

# CHRISTELLE OYIRI AN EYE FOR AN "I" PONTOPREIS MMK 2024



ZOLLAMT<sup>MMK</sup>

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They can't be seen, but they have to see everything. They never stay fixed in one place. Without being noticed, they continually change their position and their vantage point. Despite the constant background noise, they pick up every sound. They are all eyes and ears. They know everyone—their habits, their movements. But no one sees them. They receive little payment but bear a huge responsibility. The choufs (*chouf*, meaning “see” or “look” in Arabic) stay at their posts, always on the alert. These discreet figures warn drug dealers immediately while remaining untraceable themselves.

In our present-day lives, it seems impossible to avoid being seen, observed, or analyzed. Cameras and cookies are watching every move, following each action, emotion, and thought. So how is freedom possible despite this? How can we feel free and think freely? How is it to oscillate between secrecy and having your sense of self located in the digital? Could the chouf be a model, a keystone of countersurveillance?

Christelle Oyiri (b. 1992), the winner of the 2024 PONTOPREIS MMK, has created a new immersive work for her solo exhibition at ZOLLAMT<sup>MMK</sup>. The PONTOPREIS MMK is awarded every two years by the Jürgen Ponto-Stiftung in cooperation with the MUSEUM<sup>MMK</sup>FÜR MODERNE KUNST.

## Susanne Pfeffer in conversation with Christelle Oyiri

SUSANNE PFEFFER Christelle, for the exhibition at ZOLLAMT<sup>MMK</sup>, you are focusing on Les Fauvettes in Pierre-fitte-sur-Seine, a suburb north of Paris. Why did you choose this place?

CHRISTELLE OYIRI Originally, I wanted to shoot at L'Îlot 8 in Saint-Denis. I realized that it would be way more complicated than I thought, even though it made sense for me architecturally and I lived in the city as well. Last year, I developed a relationship with Les Fauvettes through my friend Alexia. I came across La Cité des Fauvettes in 2020, almost four years ago. It was ten minutes from where I was living then. I saw the building while jogging and was completely blown away by it and by the level of resilience of the people living there. This social housing is for me a symbol for the failure of French utopian and Brutalist ideas that prevailed in the 1960s through the 1980s. After the war and during the '60s, the economy was booming in France. Then, with the decolonization of a lot of African countries, especially in North and West Africa, immigration to France intensified. All of these people were sent to areas that are called banlieue, like La Cité.

At the beginning, the banlieues were supposed to symbolize the idea of progress, and the idea of social diversity, because a lot of teachers were living there, as well as working class people and intellectuals. So, it was meant to be a way that different social classes and people could coexist together, with the perspective of creating some kind of emulation. But the utopian nature of these places never fulfilled its mission. Utopia is a place that doesn't exist. So, I chose Les Fauvettes because it's the biggest symbol of that. It's one of the places that has the most difficulties, whether it's economic or architectural decay. It was inspiring to see my friend try to inject life into a place that had been declared dead for a long time, and to revive a place that is at this time going to be destroyed next year.

The place almost has an expiration date. I felt it was interesting to work on a place that is bound to be a ruin soon or will not even exist as a ruin. It was about doing archival work in a way that feels quasi-fictional, a kind of magical realism, but still operates as an archive.

SP Can you tell us a bit about your approach?

CO The film focuses on a mystical figure in the imaginary of people from the banlieue and working-class people, which is the figure of the chouf. It's spelled "c-h-o-u-f". It's an Arab word, which means "to look." But in France, a chouf is someone who supervises drug trafficking.

The chouf is the first link between reality and the whole circuit of the subterranean economy. Growing up in this environment, I always saw some choufs, even though they were really discreet and really young. You always saw someone chaperoning your surroundings. When I was little, I didn't understand what it meant. I had no idea what was going on until I reached teenagehood and realized that being a chouf was a full-time job. When you're a kid, you tend to think these people are just hanging out. The movie unveils this. I am not trying to criminalize it and I am trying to look at it for what it is.

