They have a certain stiffness. But once they're wet they change – they soften a bit because they're a natural fiber. I don't want to defend the natural just because it's natural. I don't care.

ZOË LESCAZE

You don't strike me as very nostalgic. I would never accuse you of that. I'm wondering, though, what was your childhood like?

ROBERT JANITZ

I don't know how I survived my childhood.

ZOË LESCAZE

What do you mean?

ROBERT JANITZ

Do you remember how you feel when you are young and you have no clue what the world is and you constantly check on yourself? Like how will you be seen, what will you do? How will that be perceived by others? You know, all this kind of fear to act or fear of being watched. Of watching yourself.

ZOË LESCAZE

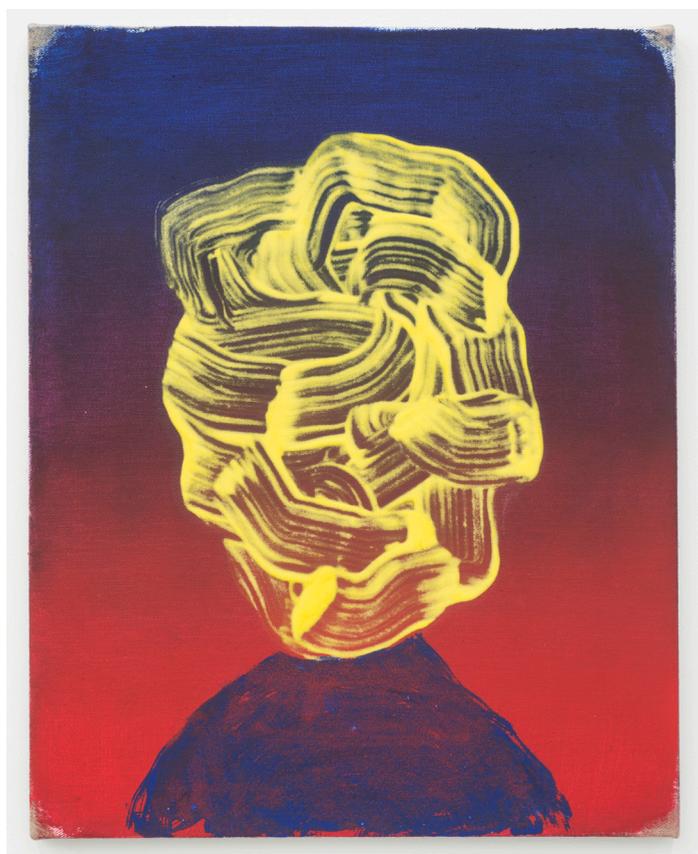
And feelings of guilt too. Everything is so heightened and magnified when you're young because you're sort of experiencing in this total, overwhelming fashion. I still feel seared by emotions I felt when I was very young about minor things that were enormous calamities at the time.

ROBERT JANITZ

Right. Yeah no, you say it so well. I didn't feel in any way like I was the master of my actions.



Two-inch boar hair paint brush.



ZOË LESCAZE

I meet so many artists and writers who feel like they don't even speak the same language as their families. Did it feel like a break when you set out to become an artist?

ROBERT JANITZ

My mom is a weaver. On my grandfather's side we had a loom factory, so all the girls were trained as weavers. So we had a big Jacquard loom at home with steps and stuff, and we would weave as kids. My parents were supportive, but I wasn't really believing in myself.

ZOË LESCAZE

Do you still wrestle with self-doubt?

ROBERT JANITZ

I think now it all happens constantly when I'm acting my painter life in the studio. I go through crazy suicidal thoughts, you know, but I know them and I know it's gonna happen. I know there's a moment that comes in every painting I've worked on when I want to either throw myself or the painting out the window - or both. But I know I just have to slow down at that moment and give some air and space and then move on. So that's the learning. Was that the question?

ZOË LESCAZE

It doesn't matter, that was the answer. I love hearing you describe the sort of arc that one goes through with the work. There's something very cathartic about experiencing that with something you're creating, when things seem to have gotten so hopeless and lost and irredeemable, and then you move through it and emerge on the other side. It's all very redemptive. Sometimes things have to get really murky before they can get beautiful.

ROBERT JANITZ

Yeah, I mean the murkiness itself doesn't really give you any clues.

ZOË LESCAZE

No, there's no indication it will get better.

ROBERT JANITZ

But maybe one comes to know, at some point, the cycle of the sun, and then there's a bigger confidence.



The family loom factory, Kircher Webrahmen, in Marburg, Germany. 1938.

ZOË LESCAZE

Yeah. And it's certainly not going to get brighter if you stop working. It's only by going forward that anything can happen.

They strolled around the edge of the Conservatory Water, the pond near East 72nd Street normally filled with model sailboats.

ZOË LESCAZE

My friends and I always used to come here at night and climb the Alice in Wonderland statue when we were drunk. Do you have any bad habits, Robert?

ROBERT JANITZ

Not anymore.

ZOË LESCAZE

Not even the scandalous kind? I mean gnawing your cuticles or something.

ROBERT JANITZ

I had a nail-biting habit as a teenager.

ZOË LESCAZE

What cured you?

ROBERT JANITZ

Vanity. I was like, no, this looks really too ugly, I need to stop. I guess there's a general story I keep telling myself and then, suddenly, there's a blank from where I am able to reboot.

ZOË LESCAZE

I mean, aren't we all sort of the product of the stories we tell ourselves?

ROBERT JANITZ

Yeah, I mean, in the best-case scenario. I think the not-so-great scenario is that you feel you are the product of somebody else's narrative.

ZOË LESCAZE

Well perhaps we are that too. I mean, is the sum of stories I've told myself about my life any more "real" than the sum of the stories other people have told?

ROBERT JANITZ

I think the biggest storyline is cultural. You know, you grow up in one particular culture and then you go somewhere else and everything is different.

ZOË LESCAZE

Right. And you see how arbitrary and circumstantial a lot of what makes you "yourself" is.

They circle back to Bethesda Fountain, overlooking it now from a balustrade. Nearby, there are some stone carvings of animals.

ZOË LESCAZE

If you could turn into any animal, what would it be?

ROBERT JANITZ

I guess I would like to be a bird.

ZOË LESCAZE

That's such a big category.

ROBERT JANITZ

Well I would be tempted to have the qualities of large wings and beautiful song.

ZOË LESCAZE

Do peacocks sing?

ROBERT JANITZ

They do. But they don't really fly. Maybe a nightingale. What would you be?

ZOË LESCAZE

I'd be a bird as well. Some things are clichés for a reason.

