



François Halard in front of a Picasso mural in the loggia at Château de Castille, the former home of Douglas Cooper and John Richardson.

PORTRAIT CLEMENT VAYSSIÈRES

IN SHOOTING INTERIORS AND ARCHITECTURE

FRANÇOIS

HALARD

SEEKS TO TRANSFORM REALITY.  
INTERVIEWED BY HIS FRIEND AND EDITOR DUNG NGO, THE  
ACCLAIMED PHOTOGRAPHER TALKS ABOUT WHY HIS PICTURES  
TRANSCEND REPRESENTATION

CAPTURING ATMOSPHERE AND ARTISTIC PRESENCE.

IN CONVERSATION

**DUNG NGO:** *I have been working with you for over a decade, even more, but I've known your work for much longer than that. The very first time I saw a photograph of yours, it was of our favourite house, Casa Malaparte. I became obsessed with the house when I saw some black and white pictures of it in architecture school. Do you remember the first time you became aware of Casa Malaparte?*

**FRANÇOIS HALARD:** Yes, of course, two things went together. [Curzio] Malaparte was one of my mother's favourite writers so we always had his books at home, but I never discovered the aesthetic of Malaparte and the existence of the house. Then I was working with Beatrice Monti della Corte back in the mid '80s. Her father was a great friend of Malaparte and he was like an uncle. When she was 14, 15, 16 she spent a lot of time with him at the house.

*This was in the 60s or earlier?*

The early 50s probably. Then when we went together to photograph Mona von Bismarck's house in Capri, Beatrice was telling me her stories of her times and I became very interested by the aura of the place. I am a big fan of Rationalist Italian architecture. For example, I have two chairs by [Giuseppe] Terragni for the Casa del Fascio that I asked my parents to give me as my 18th birthday gift. Also, my uncle had worked with Raoul Coutard, who was the cinematographer of the movie 'Le Mépris' [set in Casa Malaparte] so it was so close to me. I decided to stay one day longer in Capri to go and swim where Brigitte Bardot swam naked at the bottom of the stairs in the film. That was the fantasy of a heterosexual boy (laughs).

*It's a good fantasy.*

While I was swimming, I saw somebody fall down the cliff onto the stairs to the house. I heard, 'help help' and I went up and saw a Frenchwoman in her 50s with bones sticking out, she was really badly hurt. To be able to save her I had to ring the bell of the house, for an emergency. They were very, 'we don't want any tourists'. I'm saying, 'I'm not wanting to look at the house but there's an accident on the path and if I do nothing she will die'. So that's the first time I entered the house.

*Wow, Eros and death together.*

Yes, exactly. Years later I had a contract for La Repubblica and it was the 100th anniversary of the birth of Malaparte. I convinced them to arrange for me to take pictures inside the house as an homage to Malaparte. I spent maybe a day and a half. This is very, very important to my story: it was the first photographic shoot I did for myself. It was the first story I really found myself. I waited for maybe 15 to 20 years to have the opportunity to have access to that house for the love of the mystique, for the love of his writing, the historian, every part of the personage. I did it for myself, without having people telling me what to do.

For me it was the first chapter of a personal work. Because before I mainly worked on assignment: Vogue, House and Garden, Architectural Digest, whatever, asked you to do something and you go and you shoot and it's done. So I realised with that first experience the power of being personal, the power of doing pictures for yourself.

It was an awakening of a new direction for me. I did the book on [Pierre Chateau's] Maison de Verre the same way. Same with Marie

Antoinette because I had at one point an obsession with French 18th century and who better than Marie Antoinette to represent the politically incorrect with a super correct aesthetic.

That's what I really wanted to show in this book, that 99 per cent of these pictures are made by me for me, even if sometimes I use a magazine to get access. It's mainly my own choices of subject, of the way I want to photograph, in Polaroid or square. Nobody is behind me telling me what to do.

*What interests me is that the places you choose to photograph are not simply about a visual aesthetic. There are many other layers—cultural, literary, historical, political. Do you think these things come out in your photographs? Do they appear in some way?*

I hope so. I never explained to anybody why I do that. For example, the cover of the book, it's not only my love and interest in Morandi's paintings, it's also my love for the pictures that Luigi Ghirri did of Morandi's studio. So in a way it's not only an homage to Morandi it's also an homage to Ghirri. In many of the stories there's a second degree of interest. For example, when I shot the Louise Bourgeois townhouse in New York, I was also working on an exhibition catalogue for Collection Lambert in Avignon. When I do the pictures of her house I have in mind the pictures of her sculptures. It's always a couple of layers of perception.

People maybe would not understand why I put Lenny Kravitz in the book. I am a fan of his and I am also a fan of Prince. So I put him in because he's got Prince's guitar and shoes – you know the little red shoes. Maybe it's not really clear because I don't explain that in a caption.

*It does not need to be clear because you can see a richness in the photos, something beyond what's there.*

Yes exactly. It's not just because he's famous. He collected a lot of American civil rights material and for me it was a way also to show something that you don't expect.