I approach it from a symbolic perspective, rather than in a judgmental or moralistic way. These choufs had to be discreet and had to be able to look. They were the eyes and the ears of La Cité. I wanted to symbolize how the unseen, the chouf, sees and stays in secrecy. The movie is also about how this movement operates in places that were inspired by post-structuralist philosophy. When these places were made, it was the same time that this philosophy was becoming popular in France. So, there are elements of this philosophy that inspired the movie. I'm thinking about how this architecture, where everybody faces each other, is reminiscent of the panopticon from Michel Foucault. The movie is about the gaze that everybody has in these places, but more importantly, the gaze and the daily life of the chouf. When you are the eyes and the ears of something, you confuse yourself with the architecture. But you also become a sort of cyborg because you do stuff mechanically. It's similar to how techno musicians were inspired by looking at people, like their own parents, working at Ford factories. They could feel Detroit was going from industrial to technological, and they were being set apart from this transition. I felt the same way about the chouf.

Obviously, it's not working directly with machines, but it's working with a phone, which is the extension of their hand. It's working with eyes, it's working with their ears a lot. When you train things relentlessly, it allows you to reach a level of observation that is way above average.

You're used to analyzing your surroundings, you're used to looking at things from a different perspective, you're used to being able to counter-surveil when the police arrive, and the police are monitoring you. You're able to operate as a counter-surveillance point. This was interesting to me. These past few years, whether you're a Black American or a Black person who grew up in France—and I was born in France—the police have become hard to ignore. World-wide, the “police brutality video” has been turned into a real video category in itself.

I was reading this 2023 book by Aria Dean, *Bad Infinity*, and it was really interesting because she highlights how the police brutality video can escape any type of aesthetic category, and it kind of became its own canon. It became a canon, but the cinema industry, or film critics, don't know what to do with this canon. From a judiciary point of view, we learned that this type of video doesn't mean that the police are going to be found guilty. Even if you have the most horrendous video, it doesn't mean anything.

SP It also doesn't prevent anything. The police are so sure, and even though they must always notice that they're filmed, they continue their actions.

CO Exactly. The police brutality video became such a difficult canon, and it's a canon that doesn't say its name. I don't want to give into that. The police in France are a huge chunk of the reality of the people there because we saw what happened recently with the death of this young, North African teenager Nahel Merzouk in June 2023. But at the same time, from a fictional point of view, I want to reduce the police to nothing, because they already take up so much space, both filmic-wise and in real life.

SP You were talking about how, in Detroit, people were left behind as technology developed.

CO I feel like the perspective when you look at cinematographic production from France, whether it's *La Haine* from 1995 or *Les Misérables* from 2019 or anything of the sort, the films seem to operate from multiple points of view. Not so much *La Haine*, but *Les Misérables* definitely does. It's a multi-point of view thing where they're filming La Cité and they're giving you the point of view of the policeman and the point of view of the person living in La Cité. But I'm not interested in that. What I'm interested in

is solely the perspective of the people living there. I'm not interested in giving space to police states in my narrative because I feel like that's been done enough. It's a canon that doesn't say its name. I work against the canon or around it. I always challenge it. I never embrace it or anything. Anything that I do in the arts is always about debunking it and splitting it in half.

It was also a question of how can I do the opposite of this canon. I grew up in these places, and yes, the police have shown up to my door, and beat up people who I know. Like I said, the police brutality video doesn't prove anything and acts as a canon that doesn't say its name. So, it was about what is the other reality that can be explored when these people are empowered, and not made to feel like they're solely victims of their own environment, but rather guardians of it. It was about reestablishing my truth in all of this noise and perception.

SP It is maybe about you as an artist being a chouf yourself.

