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2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021

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Tau Lewis in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Portraits of Landscapes: Tau Lewis," *Mousse 74*, Winter 2021.

MOUSSE

CONVERSATIONS Mousse 74

Portraits of Landscapes: Tau Lewis



Tau Lewis in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist

"My main obsession is fabric," asserts Canadian self-taught artist TAU LEWIS in this exchange with Hans Ulrich Obrist regarding a practice rooted in recycling—the repurposing of raw materials and found objects—as a transference of vitality in a labor of love. Lewis has since the very beginning engaged with the creation of imaginary geographies, characters, and spirits—her "fairy godmothers"—conceived as physical embodiments hailing from fictional places, allegories, and personal stories. Influenced by poetry and sci-fi, and inspired by Lonnie Holley, Joe Minter, Thornton Dial, and outsider artists from the US South, her imaginary community is inhabited by creatures and art objects as fossil-repositories of emotional, generational DNA.

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HANS ULRICH OBRIST: Tell me about your beginnings. How did you come to art?

TAU LEWIS: I flunked out of college twice, but art has always been my strong suit. Even as a kid, I had a hard time with noncreative tasks. During my second (failed) time around, I made art, did a lot of material research, and, most important, experimented and taught myself how to do things. It snowballed from there.

HUO: It seems that there was an awakening with Chloe Wise at that time.

TL: Yes, this was when I was first figuring out that I didn't want to continue with post-secondary school. Chloe and I both lived in Toronto, but more than a creative awakening, it was that someone finally made me feel that I could have a self-directed narrative. This helps you visualize where you want to be and who you want to position yourself with. Even though we were coming from extremely different backgrounds, that time was motivating for me.

HUO: Who are the artists who inspired you most?

TL: My biggest inspirations are the artists of the US South. I've looked a lot at yard shows. My favorite artist is Lonnie Holley, alongside a lot of outsiders. This makes sense because I'm self-taught, but that specific genre of art—which really thrived post-civil rights movement and developed in this secret way, as it had to be undetectable—was valuable to the surrounding community. I love the works of Joe Minter and Thornton Dial as well. I look quite a lot at the quilts of Gee's Bend. I see a continuation of a certain material language, because its roots in upcycling, recycling, repurposing, and using your hands and raw materials have been a strong focus since the beginning of my artistic practice.

HUO: Let's talk about your first exhibition.

TL: It was in Toronto in 2014. My friends and I had a collective called This Is Not for You. It didn't last long, but we started to organize shows in our apartments, sometimes outside and eventually in some local galleries. At that time, I shared a studio with a lot of students who had just graduated from high school. We wanted to make art, but still control who had access to it. It was a great exercise for me.

HUO: Writing has always been an inspiration for you. You started as a journalist but then quite soon dedicated yourself to poetry. As you told me during our studio visit: "We have so much traumatic information, and we need to find a better way to process words and language, and that's maybe poetry." I'm curious to know more about your writing practice and your inclination to poetry.

TL: Poetry came before journalism. I enrolled in journalism school not understanding how dry and strict journalistic writing was, which is why it didn't work out for me, but writing is still a huge part of what I do. I have a notebook that has become a repository for creative writings, ideas, thoughts. I don't share it, but it's a reference for future texts about works and helps me find titles for exhibitions. For me, it's important to document my process through words as I'm making artworks.

HUO: Your exhibitions are often accompanied by poems. For *I'm countin' on you to ground me again*, your 2019 show at Night Gallery, Los Angeles, you wrote a poem about a conductor.

TL: The poems are brief love letters to the artworks. They usually have a bit of humor. The following one from 2019 is about a black hole and is titled "I heard a heart-beat down in the black hole":

I heard a heartbeat down in the black hole
I've been hovering above the giant quicksand fields of darkness sitting on this little light beam of mine
I've been looking down past the doorsteps of the ghost of space and time, and the gravitational gateway of gone-ness
Staring into the heaviest mightiest black! When I listen hard, I can hear a pulsational sound Something like a heartbeat
Did you keep on keeping on friend? In that blind, cast away place? some place we thought living couldn't be? and seeing couldn't see?
Some place so blind, and black and beyond there'd be no saving we?
That old flag still down on my flagpole...
But I could almost swear I feel some mechanism of some rhythm coming from way down in that black hole
My heart's in the bright place so I'm uncurling my rope of hope
I'll hope long and hard to stretch this rope past time so I can climb down to you

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I've never been very scared of ghosts and such. If we don't come out, I hope you'll love me enough to teach me to see in blindness and I'll still love you if you've changed some- times we need to transform to understand life better.

