



Left
 Fabienne Verdier with her work
Palpito e tremo senza saper.
 “When you hear Mozart, something
 in your body begins to move.”

Good vibrations

The French artist, Fabienne Verdier, talks to *Lucinda Bredin* about how learning to breathe changed her work

Photograph by Benjamin McMahon

In 2014, Fabienne Verdier was invited to the Juilliard School of Music in New York to investigate the connection between art and music, and whether the forcefield of sound could have a dialogue with painting. The filmmaker Mark Kidel followed the French artist while she painted alongside jazz and classical musicians. In some of the clips, we see Verdier responding rhythmically to the music with pixelated stabbing motions, almost attempting to write the score in paint; in others, she uses more sweeping gestures to capture the lyricism of a piece.

But perhaps the most fascinating encounter is between Verdier and Edith Wiens, the renowned teacher of voice. The film shows Edith grasping Verdier from behind to make the artist focus on her breath leaving her body. It had a profound effect. As she says, “Attending Edith’s classes, I came to understand that the voice needed to rise out of the whole body, and to be sung outward, expanding in space. It seemed to me that the dynamic phrasings of the voice were launched like a whirlwind.”

Fast forward six years and Verdier is about to have an exhibition at Waddington Custot in London of works that are a distillation of that time at the Juilliard. We are standing in her studio, which has been built in her (extensive) garden in a rural village to the north of Paris. A tall, barn-like structure, it has two levels, with an upper floor that functions as a walkway, with a steel girder spanning the gap. On the lower floor, known to

Below
Verdier in her library

Bottom left
Deh, vieni alla finestra miei non sente

Bottom right
Se de' tormenti suoi, se de' sospiri

Right
Verdier's brushes, waiting to create a whirlwind

Opposite
Fabienne Verdier 'dances as she steers the brush in expansive sweeps'



Photo Benjamin Mollathron. All images Courtesy of Waddington Custot



from a bicycle, an invention crafted by Fabienne's husband, Ghislain. Verdier says that when she paints, she wants to feel as if she is floating. Videos show her doing just that – she almost dances as she steers the brush in expansive sweeps over the support, in what amounts to a performance.

At first glance, Verdier's large canvases appear to struggle to contain huge swirling forcefields, or vortices. But they are the culmination of her research that began at the Juilliard. She begins each morning of painting by singing. "When you hear Mozart, something in your

body begins to move and creates an inner dynamism. It pushes an inner desire and has a physical effect. Immediately I feel vivid, and it makes an impact on my mind." Snatches of arias are written on the back of her paintings and double as the titles of her works.

It has taken quite some time for these ideas to gestate. Verdier's other studio, her first – also in the garden – is now her library, and this mental laboratory is where her ideas start to germinate. Along with some 2,000 books, the table is piled with references taken from sources ranging from medieval manuscripts to philosophical tracts, with a series of detailed mind maps that are the structure behind each work. Verdier

Verdier as 'the pit', there are rows of oversized brushes neatly arranged on the wall, as if they are primed for a giant with a penchant for calligraphy. It is an eclectic group of tools, but they are for one purpose only – the production of her paintings.

On a platform in the middle of the floor is a work with looping white strokes. "I always paint on the ground," explains Verdier. "I first create the background, then the second stage is painting with a big brush to create the vortex, and then I use a glaze to marry the form and the background." The brushes hang from a pulley system, are steeped in paint and steered by a contraption with handlebars borrowed

clearly doesn't rush into anything. She agrees. "It's taken a long time to be confident. These ideas have to cook inside." She laughs. "I'm great friends with [the chef] Guy Savoy and he's asked me to talk on his TV show about how I cook my painting and how he paints his dishes. Like me, he is obsessed with structure and how to open a new sensory pathway."

A glance at Fabienne Verdier's CV bears out her love of structure and research. She certainly knows how to play the long game. For ten years, she immersed herself in China, ostensibly learning about

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calligraphy, but in fact mastering a way of being. "I am quite timid, and I felt I wasn't in harmony with society, but I want to transmit something to help other people and to connect with them." As a child, she wanted to be a musician. "I played the piano, and my teacher wanted me to do the *concours*. But the first time I played in public, I couldn't do it," she says, still shuddering at the memory. "I was hypersensitive. My teacher said I had the talent, but was perhaps too fragile to be a star." Verdier then searched for another creative outlet and enrolled at art college in Toulouse. This wasn't a natural fit either. "I was horrified, embarrassed by the teaching there. It seemed to

be very male and based around the ego." Her tutor suggested that if she was interested in "fluidity and the natural expression of life", she should go to Asia. So she did.

It was a very different approach. As Verdier says, "When I was in China, it required me to leave all ego, to be very ascetic, not to channel emotion. But, at the start, I was *en colère*. I was angry with my family, with politics, with everyone... it took a long time to understand the power of silence. I had to lose myself in my practice, and wash all my emotions and sadness away. I had to learn humility – and I probably couldn't have done that in Europe."

It is interesting, I say, that Western artists are encouraged to harness their anger to make an impact. Rage and emotion are often viewed as positive attributes. Verdier says that one of the great lessons she learnt at the Juilliard was to have a more vibrant presence. "The musicians said I was too ascetic. I should express more... but I also saw how composers created a language that conveyed their feelings in a subtle way – a suggestion of sadness is more powerful than loud wailing. It's more powerful because it is not melodramatic, but you try to express in a universal way rather than a personal way. I think this is beginning to work towards reconnecting the two cultures."

Lucinda Bredin is Editor of Bonhams Magazine.

Fabienne Verdier's exhibition *Vortex* is at Waddington Custot, 11-12 Cork Street, W1, from 6 October to 17 November. waddingtoncustot.com/artists/fabienne-verdier/