

Comment:

Letter from Provence

Dear H,

It's February, and I am in the Luberon, in the village of Lacoste, home of a venerable art school now part of the Savannah College of Art and Design. I'm here as a visiting critic for part of the winter term. We will be an intimate group. The staff members who picked me up at the Marseilles airport told me that only five students, all women, braved the unpredictable weather—the male students who signed up lost courage at the last minute. I paid enough attention to their en route explanation of the setup to notice that Craig Drennen, the young American painter who is the term's resident instructor, was articulate and bright, while his colleague, a young Mexican sculptor named Tirso Sigg, thanks to an expatriate Swiss grandfather, was shy and less verbal, but mostly I was fixated on the landscape. I haven't been in this part of France for a while, so I needed to concentrate on the familiar bony hills, the sparse vegetation, the ruined watchtowers, and the clumps of *pins parasols*. I was even glad to see the industrial zone west of Marseilles and the polluted Etang de Berre, glittering in the winter light.

Lacoste is tiny and austere: a handful of severe stone houses lining stony streets zigzagging up a steep slope, with occasional stairways between levels. Cars can negotiate only the lowest streets. Above the town, at the end of the uppermost street, is the ruined castle of the Marquis de Sade. Below is a wide flat valley, disciplined by the geometry of grapevines, punctuated by scattered farms and houses—prime tourist and expatriate country, these days, but from this vantage point still seemingly rural and unspoiled. In the distance are snowcapped mountains, and across the valley, a slightly larger town, like Lacoste reflected in a magnifying mirror. Founded in the seventeenth century by Huguenots fleeing violence after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, Lacoste doesn't appear on maps, unless they are very local indeed. It is not, I am told, considered to be of any architectural significance. The refugees first sheltered in the caves that riddle the steep limestone hill, later building houses around them. Most of the structures, including the studios, include caves—ideal for installations, although none of the current group of students seems tempted. (Tirso, who, as resident technical director, coordinates restoration projects on school buildings, tells me that he finds most of his material for sculpture in their abandoned caves—with the approval of the administration, he quickly points out.) The larger, mirror image town is Bonnieux, the Catholic counterpart of Lacoste; it appears on maps.

Soon, the vines will have reddish sprouts and the almond trees will begin to bloom, but now everything is bleached, brown, monochromatic. The enormous, cold blue sky is filled with scudding clouds. Craig walks me through the town, from the house where I am lodged, by the Porte des Chèvres, down a steep descent to the studios near the clock tower, then past a building with a courtyard garden (a school residence). We veer right, just before plunging further to the post office (open irregularly), to note a former restaurant now used for school meals. I try to remember where it is. We retrace our steps—a steep climb—then head downhill again, at an angle, past the *boulangerie*, its sign faded almost into illegibility, and up a stone stair to the lounge. We disturb a student prone on a sofa, watching a taped movie; she untangles herself from her quilt, stands up, politely introduces herself as Jessica, and welcomes me. (When I meet the rest of what I christen *l'équipe Lacoste*—Dana, Magen, Natasha, and Katie—I discover that they are all as well-mannered and engaging; I discover, too, that—unusually for young artists—they have clear notions of what their art is about, which makes me think well of their instructor; he proves to be a thoughtful, ambitious painter who is notably clearheaded himself, so it makes sense.)

Heading downhill again, we pass another school residence and a narrow building with nice detail around the windows and “1600-something” carved above the door (the school office); opposite, more studios and school buildings undergoing renovation. An affable, proprietary dachshund sits by a massive door. “This is Leonard.” As polite as Jessica, he escorts us to the end of the street, where we double back to the center of the village. “It took me a few days to figure it out,” my guide says, kindly, sensing my disorientation. Later when I set out on my own, I find it’s easy to navigate, despite the apparent sameness of the blank stone walls and forbidding doorways. There are only three streets. The Lacostoix, with whom I exchange greetings on the rare occasions when I see them, mostly stay indoors, apart from the small knot of children who riot daily in the schoolyard below the village. The few local shops and restaurants catering to summer visitors are closed for the season. Only on market day in the post office square—meat, cheese, and *confit de canard*—do I see more than three local inhabitants at once. Lacoste seems stage-set-like, slightly unreal, especially since competing bells with differing opinions strike each quarter hour twice, eight minutes apart.

