

TO NEPTUNE, RULER OF THE SEAS PROFOUND

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN
ISABELLA SUMMERS AND TATIANA CHENEVIERE

IS (Isabella Summers): Hi, I'm Isabella Summers.

TC (Tatiana Cheneviere): I'm Tatiana Cheneviere.

IS: We met at a dinner, you and I.

TC: We met at a dinner, and it all started through the pathways of Art.

IS: Yes!

TC: It was at a dinner thrown by Gagosian. Izzy and I got chatting about Caravaggio.

IS: Yeah, actually.

TC: It was heads on plates and it was gore and drama and...

IS: Tragedy!

TC: ... and tragedy that brought us together.

IS: Yes, and it will keep us together. Till the grave.

TC: And then, we went away and we started thinking about...

IS: Well, let me interject! Because we need to tell more to that story.

We sat at dinner, you were like: "what are you into?"

Everyone's sitting talking about whatever it was they like. I was like head on plates and you were like: "Oh, we've got the Cy Twombly exhibition coming up". Because you worked at Gagosian then and you hadn't yet started your gallery, which you have now.

TC: Yeah.

IS: Pipeline Contemporary. High fives, Yay!

But it was in this moment, when was it? 2019?

TC: Maybe 2018 even. It was the end of 2018, I think it was around Christmas time.

IS: Yeah. And so we sat there and talked about my background, *Florence and The Machine*, which is deeply rooted in all things hellfire.

TC: And poetry.

IS: And poetry. I am from a bookdealing family. We sat this dinner and you were like: "Hey we're doing this exhibition of Cy Twombly's sculptures."

TC: Yeah.

IS: And they were all found objects and painted white. It was a big exhibition that was coming up at the end of 2019. [1] So it was your idea, Tats, to do maybe some kind of musical response to this exhibition that you had coming up with the sculptures, correct?

TC: Yes. So, we sat down, and we didn't quite know at that stage how it would look, but we knew all the things that made sense with your interests and your background with music and poetry and all the millions of references that Twombly has

to work with.

IS: I remember when we were on tour, I went for a run in Philadelphia one day. I went to the Philadelphia Art Museum, specifically to look at a peaceful Rubens painting of Prometheus bound that I'd seen, that was like: "I've got to go see this painting while I'm in Philadelphia!".

I was in my running gear on a break from the show that night and I ended up in the Philadelphia Art Museum and I stumbled upon this massive room full of huge scribbly paintings that said like *Shades of Eternal Night*. And it was *Fifty Days at Iliam*, Cy Twombly.

I didn't really know who he was before that moment, and I remember being absolutely blown away by this exciting, scribbly, messy, passionate, destructive, war paintings that were really contemporary and white, with things crossed out in them. I bloody loved it!

Anyway, cut to meeting you, and then not really thinking much more on Twombly, because we were on tour and I was stupid, until you were like, "oh, we're doing this thing about the sculptures." And so that was the moment that it brought this guy back to me. And then I remember I had a little red room in Soho and we sat there.

TC: And we just dug around in catalogues, books.

IS: Yeah. It was like being at art school.

TC: It was so good! And we just scrapbooked how we would want something like a journey through Twombly's life and work to sound like, because that's sort of what we were going for. Particularly with sculptures, it was a sort of quite an unsung series within his work and you brought the sound and the song into it.

IS: Well, actually for a while I was like: "Oh, these poems are amazing. Let us get Samuel L. Jackson to read them!"

TC: Samuel L. Jackson was a real consideration.

IS: Let's make it cinematic. Let's get Samuel L. Jackson to read the poem. What was I going on about?

TC: Well, actually you've got a third guest speaker on the podcast. Introducing...

IS: Let's edit him in there...Doing a poem!

TC: Doing a cameo or something.

IS: Oh my God, I love that. Dreams coming true. The end, finally!

TC: Oh God.

IS: So that's kind of what was the beginning of this piece of work that we made and it was really fun to dive into. You can't talk about Twombly without his whole thing was poetry. And here was an amazing quote that I've got stuck on the wall in my mum's bedroom. There is a Cy Twombly quote and he says: "I believe that poetry belongs to the defeated and the dead", which I find that really resonates with me. I like the kind of dramatic language.

