

# Noémie Goudal in conversation with Cristiana Campanini

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## **Cristina Campanini: Did you ever write a story before taking a photograph?**

Noémie Goudal: I used to – during my BA at Central Saint Martins I wrote a lot. Now I've replaced the fascination of the story with the experience of travel. The places I photograph, even before I picture them, are sought out, uncovered, observed and experienced.

## **What qualities do those places share?**

I draw on far off places that have nothing in common, from the Dominican Republic and Vietnam to Uzbekistan and Poland. I create hybrids that suggest an unexpected, purely mental, place.

## **Can you give an example?**

From an image shot in Vietnam, I printed a backdrop that I re-photographed months later in Poland. The final image contains the stretch of time that separates the shots.

## **Which artists pushed you towards choosing photography?**

I would say the Magnum old school, the great black and white photographers like Henri Cartier-Bresson. When I was 14, his photos led me to work in the darkroom and develop my very first images.

## **What attracts your gaze today?**

The photography of Anne Hardy, for example, but also a lot of literature. The atmospheres described in the novels of Haruki Murakami – which are suspended halfway between fiction and reality – are central to my work.

## **Your photo plays with reality like a trompe l'oeil, an image within an image like *La Condition Humaine*, the painting by the Surrealist Magritte. Is he a point of reference for you?**

I've often wondered about that. I wouldn't say so. I rather look to the history of painting in general. I find the spatial and narrative complexity of some Renaissance paintings inspiring. Antonello da Messina, for example, in his *St Jerome in His Study*, immerses the central figure in a grandiose, complex setting that opens out onto the countryside through large windows. (rather than 'windows' would 'vistas' make more sense)

## **What about your studio? Could you describe it?**

It's a bright, simple, functional space. I share it with other artists in East London. But we often compare ideas over a cup of tea.

## **What kind of atmosphere does it have?**

Alongside me works an photographer that I got to know at the Royal College of Art and an artist friend. Then there's my assistant, Constance. We never work all together,

## **What type of experience feeds a new image or triggers off a new series?**

Reading, seeing an exhibition, taking a train and many other things, but if I had to choose just one of them, I'd say travel. For example, in Vietnam I saw stretches of limestone that had been shaped by the sea – caves and small islands of very recent formation. Then I lived in small houses in the mountains, organic buildings enveloped in the forest, simple shelters constructed from leaves and brushwood. Those places were sources of inspiration for photographs. My work *Reservoir*, for example, is a cave in Vietnam re-photographed months later in a former Soviet industrial building in Poland.

## **What's your working day like?**

It's difficult to say. If I'm not travelling, I'm at the computer in my studio, assessing tests from the printer, choosing frames and retouching images.

## **Where do you escape from it all?**

I watch a lot of films, but the place I really go to escape is my family summer house in Cadaques, in Spain. The rocks, the sea, the sun, the natural world of the Mediterranean – the place immerses me in my childhood.

## **Cadaques is where Salvador Dalí's house was – is this perhaps the Surrealist background in your past?**

Perhaps, I've never thought about it (smiling). When I was a girl, I didn't know who he was. I was five when he died and for me he was only the gentleman who lived down at the bottom of the street.

Then I realised that he Dalí who lived near my grandmother's house was a famous painter. For a long time, his work seemed too showy to me. It's

only recently that I've discovered the intimate, intense side of it.

**You moved to London when you were 19 to study graphic design at Central Saint Martins. What did photography mean to you at that time?**

It was a hobby, but at Central Saint Martins it became a profession. I did photography courses above all and ended up with a portfolio of photos. For a year I shot portraits for magazines as a freelance. I liked meeting people, talking to them, investigating the details of their lives. In the meantime, I was developing my personal projects and I also enrolled at the Royal College of Art.

