

➤ THE ARTIST DEVOTED A FULL YEAR TO THE BAROQUE ARCHITECTURE OF THE PARIS OPERA; TWO MONTHS TO SHANGHAI, THE CITY OF THE FUTURE; 54 PAINTINGS TO THE 38 BRIDGES THAT SPAN THE SEINE AS IT RUNS THROUGH PARIS; AND 21 TO THE GREENHOUSES IN AUTEUIL.

THE DAILY ARTIST

MICHELLE AUBOIRON IS INSTANTLY RECOGNISABLE, WITH HER LONG BROWN HAIR, SIGNATURE RED GLASSES AND FRIENDLY SMILE. UNFORTUNATELY, SHE IS LOST IN THE WRONG COUNTRY. LILY CANNELL TRACKS HER DOWN AND TALKS TO HER IN REAL TIME ABOUT BEING AN ARTIST. PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLES GUY.

How can you get lost in Geneva Airport, it is tiny? And bi-national! Hence the confusion. Michelle Auboiron was waiting for me on the French arrivals side, and I was expecting her to come through Swiss customs. Finally we greet each other in the same country and have a laugh at this auspicious start to our interview.

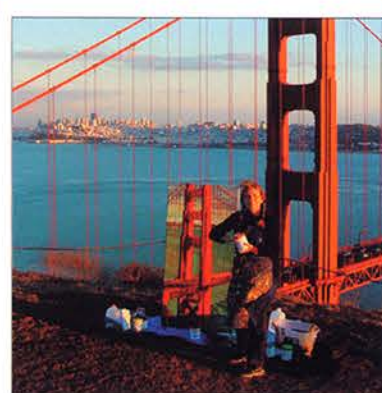
Michelle Auboiron is an artist, a painter to be precise, and an unconventional one at that, never spending more than a day on a canvas. She has travelled the world painting some of the most challenging architectural wonders of the world, be they natural or manmade, spending months at a time on each project producing a painting a day. "These trips are performances, and require a

considerable amount of energy on my part. I'm not a creature of habit, I like to be confronted by the unknown, to transcend normality."

Her normality has included two years painting the inside of the Paris Opera House, where the contrasts between the velvet and gold decors inspired her artistry; then painting her way across the US from the colourful motels of the 50s in Las Vegas to the brown hues of the Grand Canyon on an epic scale and the Bridges of Fame spanning rivers throughout the States. She then came back to Paris and found new bridges. She painted the claustrophobic greenhouses in Auteuil just outside Paris and the agoraphobic expanses of the Moroccan desert, whilst following in the tracks of the Paris-Dakar rally. In the Museum of Natural History in Paris her brush first depicted the skeleton of a 'diplonosaur' – natural architecture from the beginning of time – then it replicated the great hall in which it is exhibited – turn of the century industrial architecture. And in 2005 she took on Shanghai, the birth of a newly industrialised city. "It's all about contrasts," she tells me, "all about comparing large expanses and confinement, the natural and the industrial, what's here today and what may be gone tomorrow."



> 1. PARIS-MARRAKECH BY CAR TO PAINT THE SOUTH OF THE COUNTRY; 2. BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THE WEST COAST AND THE EAST COAST OF THE STATES; 3. A LOCAL ART CRITIC GETS A WHIFF OF THINGS TO COME; 4. THE ARTIST SEEKS INSPIRATION IN THE EAST.



> ARTFUL TRANSACTIONS

When we meet, she is on her way to Lausanne. She is going to be exhibiting some of her paintings at a hotel catering trade fair, a first for her. She is excited about the project and especially thrilled at the thought of staying in a five star hotel overlooking the lake. "Usually I swap my flat in Paris for a flat in the city or region I'm going to be painting in, or barter a canvas against a flat, that's how I manage my finances. This short trip is all expenses paid, and I'm loving it." In truth, she bartered her skills as an interior designer against a few walls on which to exhibit her large canvases at the Gastronomica trade show. A world renowned Coca-Cola paraphernalia collector asked her to design his Coke exhibition and in exchange she negotiated two rooms at the entrance to his exhibition to present her work and woo Switzerland.

Michelle's enthusiasm is contagious and her passion for painting palpable. She studied interior design at the famous Ecole Boule in Paris, and came to painting after dabbling in the world of advertising and design. She specialises in architectural painting, calling it 'mineral architecture'. "I'm attracted to powerful architecture, both natural and manmade." She is drawn to society's need to build in its own image, and has explored this interest in cities, deserts, enclosed spaces and lately in grey and rainy seaside towns in northern France, which she describes as 'Hitchcock ▶

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> 5. 6. THE 170 MILLION YEAR OLD 'DIPLODOSAUR' TOOK HER A YEAR TO COMPLETE. SHE CAPTURED IT LIFE-SIZE ON A 21 BY 4.5 METRE CANVAS DIVIDED INTO 42 SQUARES. THE 42 FRAGMENTS OBSERVED WERE DONE IN A SIMILAR WAY AS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES ARE SQUARED OFF.

> 1. THIRTY YEARS AGO NEW YORK WAS AN URBAN AND ARCHITECTURAL FAIRYLAND, NOW IT IS SHANGHAI'S TURN. ENTIRE DISTRICTS OF THIS ASIAN MEGALOPOLIS ARE DISAPPEARING AS FAST AS FUTURISTIC TOWERS ARE BEING BUILT. THE SPEED AT WHICH THE CITY IS CHANGING IS STAGGERING.