The weather is dramatic: a stunning pink and gold sunrise, followed by a day and a night of howling mistral, flurries of snow, then blazing sun and crisp cold. An immense moon hovers on clear nights, waxing during my stay. On bright mornings, Leonard and his colleagues claim patches of sun-warmed stone, moving with them through pre-assigned territories. One brilliant morning I explore de Sade’s castle. A pipe-smoking workman in corduroy, straight out of Marcel Pagnol, offers solicitous advice about the best footing on the rocky hillside in an

accent straight out of *La Femme du boulanger*. Since I have never seen the *boulangerie* open, I suddenly wonder if I should worry about the baker's emotional well-being.

Present-day Lacoste owes its survival, it seems, to the castle's connection with the notorious marquis. That attracted the Surrealists, and this art world association encouraged craftsmen and artists to colonize and reclaim the ruined houses. The hollow shell of the castle itself, however, is problematic. According to the school's academic director, Robert Dickensheets, an architect specializing in preservation, it was owned until recently by an eccentric who "restored" each surviving wall to his idea of a different period. "Not authentic," he says irritably. The present owner, Pierre Cardin, "wants to make it a performing arts center." The Lacostoix are opposed, and war has been declared. The town has imposed constantly escalating conditions each time Cardin applies for permission to advance his project; he retaliates by buzzing the town with his private plane when he flies to Lacoste. Modern-day Pagnol.

One relentlessly rainy afternoon, I accompany some students and a staff member, Tirso's Peruvian-American wife, Magaly Chocano, to nearby Apt, a larger, flatter version of Lacoste, with a grander clock tower, larger gates, and a modest but handsome *place*, its bare trees a Cubist dream of nuanced beige and grey. An Arab woman in headscarf and ankle-length robe moves the length of the gently curving, empty main street. The deserted town, wet stones gleaming palely, is like a vision from the nineteenth century. We reenter the present abruptly, on the outskirts, at "Monsieur Bricolage," the Provençal Home Depot; Magaly and I translate for the students, who have very specific requests and virtually no French.

My translation skills are fully exercised over the next few days. Mildly outraged by the school's isolation from the lively regional art scene, I arrange studio visits with two distinguished painters, Claude Viallat and Alain Clément, and a tour of La Vigie, an alternative gallery run by Viallat's daughter, in Nîmes; we will also go to the Carré d'Art, the handsome contemporary art museum designed by Norman Foster, in the main square, near the Roman temple, the Maison Carrée. (The outing is intended to broaden the students' perceptions of the South of France, but I must admit that I will be delighted to spend time with old friends.) We pile into the school van and hurtle through the valley. It's still cold, but there are signs of spring; the bare, calligraphic vines are being trimmed of old growth.

Chez Viallat, a rambling cluster of miscellaneous buildings around an internal courtyard, the grave, sweet-faced painter and his chic wife generously unfold picture after picture for us, recent works soon to be seen at various museums and galleries. We are treated to a rich, astonishing variety of scavenged cloths, tarpaulins, tents, banners, and the like, punctuated by Viallat's repetitive signature "mark"—a generous, soft-edged spot, like a pattern from an exceptionally elegant giraffe—

applied rhythmically, unchanging in size, but varied in color and sometimes in orientation. *La tache* at once accentuates and cancels the “events” of the ground; grommets, seams, and patches provide counterpoint to the imposed marks. We are offered, too, a preview of a coming show of Viallat’s “knot” sculptures.

Viallat explains the origins of each recycled element and shows us the stencil that he uses to apply the *tache*. He speaks of his interest in Native American art, pointing out small constructions evocative of Plains Indian artifacts. I remember seeing these exhibited in Nîmes some years ago, and Viallat seems shyly pleased when I tell him so. Between translations of his laconic comments, I try to explain his notion of art-making as an act of transforming ordinary things by “claiming”—by imposing a recognizable, personal gesture, rather than by making calculated aesthetic decisions. The students are clearly fascinated by the atmosphere of the high-ceilinged, coolly lit studio, with its piles of folded paintings, like a rug souk, and its walls covered with small Viallats and images of works that he admires; an early version of Matisse’s Barnes mural seems particularly relevant to the paintings we have just seen.

