

Art for Flaubert's sake



Image: Ink stain by Krishna Inks. Courtesy of The Pen World.

Joanna Neborsky and Mathieu Laca are part of a new generation of artists who is paying homage to Gustave Flaubert in contemporary art. They tell Louis Danielou the stories behind their quirky artworks.

Here he came! Meeting Gustave Flaubert for the first time *was* an experience. His arrival in any Bonapartist salon was like witnessing the resurrection of a Gaul warrior, a book in hand as if a gleaming sword. Yet, his burly stature and thinning hair made him look like one of those gentle giants who populate medieval tales, dwarfing you as he closed in.

In his personal diary, Earl Joseph-Napoléon Primoli recalled one of those autumn nights when the novelist came to show his texts to princess Mathilde Bonaparte at the château de Saint-Gratien. As he was reading *Salammbô* out loud in front of the salon's audience, Primoli felt like attending the grand spectacle of raging seas. The pigments of Flaubert's bulging eyes went from aqua to navy, and his falling bedraggled moustache moved like rolling waves as he kept thundering his oeuvre like a shipwrecked sailor would scream for help.

His flamboyance and imposing rhetoric became a source of inspiration for artists. Poet Théophile Gautier admired Flaubert for his bottled-cherry-in-eau-de-vie-falling-into-a-fire attitude, while writer Marcel Proust paid tribute to his "grammatical genius". The novelist was portrayed for the first time exactly 190 years ago at age eight by his brother Achille. Throughout his lifetime, he modelled for painters Eugène Giraud and Victor Pieters as well as photographers Nadar and Étienne Carjat until his death in 1880.

Almost 140 years after his demise, the grumpy-looking penman still galvanises a handful of enthusiasts. In North America, illustrator Joanna Neborsky and painter Mathieu Laca have used their respective weapons – a pen and a brush – to prevent a literary gem from falling into oblivion.



Mathieu Laca: Flaubert's psychedelic therapist

From Laval, Quebec, Canada.

There's something almost *Trainspotting* about Emma Bovary's arsenic experience. She could have been one of those junkies that fuel Irvine Welsh's sardonic storytelling of Uncool Britannia. Although she is not tearing down Edinburgh's Princes Street to the frantic anthem of Iggy Pop's *Lust for Life*, she is as soul wasted as Renton, Sick Boy or Spud. She doesn't crack herself up on heroin or share her white stuff with other addicts. She is posher than that. She does arsenic, a poisonous chemical which became a glamorous way to take your life in the nineteenth century.

But arsenic symptoms aren't that glam. After Emma swallowed the white powder in the capharnaum of Yonville-l'Abbaye's pharmacy, the ecstasy turned into agony. The convulsions started with a hollow shriek, oozing drops of sweat and blood vomit before she raised herself like a galvanised corpse and died in a room full of macabre solemnity, listening to a blind beggar's elegy. Yet, this scabrous poetry amazes artist Mathieu Laca every time he reads it.

"When my husband studied *Madame Bovary* at university, one of his professors told him that he had drunk a small amount of arsenic in order to fully understand Emma's symptoms before the poison kills her," Laca says, before adding in a reassuring tone: "He took it under medical supervision obviously, but I have to admit that this story just fascinates me."

Laca read *Madame Bovary* at the same time he was introduced to the art world in his teenage years. His first creations were large tortured ink figures, a fluid that Flaubert – who also swallowed the poison before vomiting up all of his dinner – associates with the taste of arsenic in the novel. In a way, Laca was unconsciously following the novelist during his first steps as a painter.

He exhibited his work for the first time at age 17. It all started when his high school teachers gave him a small studio in the school and embarked him on a series of art projects. “I was introverted, struggling with my sexual orientation; and art became my sole form of expression,” he says. There, he came across an art teacher he later married. Then, he went to study fine arts at Concordia University in Montreal.

Now, Laca is an artist based in Montreal, Quebec where the art scene is booming. In the recent years, he has developed a genuine interest in painting classic authors from Albert Camus to Ernest Hemingway and Gustave Flaubert. “When I was a child, they were my superheroes. I couldn’t care less about Spiderman. Painting them helped me to access their art and psyche in a very personal and unique way,” he continues.

Laca’s two pastel-hued portraits of Flaubert are based on a Nadar photograph dated 1869. He added bright colours to contrast with the writer’s austere look. “Don’t get me wrong I love his walrus appearance,” the artist laughs. The two portraits seem to depict the novelist, drugged up to the eyeballs, in a hallucinatory state or a phantasmagoria like the one his anti-heroine is trapped in. “I really wanted to merge Flaubert and Emma’s universes and showed how the author and the character are bound together for eternity,” he adds.

And it is perhaps for the first time in a long while that Flaubert and Emma are reunited in a piece of art. The mix of acid colours propels them on a psychedelic voyage. As a drug-addled duo, they chose not to choose life: they chose something else. And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who needs reasons when you’ve got arsenic?

Mathieu Laca is an artist based in Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

Images (this page and previous): Gustave Flaubert (two colours) by Mathieu Laca, oil on linen, 39cm X 31cm, 2016, private collection and Gustave Flaubert by Mathieu Laca, oil on linen, 61cm X 51cm, 2016, private collection, respectively.