TC: I like that too. He had such a kind of varied and kind of broad repertoire, didn't he?

IS: That was all to do with poetry.

TC: All to do with references from Greek mythology, poetry and Rilke, all the greats that you've worked with in your response. But also his series of work was so broad. I mean, If you think about the tempo matching the work, the tempo, the music and, the sound matching what you did.

IS: What we did.

TC: It really kind of builds, and you see that visually in his work. It's like it kind of warms up that, there's a fire being lit

underneath it and it's this just gradually kind of grows. There is the *Ferragosto* paintings and, then it kind of drops again. It was lovely having these chapters in the piece itself, because it meant that you went from really gaudy, grand music and painting, down to things like *Nini's Paintings*, which were much more kind of stretched out.

IS: I remember actually sitting in that red room for those of you listening, it was a tiny little studio in a basement of an office building in Soho.

TC: It was a bit like a kind of booth in the club.

IS: And it was bright red, and that was where we made this piece. I feel like, because of that little room it sounds the way it does. So, I remember making that piece of work. I remember the painting feeling quite sad and repetitious, and these lines kind of just repeat and repeat and repeat. It's like a dull grey blue with grey pencil lines going round and round and it was really interesting to try and figure out how that would sound musically.

TC: How did it feel for you? Because he's got such a diverse way of mark making, all of his mark making is so broad, there is this sort of loopiness and there is much more aggressive, violent mark. How did that translate in your head into sound? How did you map that out?

IS: I remember us looking at *Synopsis of a Battle*, that being an early Twombly, like his whole thing and then, *Fifty Days at Iliam*. All totally deeply rooted in war and battle. That being so exciting for me.

TC: Bloodshed.

IS: I love where we come in with heads on plates, and the idea of what would these paintings sound like. But then Twombly, as a human, ended his life painting flowers and roses. And the Rilke poem [2]:

*Infinitely at ease
despite so many risks,
with no variation of her usual routine,
the blooming rose is the omen
of her immeasurable endurance.
Do we know how she survives?
No doubt one of her days
is all the earth and all
of our infinity.*

TC: So, so good.

IS: And his trajectory in my head starts with these massive battle paintings. They keep going for a long period of time. I'm no expert, but these huge colorful roses with this beautiful Rilke's ode to a wonderful woman. It's such a beautiful thing to have.

TC: They're very seasonal, his paintings. I mean, we looked a lot at that catalogue from his 2008 retrospective at the Tate, which is called *Cycles and Seasons*. And it really kind of traverses those seasons in the work, from the *Ferragosto*, like a very hot August paintings then blossoming at the end. There's some pretty autumnal works in there as well.

IS: I remember us finding the text and so we worked with that, and the sound bit, that was quite a thing. I remember us

making the sea and then it was like: "What would the sea sound like?" but with orchestral elements and rock'n'roll and all the things that I am. And what would that sound like? And I remember trying to make a storm. Do you remember? Recording it was so much fun.

TC: The Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio was kind enough to give us some little excerpts of sound from Twombly's archive. There was, there was a voicemail message to Annabelle d'Huart, who was a friend of Twombly, I believe.

IS: She's a painter.

TC: What did he say?

IS: I thought "all these awful portraits, but actually they are quite beautiful."

TC: Yes.

IS: In his American accent.

TC: And then he says: "I talk to you soon, bye". So it starts with him, which was nice, and then there were these sounds of the Piazza, of a city.

IS: It's Italy.

TC: And so you hear these sound of bells and people walking around.

And then you building into *Poems to the Sea*, the first poem, which is Mallarmé. No, it is *The Swan*. Sorry, *Poems to the Sea* was the series we were looking at.

IS: It was easy to look immediately at Twombly and Mallarmé and find this Mallarmé's poem [3].

Shall I read it?

*The fresh, the beautiful, vivacious day:
with wing-blow reeling can its brilliance wake
beneath this haunted, forgotten and frosted lake
the clear ice-falls of flights not yet fled away?*

*In past magnificence of thoughts today
the swan recaptures its freedom but cannot make a song from surroundings,
but only take on the sterile, dull glint of the winter's stay.
Out of white agony the whole neck lies
in a space inflicted that the bird denies.*

*Cold and immobile in its feathered being,
not in horror of earth but to brightness gone,
as a dream wrapped in scorn, and a phantom, seeing
how ineffectual is
exile for the Swan.*

TC: I think that what was really nice about doing this was that you, as an artist, took some of Twombly's references. He obviously references Mallarmé throughout his work, but you chose which poems you were going to input. And those beats

that might not have always been directly referenced by Twombly, but that resonated with you personally. So, it was a really nice way of bringing your own inspiration to it.