Isabelle Viallat arrives with a sturdy, alert toddler on her hip, making me aware of how long it has been since we last saw each other. After being properly admired by *l’équipe*, he is entrusted to his grandparents while we visit the gallery. La Vigie, now a decade old, occupies four stories of tiny, minimal apartments, some still equipped with sinks and surprising tilework. Artists from the region and elsewhere, some well-known, some “emerging,” are invited to install work in response to the quirky settings or to make site-specific pieces, so that the narrow building becomes a stacked, vertical, coherent exhibition. The current show includes four diverse painters, Janos Ber and Pierre Mabilie, from Paris, plus Fabien Carbon and Blandine Imberty, from the region. Each floor has a different mix of solo and group installations, all clearly influenced by the character of the intimate spaces. Nothing is quite what it seems. Ber’s loose, linear wall drawings, with their obsessively repeated but casual stripings, raise questions about the relationship of geometric preconceptions and the vagaries of the hand; they also make the minute rooms pulse. Mabilie’s calligraphic improvisations suggest the “signature mark” spirit of Viallat but resolve themselves into private narratives. Imberty’s apparently “pure” luminous geometric paintings turn out to be complicated investigations of ideas about ready-made and found color, while Carbon’s exuberant constructions, arranged in clusters or tucked in unexpected corners, widen the definition of painting to include relief assemblages of brilliantly colored plastic elements gleaned from places like “Monsieur Bricolage.” It’s a strong, surprising show that holds everyone’s interest and makes us forget the penetrating chill of the building.

We warm ourselves in the sun as we walk to meet Alain Clément and his elegant German-born wife, Elisabeth. Clément’s studio, just outside the center of town, is a series of artisan-factory buildings with huge steel-

framed windows, along an interior street. Over the years, as his reputation has grown, he has gradually acquired more and more space. The first time I visited, we stood in the street while he pulled paintings out of racks; now we go from lavish space to lavish space. Clément has set up a selection of recent abstract paintings, bold tangles of broad, girder-like strokes that threaten to break out of the confines of the canvas, in intense, but unnamable colors—Renaissance browns and ochres, resonant blues, velvety blacks. We see, too, a group of polychrome sculptures, a fairly new preoccupation, that make the spatial implications of the paintings tangible and physical. An experienced pedagogue, Alain has also pulled out some earlier works to show the students his evolution. He launches into a complicated, informative discussion of his work, explaining that unlike most of his European colleagues, he was fascinated by American postwar color-based abstraction, during his formative years. He pauses regularly for me to translate—fortunately, since he is full of advice to young artists about work habits and what they should be looking at, and while he prefers to speak French, he has enough English to know if I am faithful to his subtleties. At a certain point, we lapse into the teasing banter of old friends, rehearsing old differences of opinion in a mock argument, which I find hard to translate.

The curly-haired, dark-eyed young Parisian who made the tall, blonde Elisabeth abandon Germany is still visible in the successful, mature painter, and he knows it. With five young women hanging on his every word, Alain becomes flirtatious. “Lacoste!” he says. “The Marquis de Sade’s castle! When I first moved to Provence I had an older woman friend who took me there at night, for the *frisson*.” I dutifully translate and one of the students tells him that they are planning a walk to the castle as soon as the moon is full. “No, no! It is not recommended for young ladies of good family,” Alain says. “Too many ghosts.”

He shows us a notebook of drawings and watercolors made during a recent stay in Tuscany. Images copied from paintings and frescos are interspersed with sketches of modern-day people captured in similar poses, along with landscapes, comments on paintings, and the like. It’s playful, charming, and about serious aesthetic questions. Alain reverts to “prof” mode, urging the students to frequent museums, travel, and study what they see by drawing. They are impressed by him and engaged by his work; Craig, the instructor, who makes astute comments about Clément’s work, is particularly excited. All in all a success.

L’équipe is engaged, too, by the permanent collection of the Carré d’Art. It includes large works by Viallat and Clément hung in the proximity of international art stars, causing them to look at me with new respect. But the high point of the day, in some ways, comes when we climb the main stair of the Hôtel de Ville to see the four stuffed crocodiles slung overhead with massive chains. We’d seen the palm tree and crocodile emblem of the city everywhere, including as a large public fountain by a contemporary French sculptor, a reminder of the Roman legions stationed in Africa who came to Nîmes for R and R. I’d

promised that we'd visit the quartet in the town hall, late residents of the public gardens, but no one imagined that I meant four real beasts of varying sizes, their slit stomachs carefully sewn, tastefully arranged around an eighteenth-century glass chandelier, noses neatly pointing to the center.

