

THE FOUR ELEMENTS

SÈTE, FRANCE - 2006

When I was invited by Jonas Stampe and Nadia Capitaine to the Performance Infr'Action Festival in Sète, I had already done some work with earth and water, as well as some experiments with fire and air. But it had never crossed my mind to work with the four elements on the same canvas.

At first I thought of working with the water from the Sète canal. As I had already carried out an ephemeral work with kimonos in river beds, I knew that only a very resistant canvas would be able to endure the corrosion of salt water. So I bought myself a synthetic canvas measuring 3 meters by 1 meter and a half.

But the city councillors vetoed my idea of leaving the canvas exposed under the water, attached to fishermen's lines, during the festival. I was on the Camino de Santiago when I learned of this veto and it was because of this setback that I had the idea of working on the four elements in the same work, dedicating myself to one element a day.

I wanted the place to leave its impression on the work, and since Sète is a port I very much wanted to develop a partnership with sea water. So on the first day of the Festival I decided to compose the painting with the waves. On the second day, to design with the fire of candles, on the third to remove the excesses with the wind, and on the fourth day to plant my painting for a year.

Although I had done some previous experiments with all four elements, I was most familiar with earth. In the Pyrenees the earth left its marks in a subtle way, with the four seasons impregnating the canvas little by little. As for the Amazon, that impenetrable forest, the earth simply took possession of the paintings.

In my work on the Four Seasons, I gave a special role to the time of earth. I placed most of my paintings in forests but also made the experiment of working with the other elements: for instance, leaving a painting in a riverbed and another exposed on a tree trunk. In the Amazon there were paintings that I left in the earth, but because of a flood in the region, they remained totally submerged for over eight months. The paintings were transformed completely in that particular partnership.

I learned that with the element of water the results are far more unpredictable than with earth. The kimonos that I had left in river beds, for example, disappeared completely, either carried off by the current or devoured by the river.

The element of water is the element of forgetting.

THE ELEMENT OF WATER

Before coming to Sète I had only worked with river waters, never the sea. As always before walking a new path, we have the tendency to try to plan, as if we could really predict how things are going to turn out.

Before going to Sète I had prepared the canvas finding inspiration in a Japanese technique of dyeing tissues. This technique consists in fastening cloth bags with pigments in the tissue and letting the river current flow over them and dye them. I decided to sew skeletonised leaves onto the canvas, two by two as if they were a small bag. When I got to the seaside, my intention was to apply the pigments and leave the waves to design the canvas.

However, I had not reckoned with the tide being high. I had to jump over a small wall and climb down to the sea over the rocks. There was only a little patch of sand protected by two blocks of stones. The waves were beating very strongly and when I began to put the pigment onto the leaves I noticed that the sea was coming in and carrying everything off, washing the canvas of leaves and pigment. I realised that my initial plan to let the waves design the canvas would be impossible.

That was when I started my struggle, holding on to the canvas and trying to fix the pigment. It was as if nothing around me existed, just the sea and the canvas and me. I began to throw the pigments directly on the canvas, no longer using the little bags of skeletonised leaves, but the sea rushed in too quickly, leaving only a slight vestige of color.

Since I had bars of pigment, I began to draw with them and the effect started to appear. Then I fixed the canvas to the rocks and began to use the bars of pigment like a stamp.

I saw the canvas becoming transformed and at a certain moment I felt that this was the right time to stop, the canvas had to rest.

I brought it up a little higher where the sea was not as strong and sat down beside it. I felt that we were partners: the sea, the canvas and me. I stayed there contemplating the horizontal for a quarter of an hour, and when it was six o'clock I said my prayers.

THE PATH OF WATER IS FIRE

At eleven o'clock the following morning I was taken to the top of Mount St. Clair beside the Chapel of Our Lady of Salette. It was there on the top that I had my first experience with fire.

After talking to the priest, he opened the gate to the plot of land beside the chapel and I stretched the canvas out on the ground, fetched the candles and began my work.

Right at the start the fire fell and made two holes in the canvas and I felt that was not the way to do it. I began to concentrate a little and little by little I started communing with that element.

Unlike the sea, which forced me to engage in battle with it, fire led me to meditation. The drops from the candles wept, silently leaving their marks. I noted that there were large stones on that plot of land and decided to put the canvas on top of a large rock and let the drops form their own path. Then I let them drop on the canvas and these fingers of fire remained there burning for some time.

I prayed while working and the fire danced before my eyes, bringing back memories. I have known the image of Our Lady of Salette since I was very young. It intrigued me to see the image of this saint sitting with her hands covering her face as she wept. One day I asked my mother why the saint was crying and she explained to me that Our Lady of Salette weeps for the sad people who live on the earth.

On the top of Mount St. Clair, in the crater of this old volcano, I saw Our Lady crying tears of fire on my canvas.

THE RAIN BRINGS THINGS FROM THE AIR

On the third day I had to compose with the air. I had already experimented with the air by leaving a painting rolled up in a tree in the Pyrenees and another on top of a tree in the Amazon. Except that this time I had to compose, for just one hour, with this element.

Upon arriving at the atrium of the church of St. Louis, below a crowned Virgin, I was welcomed by a very powerful wind. The canvas, attached to a small clothesline, waved about like very fine tissue.

I realised at that moment that the work of the air is to remove excess. Until I understood this, it was difficult: I prayed, uttered disconnected words and chanted mantras, tossing my air too onto the canvas. Throwing my interior air on the canvas, I felt that I too was removing the excess, that I was being purified. Finally I took my canvas and began to hit it on the ground and wave it in the air like a banner. I wanted the air to penetrate it and for it to discover new forms.

The necessary became clear because I lost the fear of spoiling the canvas.

EARTH: REPOSE AND RESURRECTION

I thought that working with earth would be calmer because I would be dealing with the element that I knew best. I had taken a pick and a shovel: all that I had to do was dig the earth, stretch out the canvas and cover it up again.

I returned to the plot of land beside the chapel of Our Lady of La Salette where I had worked with fire. It was Sunday and all the work was to start after the half-past nine Mass.

What I had not expected was for the day to start with heavy rain. The city of Sète was on yellow alert, with very strong winds blowing and the sea was swollen. When we reached the top of Mount St. Clair the rain fell in torrents.

There were nine of us: Joe, Laurence, Paula, a couple, a father who had come with his young son (carrying a plastic spade to help), Jean Jacques and myself. The wind and rain beat down very hard but I felt that this would be good for the soul. Everyone helped me so that everything would happen as quickly as possible. We had to dig a hole three meters deep on land covered with stones. At the moment we began to dig, the rain calmed down a bit and allowed us to work.

The earth is hard, the tools are heavy: the time of the earth is a time that calls for great strength and dedication from the worker.

We worked hard until we managed to dig the hole and plant the canvas. Just as we were finishing, the rain started even stronger than before. We ended up running to take shelter underneath a cover of sorts on the plot of land, absolutely soaked. We all took leave of one another with much love, but also much haste, because the rain was beating down so hard.

So I left my canvas there in the wet ground for a year. My project is to recover it at the next performance festival. Then I shall see how the earth of the chapel of Our Lady of Salette will treat my painting born of water, fire and air.