IS: And in the same way that, I think in that moment where we started uncovering Twombly for real, in making this piece I was also uncovering all of these poets for the first time. I didn't really know who Mallarmé was before we were looking at Twombly's paintings. Because I knew we were going to record them, it was about learning the language. In the first iteration of this piece that we made, *To Neptune, Ruler of the Seas Profound*, I think we made it twelve minutes long. It could have been infinite. There are so many sketches of thoughts, of fragments, of poems...

TC: We had to do quite a bit of shrinking.

IS: We would never be done. I mean, it's lifetime that he's been learning and writing and reading all this stuff.

TC: And you've got so many different players involved. It's Twombly, it's you, it's all of these different poets.

Do you know what I mean? It's like a such a great kind of conversation across lots of different art forms and different people all throughout time. Do you know what I mean?

IS: Yeah.

TC: What was really cool about the sculpture chapter was that we had a recording of Twombly playing the piano, so we had a musical snippet from Twombly himself and that was quite special.

IS: That was the hardest one to figure out what to say over the top of it.

TC: Yeah.

IS: And it ended up being Rilke.

TC: Yeah, it has this really nice kind of clunky feel to it because he was just messing around on the piano. It wasn't very coherent. And then Rilke on top which didn't totally fit but was it sort of worked anyway.

IS: It was a very Twombly process.

TC: Totally.

IS: It brought the early years together.

TC: Yeah, and it felt like, bringing in bits together, and found objects, you know, kind of like constructed together but as a whole makes total sense.

IS: Yeah and then we had *Leda and the Swan* [4]:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.
How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?

And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?
A shudder in the loins engenders there

The broken wall, the burning roof and tower

And Agamemnon dead.

*Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?*

IS: I mean come on, come on!

TC: Come on!

IS: That is so amazing, and also it's so definitively Twombly when you hear those words and you think about that painting and the sort of abstract, visceral, explosive thing on this big white canvas, so fun to unravel all of this.

TC: He was sort of the perfect artist to do this kind of thing with because it's all of the senses, isn't it? It's so sensory working with text and language, but then also the visual side of it, of course, and then the last bit, the last ingredient, was the sound...

IS: Yes!

TC: So it became like an amazing kind of sensory overload to have sound with visual and language.

IS: What was so amazing about the first iteration, is that it was to do with the sculptures, which if you didn't know Twombly and any of this stuff, any of these amazing poems or poets or his journey from New York in the 50s to Italy, the passion that he had for the sea, and all of the stuff that was Twombly; if you didn't know any of that stuff and you walked into an art gallery and you saw these white sculptures, what was so fun about what we were doing in that moment, was that kind of bringing them to life with this audio thing, that was like scrapbooked ideas: half beats of the Iliad and Yeats and Keats and Christopher Marlowe.

And then, like, let's make the sea, let's make sounds of Italy, and what does a battle sound like? And then, when it came to the first time we were going to show this piece that was all recorded in a studio, in a little room, I think it was quite funny. The idea of performing it, it seemed too chaotic, because these sculptures are so valuable, first of all, and so we were kind of troubleshooting how we were going to perform this piece with so much having gone into it. I'd been writing for an orchestra and recording electric guitars that were maybe too loud in decimals for the room and then doing poetry on top, we felt it was going to be far too much. But actually to do it in the room with the sculptures, when think about how much stuff went into the actual making of this piece, so instead...

TC: Instead we had it recorded and people walked round the show with it playing in their headsets. Looking at these white sculptures. And you know what? As you were talking I was just thinking that "Thank God!" we waited for the live performance of this piece and the first kind of run of it was in headsets, because for that show in particular, the sculpture show, the way you weave through that show, when you're an audience member, it's such a private experience, isn't it? You do want to have that quiet kind of private moment with it to experience Twombly's kind of...

IS: All of this stuff that went into it. Painting these things he found on the street white.