CO Exactly. Originally, the movie was supposed to be about two girls. One girl would have been reflective of me and my history. I grew up in this environment, but then I had the opportunity to do great studies. I had to leave and embrace the survivor guilt because a lot of people that grew up with me didn't have the same kind of opportunities. The movie was going to be more narrative and filmic. This character was supposed to be some kind of chouf herself because, even though she's going to leave and eventually pursue other studies, she's still looking at La Cité through her window and watching the choufs that watch reality. It was kind of a metaphor. Then I thought that I could do it in a more metaphorical way. It was about observing my own surroundings, making my own conclusions, and creating my own mythology. When you let a certain narrative take over completely, there's only space for one mythology, which is reminiscent of Greek mythology. There are the powers that be and there's the hero who cannot fight against them.

But for me, it's always about exploring what an anti-hero is as well. I think that the chouf sits between counter-surveillance and has a sort of hacker vibe about them. They wear a lot of tech wear. They wear a lot of Arc'teryx, really technical streetwear stuff. It was about looking at the fact that they dress like this for a reason, too. Everything

is taught thoroughly; nothing is chosen in a random sense. Instead of looking at things from solely a criminal point of view, I was thinking, this is an organization, the mythology is already there. I'm just highlighting it. I'm not inventing anything, what I'm talking about is daily life. It's not even me extrapolating or creating something completely new. I'm highlighting something that is already there.

SP You described how as a child you didn't understand the situation. But I just thought that as a child, it's interesting that somehow you observe everything in an equal way. This is maybe also part of the chouf, and maybe a bit Freudian, but every single thing, even a small thing, is of the same importance as every big thing that happens. You told me once that a lot of children are choufs. How do you get to become a chouf?

CO You get to become a chouf because you're young, you're pauperized, and you're impoverished. I don't think that kids from a privileged background, or not even a middle-class background, get to be choufs. What I noticed when I was a kid was that the kids that were the most active, who were always outside and who had a huge responsibility from a really young age were the ones who became choufs.

SP Who were also responsible maybe for their younger sisters and brothers?

CO Like an unspoken responsibility, because the parents are not telling the kids to go work. It's not what's happening. The parents think their kids are at school. That's why I said it's something that operates in secret. It's not something that is supposed to be known by the parents. Some of them probably know, but they have to act like they don't because they don't want to enable their child. So, there's a lot of secrecy surrounding the selection, but also how the parents receive that because most of the choufs live with their parents.

SP And how old are they most likely?

CO A chouf could go from 14 years old up until I would say 25? But yeah, 12 or 13 to 22. And because it's an organization, you can evolve and be placed in other categories. But the chouf is the primary category. It looks like it doesn't

require any skills because they're just asking you to look. They're not asking you to weigh the drugs or test them or pack them or exchange them with clients and verify that all the money is there. They're not asking you to do that. They're asking you to look. But most of the choufs are pretty young. You have to be really young because you have to be discreet. You have to be small. You have to be quick. And the older you get, the more you lose all of these qualities. For children to develop this sense of observation, it's kind of crazy when you think about it. It looks like it doesn't require any skill, but it does. I don't know if I'm going to tackle it, but what's also interesting is from the point of view of the organization of a business, the chouf is the most important part because they secure the place and make sure that all of the transactions can be done effectively. But at the same time, they're paid the least. So, I'm excited for someone to do a movie about the syndicalism that can potentially happen and be erected in a place like this.

It's almost like the movie industry, where the screenwriter is paid the worst, but nothing would happen without them. We saw in 2023 with the Writers Guild of America strike that screenwriters are at the bottom of the barrel. I feel the same way about the chouf. They're the ones making business possible because they insure the environment. They're the first *rouage* [cog], the first step. But because they're the youngest and the ones who probably need the money the most, they're not considered to have power. They're considered to be at the very bottom. So, I think it's interesting from a capitalistic point of view, if you remove them, what happens? If they get rebellious and ask to be paid more, or if they go and have the same grievances as people operating in the real corporate world.