*You were saying earlier that your parents were well known furniture dealers and you grew up with a mix of...*

French 18th century furniture...

*You said grandmother furniture.*

The good grandmother furniture (laughs), mixed with good Danish design with super avant-garde Italian design as well. One of my early birthday wishes was for my parents to take me to the Milan furniture fair to see the first Memphis exhibition.

*No...!*

Yeah, for maybe my 16th birthday, so instead of asking for a moped, I asked to go to Milan to see Studio Alchimia's first exhibition. I still have the catalogue. I always understood or had the perception of design where it was one layer next to another one, not one aesthetic but a mix of different aesthetics and that mix brings you to an interesting point of view on very broad subjects.

*Obviously you are a big collector of objects, but you are probably in some way a bigger collector of images. And you don't just create the images.*

*For me your photos are as much an object as the object that's portrayed.*

Yes. My goal is to transform those pictures of objects into objects by themselves. And not only photos. Not only a representation of what it shows but it also begins to be its own personal object or moment.

*So that's why having lived with your photograph of Casa Malaparte for several years, I'm afraid to go there. I feel like it's going to be a different thing from what's in that photograph.*

Sometimes what I like about a picture is that you can put all the fantasy you want into it. You can project yourself or your fantasy or your love or whatever into a photograph because I think photography has nothing to do with reality, absolutely nothing. It's a transformation of reality, it's your own imagination which transforms what you want people to see.

*But your photographs are not empty, they are not empty to be filled with the person's imagination, they are so full.*

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Yes but you could add your own I think.

*Another house that I think we are both obsessed with, which I got to see before you (laughs) is the Menil House in Houston.*

I didn't know the house but I knew the Menil collection, the Rothko Chapel and the Menil Museum by Renzo Piano, for me you cannot get better than this. Because I knew Dominique de Menil as the collector, Philip Johnson as the architect, and Charles James as the interior designer of the house, I needed to put the three elements together. You see the collection of the paintings but you see the decor and the architecture at the same time.

For me the goal was to translate the emotion I had looking at those three together and not only choose the paintings, the furniture, or the house. That's why I photograph different houses with different techniques, so you don't recognise my pictures by the techniques, except everything is analogue because I would never shoot digital for these projects.

*I can always tell they're your photographs.*

I try to see what will be the best photographic medium for me to use in order to get the sensibility or the emotion I am trying to transmit or to translate.

*The other thing that I think you are obsessed with and it really shows in this book is artists' studios. It's a dumb question, but why?*

Because I feel that they are the closest to my aesthetics in a way. The architecture translation came for me the most with Malaparte and Maison de Verre and for the studio with the Cy Twombly pictures. How can you make a studio be the reflection of the artist himself, his collection, and his approach to the outside world?

I think it's very revealing if you do it well. That's another old thing which I really love, Brassai's approach in the 40s with Picasso's studio because I think that reveals more than anybody else: Brassai's own work, his work on Picasso and I think his writing in his book about it is wonderful. So I try to have a similar approach.

*What you are describing to me sounds almost like a collaboration between the photographer and the artist, or a dialogue at least...*

I think it's a dialogue where they give you the freedom to be there with no constraints and let you do what you can do and I think it's... how can I explain? Usually you see always the same pictures of artists' studios, you know the guy next to the easel. You see but don't really feel the experience of being in the place.

I am trying to focus on what I am going to show but it's really more about retranslating that moment, even if it's really short, it could just be a couple of hours it doesn't matter. But I think it's so revealing and so inspiring for me and hopefully for the viewer that I want to continue in that direction more and more. I have a chance to have access to fantastic places, fantastic art that I could enjoy seeing but I could also enjoy photographing and also enjoy re-gifting to other people who don't have the same access as me to be able to experience. *Your photographs of artists' studios always have to me the term that you used earlier, which is aura.*

I am in America because of Alex Lieberman [the legendary Condé Nast art director] and when I met Alex I discovered not only my boss at Condé Nast but also his book 'The Artist in His Studio'. A few weeks ago at a flea market in New York I found a box of prints by him, the best prints from his book, of Picasso with Matisse. So for me to be able to find those when I was working on my book gave me the strength to go further in that direction.

*Lieberman and his photographs are another layer, I want to say an echo, but in some way it resonates even stronger.*

I like to dream of the provenance of an object, even if you make it up but at least it give you a sense of living together.

*What's interesting though is now a photograph by you has provenance.*

It's not yet there.

*I think you're there.*

En charmant, en charmant.

I ALWAYS UNDERSTOOD OR HAD THE PERCEPTION OF DESIGN WHERE IT WAS ONE LAYER NEXT TO ANOTHER, NOT ONE AESTHETIC BUT A MIX.

FRANÇOIS HALARD: A VISUAL DIARY, by François Halard, concept and art direction by Beda Achermann, a friend and collaborator. Published by Rizzoli New York. Available in October.