Our next outing is to Marseilles, to see exhibitions and connect the school with art supply stores. The first stop is the minute Galerie du Tableau, run by my friend Bernard Plasse, a former art critic immensely knowledgeable about contemporary art and possessor of the most impressive moustache in France. (Worth the detour, as Michelin says.) The gallery, which has an ambitious, eclectic international program, is so small that only one work can be displayed at a time (hence the name); at openings, people cluster in the narrow street, viewing the show through a large arched window. The current exhibition, by a young French photographer, atypically includes *two* images high on the wall. Armed with Bernard's advice, we head down smart shopping streets towards the port, past boats, dock litter, and crowds of promenaders reveling in a glorious day that finally hints at spring. We thread the narrow streets of La Corbeille, the oldest part of the city, now peppered with official signs announcing municipally-sponsored improvements "to insure decent housing." Our goal is La Vieille Charité, a superb complex of High Baroque buildings, at the top of the hill, once a plague hospital, saved from destruction by hippie squatters in the 1960s, now a cultural and exhibition center.

Bernard has recommended two shows, "Méditations: Méditerranée," video installations by an Italian group, Studio Azzurro; and an exhibition of drawings, artist's books, and constructions in steel by Jean-François Coadou, another friend, whom I had embarrassingly failed to call, not sure if we would get to Marseilles. Coadou's exhibition is tucked into the hollow square of pale stone arcaded buildings framing the complex. Low, massive, four-square steel sculptures are arranged in a grid. Implacable and compelling, they are like nothing but themselves, but also reminiscent of both heavy machinery and architecture. Drawings, arcane diagrams, written texts, and pages from collaborative projects are interesting additions, but Coadou's mysterious, brutal constructions are the main event.

The symmetrical courtyard of La Charité is dominated by a handsomely proportioned chapel crowned with an oval dome where part of "Méditations: Méditerranée" is installed. We enter the darkened space and are immediately disoriented. A swirling video "carpet" fills the entry floor, shifting, apparently in response to footsteps, from sea, to abstract pattern, to mosaic, and more. As our eyes adjust, we discover rows of video screens in the apses on either side of the central plan building, a changing litany of iconic, exquisitely selected and composed images of Southern Italy, Greece, North Africa, and the South of France. Lavender fields and orchards cut to dissections of traditional crafts and their modern equivalents—handsome, nostalgia-provoking, but not remarkable. In the center of the former chapel, though, is a vertical stack of

screens, with a wooden platform and wooden tripod before it. The image, a synchronized composite, plunges us into the sulphur fields of Pozzuoli, as forbidding as one of the ancient entrances to Hades. We watch the curling smoke, vaguely interested, when suddenly a visitor stamps on the platform. The sound is alarmingly amplified; and in response, the images on the screen blur and vibrate. When they calm down, they have become artifacts from Pompeii; they hold for a while, then revert to smoldering wasteland. Each stamp, the noise and tremor an abstraction of the horror of the *terremoto*, reveals new tightly-cropped, beautiful images before returning to the grey, haunted landscape: domestic objects, casts of bodies, and frescos from the ancient world; near-kitsch religious statues from modern, still earthquake-prone Italy; flaming lava. Without resorting to easy narrative, the installation suggests the continuity and fragility of Mediterranean civilization, reminding us of the simultaneous remoteness and seamlessness of the past. Only when the cycle repeats do we manage to pull ourselves away. Elsewhere we find additional interactive installations about saltworks, North African architecture, and vacationers—the entire spectrum of the modern-day Mediterranean. It's all on a high level, but the earthquake piece is clearly the most achieved and resonant.

Sated, we descend the slopes of La Corbeille. Next: art supplies. I am pleased to remember where the key places are, near the port. One is a maker of sails and tarpaulins, where canvas suitable for painting on can be had at good prices; the other, a chaotic mix of artists', house-painters', and (I think) ships' maintenance supplies, with hard-to-find items like beeswax by the pound and powdered pigment, both eagerly sought by two students. I translate enough to connect them to a helpful salesman, verify that there are student discounts, then head for the sail-maker's to help the others negotiate the metric system. No discount here, but the array of ropes, grommets, and other nameless but entrancing gear almost makes up for it. The last stop is part of a nationwide chain—big, professional, charmless, but so well stocked that all necessary items are found. Their discount system is more complicated, but I persevere, so I feel I've earned my honorarium for the week. The last time I was in the place, I had trouble finding it—the friends I was to meet had given only approximate directions and an approximate name—so I turned to a neighborhood shopkeeper, lounging in his doorway. Desolated to disturb him, but could he be kind enough to tell me where to find a nearby big store that sells materials for artists? "Artists? I have a horror of artists," he growled. "Drug addicts and good-for-nothings. I make every effort to avoid them, and I advise you to do the same." (Luckily I spotted the sign a little further down the block.)

L'équipe likes the story. What they like even more is Marseillaise pizza—*aux anchois* for most of us—near the port. Then it's back to the van. Tired but happy, as French children's stories always end, we return to Lacoste.