SP The interesting thing is that, as you said, it takes a lot to be a chouf. But it's regarded as if it doesn't. So, they don't have the option to say, "Oh, I would like to have more." I'm sure the drug dealers would say that they would choose somebody else.

CO Exactly, there are so many of them.

SP Because there are lot of people hanging around who need money and would like to become a chouf?

CO Exactly. The movie is inspired by one of my friends, Sophia Oud-Kaci. She's a cultural worker and she was also a social worker. She worked with impoverished youth for more than ten years. She studied psychology and grew up in these places. She's of Algerian descent, and her stage name and how I call her, is chouf. She's also a poet. She's going to be the narrator of the movie. She's the inspiration behind it because, for her handle, she made up this word called *canal-chouf*. *Canal* in French means channel, like a TV channel. She made up this weird, double alliteration *canal-chouf*. I thought it was genius. Honestly, I would love to see a TV channel from the people that see the reality of these places or that always have so much to share because they see so much all day.

SP Because they see *everything*.

CO Everything, they see everything. So, it started from there. I thought, that's a crazy concept. It's not just a random name. That's a concept in itself. In the movie, I'm also including found footage from the choufs and found footage from Snapchat and stuff. The real concept is for it to operate like its own TV channel. The choufs are always on Snapchat, and they have one iPhone and one phone without the internet that we call a *Bigo*. It's a phone that doesn't have internet, so they're not traceable. So, the choufs, on the other hand, they live like normal teenagers with an iPhone or whatever. And they have a second phone, which is an untraceable work phone, where they almost become sort of unseen, unreachable, and they go back into their secrecy mode. It was important to create different types of perspectives, camera-wise, to illustrate this point of view.

SP I was interested in what you said about this canon, which does not ...

CO ... that doesn't say its name.

SP Here it's also about going back to the eyes as a witness. A witness who does not have a specific point of view, because as soon as I move my head, I change my perspective. So, there is never a fixed way of seeing things.

CO I'm very much into what makes an archive, and it was interesting to start from the point of view of the witness

because archiving is also witnessing. It's like being put in the middle of your surroundings and making sense of them, almost photographing stuff, whether it's mentally or creating something with your reality and drawing conclusions from it. I think that's exactly what the choufs do. The witness doesn't say its name, and it doesn't have the whole academic framework of language to say its name, but that's the basis of it.

SP What role will music play in the new work? Or maybe I start a bit earlier. How do you approach the space of ZOLLAMT<sup>MMK</sup>?

CO I'm seen as a multidisciplinary artist, and I don't always make sound my priority because sometimes I want people to approach the work as if I'm a visual artist. I want you to see me as such. I felt that with the space of the chouf, I'm trying to go about it in a poetic way, and I don't think there's anything more poetic than music. So, it's definitely going to play a part in the film. What's interesting is to balance music with actual field recording and find the right mix between environmental sound and poetic or oneiric sound that I create myself.

SP You're also thinking about using masks.

CO I realized that it's been a recurring procedure and motif in my practice to use masks, whether it was in my exhibition *Gentle Battle* in Glasgow at Tramway in 2022 where I did the *Vindicta* series, where I printed masks on the back of a mirror and then backlit them with a system. So, the mask can almost pop up from obscurity. The mask is a motif that is important for me because from where I stand, in France, I felt invisible a lot. At the same time, for all of my life, I've always been fascinated with masks because in my dad's culture from Ivory Coast, they mean ritual, they are serious. They mean something real and ceremonial; they mean all of these things. But I'm a child of the internet. So, I could never present myself as masked because I've been on the internet since I was seven years old. You can find traces of posts that I made on forums since I was eight. I grew up on the internet and I didn't have the opportunity to circulate in life with a mask. I'm pretty naked, not literally, but I feel for my generation that we are pretty naked, more often than not.