HUO: Poetry is still important for you, but you are foremost a sculptor. When I started to observe your work, you had already found your own language by doing these extraordinary, almost like personas. Could you tell me about them?

TL: They come from different fictional places. When I'm in my studio, I try to remain in the imaginary, so often I'm referencing make-believe geographies while also taking inspiration from real stories and people from my personal life. I make things about memory. I like to think that I create portraits of landscapes because my materials are coming from different landscapes.

HUO: Can you please tell me about the blossoms of *T.A.U.B.I.S* (2020)?

TL: Her blossoms are infinite and they grow everywhere, all over the universe and in harsh conditions. There's nothing that inhibits them from existing. Their job is to collect information, to absorb data that has been dispersed. There's a unified and regulated consciousness so that this information is a constant up-to-date measure of what is happening everywhere and to everyone. For me, it's about putting some sort of order to the chaos of trying to understand and decipher all the hurt that I feel. I'm an empathetic and emotional person, and I perceive things deeply. This was a good exercise for me in trying to formulate some sort of sense towards the idea of morality, and at the same time take a deep departure in creating a visual world. It was a departure for me, which I think is the most radical form of love that I can give myself, and hopefully offer it to others.

HUO: Some of these figures were part of *Triumphant Alliance of the Ubiquitous Blossoms of Incarnate Souls*, your 2020 exhibition at Cooper Cole in Toronto. They seem to form a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk, a system or institution that is plural and singular at the same time.

TL: This exhibition was for me very much cloaked in love. Courage is one of the main driving points for my work, and a lot of this show was about devotion. Part of the narrative is that these figures are singular, but they belong to each other. They are part of a unified consciousness. There were three characters in the exhibition. *Symphony* (2020) is the tallest, covered in blossoms and installed in the main part of the gallery. In another space there was another persona named *Delight* (2020). She's also vested in flowers. The idea was that at the end of every cycle there was a ceremony where these figures fed themselves to this giant head. The head, called *Opus* (2020), was the container of all the information that transmitted signals to and from the different blossoms. It archived, dispersed, and updated all of this intel, stories, and everything collected through the blossoms. They fed themselves into it: they crawled onto its tongue and then into its mouth, and their cycle ended. And then they were absorbed into the unified consciousness.

HUO: Can you talk about the different characters and their names? I'm also interested in the fact that they somehow form a system, a model for a different society, a sort of utopia.

TL: While laboring, I let things bleed into one another. If I'm working on a figure, a story, a spirit, I'm communicating with her and helping her come to life before I finish her. I have never created a body of work where one sculpture has not been a "relative" of the other sculptures. Everything is always coming from the same whole. I chose the name *Symphony* because I could feel it in the process of creating it, or just looking at her. It's like a symphony that surrounds you. I would describe all my characters as fairy godmothers, taking a reference from *Cinderella*, which was my favorite movie as a kid.

HUO: And one of them always travels with you.

TL: Yes, and she has a sister now. It's so nice having the two of them together with me.

HUO: What are their names?

TL: *Little Gal* is the first soft sculpture I made in 2017. It's a self-portrait. She goes everywhere with me. Her sister, *Harmony*, is part of an entity that takes on many different forms, but always has the same name.

HUO: Is this way of talking about fairy godmothers forming a system, a model to imagine a different society?

TL: I'm interested in the past, so I'm trying to uncover allegories and stories that have existed before me and interpreting them, but these all belong to a sci-fi narrative that is much bigger than myself. I don't think that sci-fi is about the future, and I don't like to regard things from an escapist point of view that looks to the future. I'm very much interested in the present, in things from the past, and in the way that these stories return to us. I don't think that any life form can exist without conflict or struggle. And it is fantastical of me to

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devise some sort of formula for understanding morality. I think there's unfortunately a balance to the universe: everything is a vibration, and things have to oscillate between struggle and triumph. Otherwise everything would just be atonal and dead. That's the way it has to go. I think it's healthy—envisioning a utopia and trying to think about these things and build these worlds as a way of taking a departure.

HUO: What kind of sci-fi inspires you?