TC: Yeah.

IS: Essentially.

TC: I think you're right. I think anything more live, more outwards, more loud would have been too chaotic, but it was really beautiful to watch people just...

IS: Listening.

TC: And walking around, and kind of hearing these sounds of war and rock'n'roll in their headsets, their reality - their physical reality - was such a kind of quiet one.

IS: Also the idea that some of the people that I invited for sure probably would never have got what they got out of there headsets that night, from looking at these sculptures, not knowing anything.

TC: It was very much a surprise for people. I don't think anyone really understood what they were going to...

IS: Get. I think there's something really blissfully brilliant about how innocent the making of it was. Relooking at some of the pictures, knowing that you were coming over and we were going to do this today, I was just thinking: "Oh my god, even I don't really know necessarily what we were doing in that moment." There were just all of these ingredients that had to go into it: the battlefield, the poetry, the beauty, the sadness, the repetition, the love for language, Twombly himself.

TC: I think that's what the process really looked like. It was a lot of chucking things in all the necessary ingredients, responding to the paintings themselves and the sculptures themselves in sound. And then we sort of applied some structure on top of it, didn't we? Then we looked at it in a more sort of linear way: the different series that he made throughout his life, and the kind of poetry...

IS: The moon landings.

TC: Moon landings. And then we would put the structure on top, but all of the sound and all of the response came very intuitively.

IS: Totally, yeah, a man after my own heart. I say that we're married together, posthumously.

TC: I would call you Twombly's...

IS: Official composer? Yeah, I'll take it!

TC: The composer he never had asked for!

IS: He didn't get a choice! And then shout out to Eleonora and the Cy Twombly Foundation.

TC:...Who came to the first performance, of course.

IS: And then they suggested that we-- well, slightly me pushing for it-- but us ending up in Rome at the Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio doing it live. Live players!

I was like: "we've got to do this live!" And Eleonora said: "Yes, let's, we really do." So, we went to Rome.

TC: Perfect setting for that.

IS: It was 2022. It was right in the weirdest beginning of the end of Covid, but it was still kind of weird, having been through the weirdest chapter ever, and us starting this adventure, just at the beginning of that, at the end of 2019. And then we go to Rome and Eleonora said: "we are friends with the Italian Contemporary Orchestra [PMCE - Parco della Musica Contemporanea Ensemble] and we can get you twelve players." And we were like: "we'll take it! Sign us up, we'll take it!" And we went to Rome and we had two days of rehearsals with our band of Italian brothers, brothers and sisters, and I remember it was quite a hustle to get this kind of strange brilliant piece that we made written out for the players. We were limited with - obviously when I was writing it in my computer there was no cap - it was like: "Yes sure, put the whole

orchestra in there because I can, it's all at the tip of my fingers." And you know, twelve electric guitar tracks with me talking over the top of it, massive strings, horns, big timpani, drums, and then some quiet beautiful string moments, whatever the moon landings Twombly talking, and it was like: "let's now translate that live." And it was like having to write it out for the orchestra and the Rome players—because they didn't really speak English, we would communicate with them in gestures, it was very gestural.

TC: I'll just communicate through the spirit of music in Twombly.

IS: And so we performed that piece... there was *Treatise on the Veil* pictures, somewhere in the back room.

TC: Yeah, there was a little exhibition happening in the sort of side room, next to where the main stage was. But it was perfect for us to perform it live there because we weren't really interfering with any works of art. The performance was quite separate, which was nice. [5]

IS: Because that was such a success, we then got to take it in front of the blockbuster paintings. I went to Los Angeles terrified this time: "Oh God! What stone have we thrown, what avalanche we created!" And the third time we performed it to date was in Los Angeles at Gagosian. [6]

TC: That was 2023.

IS: Yeah, at the end, in front of these huge, massive masterpieces that were colourful and scribbly. They were enormous. And the scale of that room and the scale of those paintings. It was quite fun knowing that what we had done so innocently in this little red room was then going to translate in front of these huge, simple but colourful and extremely drippy and expressive – masterpieces is the only way I can describe it—It was at that moment we needed more. Because they didn't have any scribbly words in them and they were quite floral and they were called Winter pictures and things like that, I basically sat and wrote a bunch of orchestral sketches with these images, literally taped behind my computer, as to what I interpreted the paintings to sound like, because I knew they were gonna be simple and bright, and kind of dark and scribbly and drippy. And I made this kind of whole...