**Do you think that your work has been influenced by graphic design?**

At Central Saint Martins I learnt to communicate, to use a visual – and also a narrative – vocabulary. Each image conveys a message. It offers a clear point of view, an unexpected point of view, whether it's backdrops, cellophane waterfalls or a polystyrene iceberg.

**How much is real in your images and how much digital?**

I use a large-format camera and print digitally. However much retouching I do, the places I photograph are never virtual. It's essential for me to provide the person viewing the image with enough points of contact with reality that they can enter into them, and without the images seeming "retouched".

**How many photos do you produce in a year?**

Five or six, eight at the maximum. I work for a long time on the images. With Iceberg, I was lost because I was used to photographing spaces and architecture with a certain depth. Here I found myself in front of an object. It took me time to change my approach. I didn't know what form to give or what material I should model it in. I wanted it to float and so I ended up with polystyrene, but it took month to photograph it. I went to the same beach dozens of time to get the atmosphere I wanted, but sometimes the clouds dominated the sky, or the sea was too rough or the sun too bright.

**Do you make drawings on paper to study composition?**

Yes, quick sketches in my notebook. More often they're digital collages. I alter images taken off the internet: I try to understand their structure, the compositional mechanism, and their potential. To do that, sometimes all I need to do is hang them on the wall and superimpose on one top of another.

**Is there a link between your photos and the collages of John Stezaker, free associations of landscapes taken from old post-cards?**

I like Stezaker's work very much, but his collages suggest interior spaces; they're about the relationships between people. In contrast, I work with landscape and the natural world. The outcomes are sometimes close, but the themes the works raise are different.

**In your series *Escapism* (2007-2008), people were still the central elements in your shots.**

They still are in one sense, but from the outside: I see their gaze as being at the centre of the composition. I used to photograph people, especially children, when I started. Then I saw that their stories were superimposed on places and the images communicated too much information. So I tried to simplify them, letting the landscape alone come to the fore.

**When and why did you use your first backdrops?**

During my studies, I had to portray the inhabitants of a Scottish island, a place that's so cold and windy that not even plants grow there. I couldn't even stand upright, so imagine making a portrait. So I wrote down these people's stories, and used a photograph of the landscape as a back drop to his portraits. This was the first occasion in which I used a backdrop in my work.

**As happened with the classical studio photography tradition at the beginning of the twentieth century.**

Exactly. Once I'd returned to London, I started to develop the idea. I asked people to restage their stories against those backdrops.

**From studio portraits you moved to deserted places, such as large sets. What is your relationship with the theatre?**

I grew up in the theatre. My mother has always worked there. She's the artistic director at a Paris theatre and follows the most experimental scene and contemporary dance. When I was a girl she took me to all the festivals.

**Do you still follow the theatre?**

Intermittently. I didn't want to be an actress or work in the theatre, but telling a story has always been a central need.

**What does the landscape represent in your photos?**

It's a place of contemplation where life stops, a place where you can look and listen. It's like when you stand on a rock in front of the sea or walk in the forest surrounded by the noise of the trees. There's nothing more romantic.

**In the exhibition you present your first installation project. Was it a new challenge in your artistic career?**

It was more a natural evolution of my work than a challenge. There's nothing radically different from the photos in it. I constructed a small wooden structure to put in the centre of a room where the walls were covered by images of the sea.

**What is the meaning and the role of your titles?**

The title must be simple. I try to call things by what they are or at first glance seem to be. Warren/Conigliera, for example, is also a hole in the ground, an escape into the landscape. Observatory, on the other hand, is a shelter in the jungle – I constructed it in the Dominican Republic. The structure of leaves and branches lets the light filter through inside, just as the vegetation does in a forest.

**What are you working on today?**

I'm still looking for isolated places with huge narrative power – like islands, caves and hideouts. Reading Gilles Deleuze's Desert Islands has been inspiring in this work. The island is a part that's broken off from the rest of the land. It's surrounded by the sea and seems to float. It moves up and down on the surface of the sea.