TL: I had a huge aversion to sci-fi for most of my life. I didn't want to align my work with sci-fi as a genre for the same reasons that I don't love my work being called Afrofuturist, because in my mind I connect Afrofuturism with an escapist mentality that says that things are going to be better in the future. But now I understand more and more about sci-fi, and I've read Ursula K. Le Guin on how sci-fi is much less about the future than it is about now. All of its themes—which deal directly with morality—are a comment on what we are currently facing in the present, as opposed to some future utopia or some future-oriented space. So I'm inspired by the boundlessness of it, I suppose, because it doesn't have to exist in any particular time frame or geography. I think sci-fi can be anything. And while I am writing (and I did write a whole chapter in the process of creating that last exhibition), I don't want to create something structured or linear. I just want to have an output of these stories and this information that I've been collecting and developing throughout my career. As I work, I'll develop systems of organizing it. I used to think that it was going to be a straight-up novel. I change my mind every day on it, but the most important thing is that the stories are coming out.

HUO: Are there others writers to whom you feel a proximity?

TL: There are some amazing contemporaries like Nalo Hopkinson and N. K. Jemisin, both black sci-fi writers. I've tried to understand the sci-fi genre through the lens of black writers because I think that most of fantasy genres are quite whitewashed, and I want to continue to invest time into art practices, but also writing practices that are black and imaginary. Samuel R. Delany is another huge favorite. He writes in a way that is just so familiar, and some of his stories have taken place in Toronto and New York.

HUO: Talking about the imaginary, you have described it as composed of certain art objects or mythologies, and the way they could be useful in theory, sciences, or even be considered technology. Could you elaborate on the imaginary in your characters?

TL: I think the imaginary is the "truth," and a lot of the time it becomes a tool when there's no other element at your disposal. Describing the imaginary as truth, and art objects and mythologies as just as important as the sciences or theory, I'm interested—in my personal experience—in studying the outsider artworks of the US black South. These objects come from the post-slavery era and are made largely out of debris and refuse and garbage. I consider them fossils containing the emotional generational DNA of the entire community. I believe that by studying certain art objects and tendencies toward new thinking in the black community, you can learn a lot about mobility, pictorial memory, trauma, and how to recover.

HUO: You have a drawing in your studio by Purvis Young, an extraordinary and prolific artist from the over town neighborhood in Miami. Could you tell us about your passion for him?

TL: I have a great connection to the branch of art that Purvis Young belongs to. My greatest inspiration in life and in art is the Afro-American artist Lonnie Holley. I had the chance to meet him in Atlanta in 2018 and it occurred to me then—seeing the Souls Grown Deep Foundation and the massive sum of objects (which have for so long been undervalued)—that we can learn so much and these artists have lent so much to contemporary art in a vast number of ways. I get asked a lot about the connection between my- self and artists like Young or Holley because I'm Canadian, but we do have threads of a similar narrative across geographies, and I think we connect in our tendency toward mythmaking, collecting, archiving, and trying to create something different out of a circumstance.

HUO: Do you make drawings or sketches for your sculptures?

TL: Yes, sometimes. If I have to make a carving, I need to see the muscles of the face and how they're supposed to bend and curve. I do perspective drawing because the internal frame of the sculpture is made of metal or pipe, and I need to envision what connectors are required to make a certain skeletal frame.

HUO: You often use body hair—your own hair but also that of your close friends in a very spiritual way.

TL: Historically, it's a spiritual process. You can find human hair in a lot of art objects from Africa, for instance masks. But if you look at the natural structure of African hair—the coil—it's something that's meant to grab on to things. As the hair grows out of the head it's holding on to information, emotions, traumas, ideas. Part of the reason I use hair—as well as other personal belongings and found materials like seashells— is

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because they hold a charge. They had a life prior to me repurposing them, and they grasp it, retain it. It's these histories that help create a visceral experience for me when I'm looking at the artworks of Holley, or these kinds of assemblage works made of found objects

HUO: Your practices have in common the idea of healing.

TL: It's a slow art process. I don't use sewing machines. I work with one assistant. We hand-stitch everything. I enjoy sewing; I did it as a kid, and it feels tender. The plaster pieces in the artwork are hand carved. I'm interested in how I can honor and continue diasporic practices of art making, which have been labor intensive and very focused on recycling and burning their own energy into the object. There's a huge transference of vitality that you give to an object when you spend time physically with it. The same happens with paintings, but I spend even more time on top of, wrapped up in, and handling the fabrics I work with. This process takes up the entire floor of my studio, and it's an absolute delight for me to stay with the object before it goes into the space where it is consumed. It's a labor of love.

HUO: I want to ask you about the "magic of limitations" within creative work, and the possibilities of operating despite restrained resources or circumstances.

TL: When you are creating anything out of limited circumstances, resources, and access to materials, it forces you to engage certain mental muscles that you otherwise might not. If you look historically across most forms of black cultural production, the main backbone is always an upcycling of a circumstance: hip-hop, jazz music, found objects. Everything is about working with what you have in order to create something different from a situation that might not be so fruitful or generative. For the most part, my practice is grounded in using what is available to me. This has helped me to work harder to understand materials and grasp why and what I make.