I feel this because we use social media all the time. We exchange data all the time. We have lost a sense of ritual. Maybe we made other rituals, I don't know, but what I do know is that I love the mask for the sense of secrecy that it can give. When you wear a mask, nobody knows who you are. When you wear a mask in my dad's culture, the Kru culture of Ivory Coast, you represent the symbol. You're no longer the person. I'm a DJ and a musician, and I've always been interested in avatars. If I wear a mask, I become somebody else, and I'm also interested in pseudonyms. Avatars give you another perspective, another sense of self; they open new doors, and allow you to explore something different. I think that is something prevalent in the life that we're living in right now because everybody can make an avatar or be somebody else. But at the same time, all your actual data, like who you are *for real*, is being exchanged every day. So, you don't have the luxury of being confidential anymore, or even exploring another self, because your true self is owned by Google.

So, I think for me, there is this tension between being a DJ and putting myself on stage, and me being seen. It's like being exposed almost and I have a nostalgia for a time before it. Even at the beginning of the internet, it was rather confidential because corporations weren't as prevalent. It's not necessarily being attracted to the mask but being attracted to particular times when I'm using the motif of the mask. In the 2023 film that I did that is called *Grotesque*, I'm reusing a mask in a hologram. Actually, when I used it in a hologram with the hood, a lot of people told me that it looked like some kind of medieval hacker. For me, the figure of the hacker almost feels nostalgic now. I don't know if you saw the movie *Hackers* from 1995, but it's a movie that inspired me a lot because when you have a mask on in the movie, or when you are advancing in your mask, you're a glitch in the system.

Whether it's socially, where everybody is exposing themselves but also wearing a social mask, or whether you're wearing a real mask, it's a glitch that I like to explore. This is whether it's from a ritualistic point of view, where I'm coming from my African roots, or from a technological point of view, where I'm exploring what it means to be anonymous in 2023 when all of your data is being distributed everywhere, or from my perspective as someone who grew up in the banlieue, where someone who is discreet can be a great asset, they can be a chouf. I've witnessed the internet from a young age, and at a different

time, because the internet wasn't what it is now. It was pretty free at first. Corporations hadn't taken over it yet. So, the fascination with the mask also comes from being able to circulate without being recognized.

SP I think that's maybe an important point in your work, because I always wonder, how can someone be truly free nowadays?

CO That's my point. That's the essence. That's the main question I'm asking myself too. That's why I make art because right now it's the only way I can explore my ideas of freedom. When I did *Gentle Battle*, it was about being free to debunk your own familial trauma. In order for me to get into this art thing, I first needed to get into my own *art history* and *heart history*. It's a play on words. I needed to get into my own heart and look at my own family and my own history to get this out of the way in order to be able to tap into myself as a person, not even a Black person or anything, but just a person. It's hard because you have a lot of noise. It's a very noisy environment where everyone is sharing their opinions, even people who don't know anything about anything.

SP Sometimes there's not a connection between wisdom or experience and opinion. It's only about opinion and it's really loud. It prevents people from thinking.

CO Exactly, exactly.

SP Technology keeps you permanently occupied. The main reason is to prevent you from thinking, because thinking is getting more and more dangerous.

CO This was one of the subjects that I tackled in my performance that I did at the Serpentine Pavilion in London as part of *Park Nights 2023*. The performance was called *Faster Than This Is Suicide*. It was a performance piece that was kind of an homage to the British writer Mark Fisher. I feel, personally, the world is going in a direction that he predicted. The title refers to accelerationism, and to the fact that we're chasing something that doesn't exist, or the feeling that we're trying to experience doesn't exist anymore. Technology allowed me to share my work, but it also created an avenue for post-truth. I could completely debunk what the truth is. Every day you see fake news,



and it's different to look at what's real and what's not, it's breaking reality. It's the idea that the end of the world is easier to process than the end of capitalism.