> 2. FOR OVER A YEAR SHE TRAVELLED DOWN THE SEINE, PAINTING THE BRIDGES OF PARIS FROM ARRESTING ANGLES, OFFERING THE ONLOOKER A FRESH LOOK AT THE CITY.

like'. She developed her particular approach to painting after doing the rounds in the art galleries of Paris and never getting her portfolio past the secretary. For lack of an opinion from the gallery owners, she decided her studio would be the street and her critics the passers-by. She has not looked back since, discovering her own expression, figurative realism, as she has moved from one project to the next.

> REAL TIME

Every project is a voyage of discovery in itself since she only paints in situ. "I'm continually in search of contrasts," she explains eagerly, "each trip has a particular architectural theme, with its own space, structure and light."

Every two years or so, she and her work and life companion, Charles Guy, an architect and photographer, plan a trip to a new



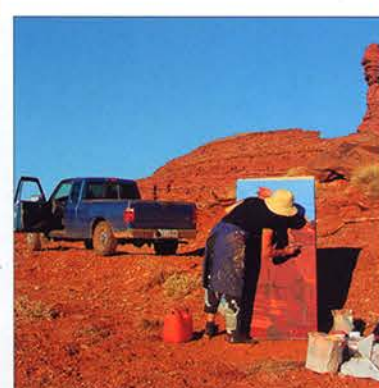
environment, generally the antithesis to their previous expedition.



He is in charge of logistics, so that she can produce as soon as she is in place. Every visit brings her something special. When she was painting from the 98th floor of the Jin Mao tower in Shanghai, she felt as if she were on a plane. "I felt something special up there, that feeling I get when I'm doing something really different. I mean, not everyone gets to paint from up there." Her candour and true appreciation for the luck and talent she has is refreshing. "During these escapades, I'm freed from all constraints, and my daily life vanishes. I have a limited number of days to produce a series of paintings, so I have to remain totally focused throughout." Once

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> 1_ IN THE EARLY NINETIES SHE WAS DRAWN TO NEW YORK'S RAW ENERGY. SHE PAINTED THE CITY FROM ABOVE, WHETHER RAIN OR SHINE. ON ONE PARTICULARLY STORMY DAY, HER WORK WAS WASHED AWAY.



> 2_3_ THE TRIP TO THE GRAND CANYON TOOK SEVEN WEEKS AND A PICKUP TRUCK TO COVER 6000 MILES IN THE SEARING HEAT. 40 LARGE ACRYLIC CANVASES LATER, AND THE MOST IMPRESSIVE NATURAL ARCHITECTURE IN THE WORLD HAD BEEN TAMED.

she has decided on the best angle for a painting – which can sometimes take up to an hour – she sets up her easel and settles into painting mode. By this time, half the day has gone by already, so in truth her canvases take at most five hours, often less. She never sketches, simply paints what she sees and feels directly onto the canvas. "It's a sort of liberation painting like this, there's no time for mannerisms. I have to synthesise what I see and go for the essence, which is wonderful since I must translate what I sense in a few brushstrokes." There is little time for hesitation, which becomes very obvious when you watch the videos of her performances. "Immediacy is at the core of my work, I paint in real time," she says smiling, fiddling with her long dark hair. Charles Guy not only organises the trips and sells his own images of the places they visit, but also films all of Michelle's performances, putting them onto her website daily so as to add to the 'real time' effect. This emphasis on a painting a day could be regarded as gimmicky by some; it is



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> 1_ EVERY TRIP INVOLVES A ROAD BOOK TO RECOUNT THE ARTISTIC MARATHON, WHICH GOES LIVE ON INTERNET DAILY. SOME TRIPS INVOLVE MICHELLE AUBOIRON SENDING THE PAINTING OF THE DAY BACK TO PARIS TO BE EXHIBITED IN REAL TIME.



anything but that. She has simply found her voice, her intensity, her fulfilment as an artist this way. She loves having to take all the decisions on the spot, to deal with the

light on that particular day, solving problems she may come up against within a limited time frame. Immediacy is her thing. There is no leeway here, just as the subjects of her paintings must weather time, so must she. And weather there is at times. In 1991, she did a series of thirty paintings, two metres by two metres, from the top of the Parsons School of Design in New York, and the 43rd floor of the Meridian Hotel. She had bartered a painting for a flat as usual. One day she was painting from the terrace of the 43rd floor and the rain was so torrential that the painting was completely washed out. She called it: 'tempête on the 43rd floor...' On this particular trip she sent each day's painting by FedEx to Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport, where they were exhibited in one of the



terminals in real time. Instant gratification for all involved. She painted the twin towers too, twice, and gave them to her twin daughters.

> SIZE MATTERS

The second time we meet is at the fair in Lausanne, and only here do I really understand what she is about. The variety in her work is inspiring, the scale of her paintings imposing. The power and energy she conveys through her brush strokes is tangible, and whether the onlooker likes or dislikes her work, it is impossible to remain indifferent to it. Her painting of the Grand Canyon at Dead Horse Point is three metres long, and one metre twenty high. It is tiny compared to the scope of the canyon, but huge when hanging in a Parisian art gallery, a fair in Lausanne or in someone's living room. David Hockney considered the Grand



Canyon 'A painter's nightmare', Michelle Auboiron begs to differ. And each and every one of her 40 canvases of this 'nightmare' brings the point home.

These 'artistic marathons' as she likes to call them, are her bread and butter as well as her way of reporting on a place. Since the whole process is recorded by various mediums – parts are committed to canvas, others to still images, film and words – her breadth and scope are as varied and far reaching as her favourite technique: brush strokes.

Michelle and Charles – because she could not do it without him – are recording a moment in time. And to truly fix this precise moment in time, she stamps the place and date of each 'performance' on the canvas. Then the light fades and it is time to wrap up the show and move onto the next venue: Cuba this time around no doubt. ■

PERMANENT EXHIBITION

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