HUO: I see your personas as time capsules in terms of reusing things. What motivates you most about recycling materials?

TL: My main obsession is fabric, because salvaging is so important. "What are you adding?" and "How can you not add so much?" are questions I'm asking myself in the studio every day with regard to my material practice. I don't think that art professionals and artists should be exempt from conversations about the environment, given that they are perpetrators—look at the waste produced by art fairs, artistic production, jet emissions. This issue is a daily consideration for me. I take donations of fabric. I scour secondhand stores to see what I can get for free. Fabric is easy to travel with, so it's a wonderful way to collect things as I'm voyaging.

HUO: How do you use found objects in your work?

TL: I use them inside the pieces. They're embedded in the quilts and in the objects—nothing harmful that shouldn't be internal to an object, but secret things that make them feel more alive. They hold a certain energy, and I like to actually physically insert them inside of the art. Sometimes you don't know they're there, and that to me is powerful and makes the art feel empowered.

HUO: I'm curious to know what you are working on right now.

TL: I'm working with outer space. I'm in the practice of mythmaking at the moment—creating imaginary geographies and exploring the creatures and characters that come from them. They are a sort of physical embodiment of different imaginary places. I'm also working on some quilts that are like maps, but not so decipherable because they're not for us; they're for the creatures. I collect little bits and things when I'm walking around and they become languages and dials and symbols on the quilts. I'm working in patches to try and understand different colors and textures; eventually they will all be assembled on the floor to create a map, accompanied by the figures. This whole body of work will be dispersed through my next exhibitions.

HUO: Where are you at the moment?

TL: I recently moved to New York.

HUO: Why did you leave Toronto?

TL: It seems a bizarre time to move, but I made this decision long prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the US presidential election. I had already tied up a lot of loose ends in Toronto. I want to settle in at a studio where I feel comfortable and happy working. I have such a rich community of wonderful peers in New York. When I started having group exhibitions, I came to New York whenever possible, and it became clear to me how this city is important not just for my spirit, but also for my production and inspiration.

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HUO: Who are your peers in New York?

TL: I'm part of a collective called RAGGA NYC, a Caribbean queer collective of visual artists, performers, poets, and chefs.

HUO: And do you have an unrealized project you would love to make?

TL: I have so many things in my head. I want to experiment more with video and expand on poetry reading. I have a lot of projects up in my head that are waiting for space. The most exciting one is with Holley. When we met two years ago, we started working on digital collaborations. I'm extremely interested in his early works, most of which are made from debris and organic materials. He loves to document his life on his phone, and we would send the images back and forth and draw and layer and edit them on our phones. We accumulated almost a hundred digital artworks but then we kind of left off, not being sure what to do with them. I'm also writing a sci-fi story with my artworks. It may not ever actually happen, but I'm obsessed with it. This is something that will continue to stretch on, and I don't know if it will ever be fully realized, because it's a nonlinear and evolving story coming together in my head. As I continue to make these works, I feel as if they are part of an unfolding narrative that may never be complete. But it's been fun for me to write about them and imagine them realized.

Tau Lewis (b. 1993, Toronto) lives and works in New York. She employs arduous methods such as hand sewing, carving, and assemblage to build intricate sculptural portraits and quilts. Her practice is rooted in healing personal, collective, and historical traumas through labor. She has exhibited at the museums Oakville Galleries, Oakville (2020); Hepworth Wakefield (2019); College Art Galleries, Saskatoon (2019); Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston (2018); the New Museum, New York (2017); the Art Gallery of Mississauga (2017); MoMA PS1, New York (2017); and the Art Gallery of York University, Toronto (2017). She has also exhibited in the artist-run spaces Mercer Union, Toronto (2018); Plug-In Institute of Contemporary Art, Winnipeg (2017); Gallery 44, Toronto (2017); and 8-11, Toronto (2017), and the galleries Jeffrey Stark, New York (2019); Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles (2019); Shoot the Lobster, New York (2018); Night Gallery, Los Angeles (2017); and Cooper Cole, Toronto (2017). In 2021 Lewis will be included in group exhibitions at Josh Lilley Gallery, London; Grinnell College Museum of Art; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Prospect 5, New Orleans; and the ICA Boston.

Hans Ulrich Obrist is artistic director of the Serpentine Galleries, London. Prior to this he was the curator of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Since his first exhibition, World Soup (The Kitchen Show) in 1991, he has curated three hundred and thirty exhibitions.

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