For me, the performance was making sense of and mourning these ideas of revolt and counterculture and it was about slowing down. In this piece, I explored these subjects, but as a musician, because music requires time to be made. You cannot make music fast. I invited people inside a jam session. Nowadays you don't feel the real time of creation because all people do is share the result. They don't share the process of you making something. Of course, live creation is a little bit clumsy. It takes time to get somewhere. I sing, but it takes time for me to warm up. I operated in a band in this performance, with my friend Coco, playing piano, my friend Oscar, doing drum programming, and my friend Nandita, on the guitar. I did the singing, drum programming, and DJing. It was funny to bring people into the creation of music and not just give them a product that was already finished but make them witness what improvisation and real time feels like.

SP The labor disappears.

CO Yeah, exactly. It was about getting into what is the real time of creation and not just into Instagram and posting about the end of the creation.

SP Maybe one last thing just to touch it. You're thinking about using a laser. Why did you come up with this idea of a laser, which seems a bit 1990s or nostalgic? Maybe nostalgic is not the right word.

CO I'm a '90s baby anyway.

SP When were you born?

CO 1992. Yeah, I felt like I'm a '90s baby so there's always something about me that will feel like this. I mean, let's take it to the beginning. There are two reasons why I'm fascinated with lasers. My dad used to work at a "Laser Quest" in the south of Paris. My dad had two or three jobs. He always tried to make sure that we had everything we needed. He worked as a security guard at the Science Museum. He also had his own little security company where he hired his friends when he couldn't work, and

sent them to do security, at a jewelry store or some other place that needed security.

SP It's also interesting, all these jobs are in the context of surveillance.

CO Of course! It came from somewhere. My dad did that for a good twenty-two years. On the weekends, maybe two or three weekends per month, he worked at the Laser Quest. That was perfect for me because he brought me to work. He could bring me to work because it's a place made for children, literally. All of a sudden, I became super popular at school. Everyone would say, "Your dad is working at the Laser Quest," and I could get people in for free. I had my 10th birthday party there, so everybody wanted to come, saying, "Please invite me!" I was like: "No, you've been mean to me!" I acted like a chief because my dad was working there. They were my fabulous years. I always say to my dad, "Those were my best years ever." The game was called "Cosmic Laser." It still exists. And the guy that worked with my dad is still there.

SP We should go there the next time I'm in Paris. I've never been. There's also a similar one in Frankfurt, "LaserTag."

CO There's one in Frankfurt?

SP Yeah, I know the son of someone who works with us at the museum always loves to go there.

CO I went there all the time. I think my fascination with lasers comes from the fact that, for years and years and years, I was playing there. I also discovered an album that changed my life from Bernard Szajner. I love this artist because he's operating between the music world and the world of light work. He's the person who did all the lighting for the French composer Jean-Michel Jarre. So now he's like 79 years old but I started talking to him during the pandemic, sending little emails and stuff. During Covid-19, I got scared that all the people who I admire would suddenly die. So, I was like: "Oh my God, I need to get in contact with this French composer." Bernard Szajner also invented the laser harp I think in 1980. He came up with the idea and he made this incredible album called *Some Deaths Take Forever* (1980). It's an album that was commissioned by Amnesty International, where he

followed the path and the last day of someone who had been sentenced to death. I've always been fascinated by him because he didn't know why he was fascinated by lasers. He had no idea.

Szajner is of Jewish descent. He's French-Jewish and is a survivor of the Holocaust. He noticed when he got really old that he never used to talk about his roots, or about the Holocaust, because it's traumatizing. But then he realized that his fascination with light came from the fact that when he was little he was living in a cave because of the war. The only thing they had in this cave was a small candle. They always had a candle, or when they could, they had a petroleum light. That was the only thing that gave him hope when he was super small. But he never used to talk about it, and when I made a piece about him, I looked for interviews with him. He's someone who is very discreet, very behind the scenes. He made all of this stuff for Jean-Michel Jarre and never claimed anything. He is a really sweet person. In the interview with him that I found he said: "I never spoke to anyone about what I went through because I don't want to use my identity for anything. This is my story and I'm sharing it now that I'm almost 80." But the interviewer asked him: "What's with the light? Why do you think that you like lighting work so much?" It's like the same way you asked me, "Why do you like lasers?" Szajner never actually asked himself that question. Now that he's almost 80, he's like: "Well, maybe it comes from that. Maybe if the only thing that you're seeing all day is a light, then you're going to become a light designer."