TC: Extra chapter.

IS: Extra chapter called "In Bloom" or "Bloom" of like these little scribbly sketches. Actually, I think that's maybe some of my favourite work that I've ever made.

TC: Really?

IS: Yeah, because it really is to me how his work sounds if it was orchestra.

TC: Do you feel like the piece kind of found its final conclusion with that chapter? That it felt whole after that?

IS: I would say it would be impossible to put an end on it.

TC: Yeah, it could keep going, couldn't you?

IS: Yeah, you could make a whole lifestyle of it.

TC: I'd like that lifestyle.

IS: You give me a whole lifestyle.

TC: You could dress like them,

IS: Like the yellow and red, literally. But I think that to that point it has deeply affected my life and the way I think as a musician and artist. Obviously the Twombly's fever has taken over me. It's so exciting to still be able to uncover his work but knowing that we've had this intimate time with him and his work directly, which is such a privilege.

TC: It's such a privilege. It's really interesting to hear that it's affected the way that you think as an artist.

IS: How could it not?

TC: Yeah. It's the first time you've really responded to visual art that "wow".

IS: 100% and what a blessing it was, such a fun addition to like scoring movies, like...

TC: Like still storytelling though.

IS: Exactly that! It's still storytelling in a new way, in a new old way.

TC: And since then, you are working collaboration as artist and curator. Well we have gone on to do more of this kind of scrapbooking. So, the story has continued with the man himself, Caravaggio.

IS: Yes, we got there!

TC: Cool.

IS: That was the second one we've already done. We've done Twombly, we've done Caravaggio, and we've done in your Gallery Pipeline Contemporary.

TC: Yes, we've done three now. All very, very different, but all with a very similar thread and approach to art making. Long may it continue!

IS: Literally, Twombly what an honor! Thank you for having us, whoever's listening. And then, Caravaggio for the National Gallery... [7]

TC: The last, I would imagine.

IS: And then, learning about actual why their heads were on the plates.

TC: Yeah.

IS: And then, Ursula and her arrow... And then in your gallery.

TC: We went back to books.

IS: Yeah, we went back to books and it was like finding some things to respond to like in...

TC: In a book collection.

IS: Yeah. Side note: I sat with my godson, who's 4, at Christmas time. He's so cute, little Gabriel! I squished him in next to me, because it was bedtime and he was being crazy. And I read him *The Raven*, which I read in your gallery [8], and he said: "why are you keep saying 'quoth the Raven, Nevermore'" [9]. And so now, our whole thing is I go to "Quoth the Raven" and he goes "Nevermore." Thank you! I am doing it all Christmas. It's a thing!

TC: So, how do we wrap it up? In conclusion, I think what you said just a few minutes ago about it all being a really privilege. Yeah, I think that's.

IS: We'll see you at the Met, Twombly.

NOTES:

[1] Gagosian Gallery, London, *Cy Twombly: Sculpture* (September 30–December 21, 2019).

[2] Rilke, Rainer Maria. *The Roses XXVI*. 1927. Translated from French by A. Poulin Jr.

[3] Mallarmé, Stéphane. *The Swan*. 1887.

[4] Butler Yeats, William. *Leda and the Swan*. 1924.

[5] On the occasion of *Un/veiled*. Cy Twombly, *Music, Inspirations* (2022) some works on paper from the series of the studies for *Treatise on the Veil* paintings were exhibited at the space of Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio.

[6] Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles, *Cy Twombly* (September 15–December 17, 2022).

[7] The performance took place at The National Gallery in London on the occasion of the exhibition, *The Last Caravaggio*, in response to the artist's paintings, *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula* (1610) and *Salome and The Head of John The Baptist* (1607).

[8] The project at Pipeline Contemporary Gallery was as part of the exhibition *Strings Attached*. For this exhibition, a group of artists were invited to select a book from the Bella Kesoyan rare book collection as a reference for a new work. Isabella Summers composed a piece in response to the collection and selected two texts which she recited: Alexander Pope's, *The Dunciad*, and *The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe.

[9] Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Raven*. 1845.

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