

TEMPLON

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PRUNE NOURRY

CHRISTIE'S MAGAZINE, May 2019

Art of glass

As Murano's Glasstress exhibition marks its 10th anniversary, Claire Wrathall profiles four artists who are re-examining the creative potential of the Venetian island's most famous export



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Prune Nourry

Born 1985, Paris; lives and works in Brooklyn, New York City

Outside The Standard hotel in New York, by the steps to the High Line, a monumental and powerfully affecting sculpture held court for a month last summer. Entitled *The Amazon*, and modelled in white concrete after the Roman marble statue of a wounded Amazon in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it stood almost four metres tall and was a tribute to those who have had surgery for breast cancer. When the torso was installed, its right breast was intact. By the end of the month, the artist had chiselled it away. What really held the viewer's gaze, however, were its lifelike blown-glass eyes.

Nourry, a conceptual artist who embraces sculpture, installation, performance and video, has long put issues of gender, reproduction and bioethics at the heart of her work. *Terracotta Daughters* was an installation of 108 statues of orphaned Chinese girls, inspired by the Terracotta Army, which were buried 'in a secret location in China' in 2015 to be excavated by archaeologists in 2030; while *In Vitro* addressed assisted conception and breastfeeding through sculptures made of old laboratory glassware the artist had found at Paris's Porte de Clignancourt flea market, laid out to evoke a woman's internal organs in a clinically dehumanised way.

Nourry has used glass eyes for some time, for instance in her series *Bébé's Domestiques*: lifelike silicone sculptures of what she calls 'genetic hybrids, halfway between children and dogs, [which] probe the boundaries between man and animal, as well as the anthropomorphisation of pets in our society'.

But if her motivation for these works was to bring 'the objectivity of an anthropologist' to an idea, she has begun, since she was diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago at the age of 31, to make herself more central to her work. This was partly pragmatic: 'Suddenly I was the subject!' she says. But it was also a coping response to the forced passivity she feels is imposed on patients: 'They push you on a trolley even if you can walk to the operating theatre.' Continuing to make work when she could – 'holding a camera and saying "action"' – was a 'way to be more proactive with the illness', says Nourry, who refers to *The Amazon* as her 'catharsis sculpture'.

Her illness has also made her look at some of her early works from a different perspective: 'Right before the cancer, I was using acupuncture needles to make sculptures [*Imbalance*, 2016], without knowing that by the time the exhibition opened, I would be completely imbalanced myself – in the middle of chemo with no hair, and using acupuncture as a kind of pillar to help me with the side effects.'

Nor did she know that 10 years after she had made casts of her nipples, she would have a mastectomy. Originally, she had modelled them in porcelain for a series of sculptures she calls



Above, Prune Nourry, *In Vitro Fertilization*, 2010. Opposite, the artist in her studio with the eyes of *The Amazon*, shown behind her

'breast-udders'. Later, she had used them to cast pink marzipan for a performance piece and video called *The Procreative Dinner*, where they were served as dessert, the final course in a meal in which each dish symbolises a stage in the process of assisted conception, gestation and birth. Despite a voice over by the French pioneer of in-vitro fertilisation, Jacques Testart, the work lampoons, both chillingly and amusingly, the fertility industry. 'I didn't know then that I would have to freeze my eggs,' she says.

The work she has made for Glasstress is both philosophical and obliquely biological. From afar, she says, the 'human-size' Pyrex sculpture will seem to resemble a landscape seen from above – of trees, their roots, a river. On closer examination, 'You will realise that it's like an anatomical chart of all the veins inside a human body. I like this kind of analogy, this kind of animism, where everything is connected: human, nature, animal, objects... It's the eternal question of the soul.'

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