SP Maybe he started to think a lot about light, and he also got more sensitive to any kind of light.

CO I think that it imprinted onto his brain, into his subconscious, without him thinking about it much, and then he realized that maybe it came from that. He is someone who is extremely tactful and discreet. I thought it was beautiful, too, because light is also hope. He said that the light was the only sense of hope that he had. It was his only window onto the world. But it's crazy that it wasn't until late in his life that he saw that. Because some people are very separated from their trauma. They don't want to engage with it. They're very: "I survived, cool." And he was like that. He never told anyone that he was Jewish.

SP Maybe it seems strange nowadays, as a lot of things are argued with identity politics. We also talked about masks and surveillance, and it seems that everything somehow is connected in a certain way.

CO Exactly.

SP If you think of those early movies, it also seems that the laser becomes a symbol of early technologies and the early digital age. So, it's interesting that you see light as hope and as a symbol, as an extension...

CO As a very nostalgic trope as well.

SP Yeah, but it still feels futuristic. To me, it doesn't feel nostalgic.

CO It doesn't feel old. It never gets old or anything. I don't know why it never became an outdated trope. As a child, I was maybe 7, my uncle had a laser pointer.

SP It also became common. Everybody had it on a key.

CO My dad had it, too. My dad and my uncle had it as a key thing. They weren't even using it. It was just a regular trope of the of the 1990s and the '80s. So I was using that. They would tell me: "Stop using it!"

SP "The battery is going to drain!"

CO Or I would use it on my small baby cousin to scare him. And they were like: "Stop, lasering the baby!" I have been fascinated with lasers since I was a child.

I gave you a lot of elements to think about, but I cannot tell you exactly where it comes from. I just know my dad was working at Laser Quest. I explored this intergenerational relationship, in friendship with Bernard Szajner. It was a huge thing when I grew up, pointing at everything with a laser, acting like Indiana Jones.

SP So my last question would have been, "Why did you start to work as a visual artist?" But you already answered it. And you said the biggest reason was freedom.

CO Yeah. It was like freedom. I always wanted to be a visual artist, but coming from where I come from, I didn't know it was possible.

SP And why? You didn't have the idea?

CO It's not that I didn't have the idea. My dad would say: "You need to be a lawyer or a doctor." When you're working class *and* you're an immigrant, you have to do something that is economically valuable for your community and for you. You have to be able to make money to sustain yourself and your family. I know that he didn't say that to be a bad person, but they don't have money and they didn't want me to be a struggling artist. So, I didn't think it was economically valuable. I just thought: "It's for *white* people." I was still making art, but I did not think that it could potentially be something economically valuable.

SP But did you ever want to become a lawyer or a doctor when you were younger?

CO I would repeat it just because my dad would tell me: "You would be a great lawyer." And I would say: "Oh sure, I would be a great lawyer." Children repeat whatever their parents say. I still think I would be a great lawyer. I understand what he meant by that because since I was little, I always had great speech abilities, and that's what he saw. But to be a great lawyer, you have to regurgitate a lot of facts and you have to read the codes and be extremely precise and have a rigorous nature that I don't have exactly. So, I wanted to become an artist to break free and tackle things in ways that makes sense for me. The best way to be a witness of my time is to be an artist. Whether it's music or it's visual art, the best tool for me to make sense of what I see, to observe just like a chouf, is to be an artist.

# Imprint

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