

An impressionist painting of a sunrise over a body of water. The sky is a mix of warm orange and cool blue tones. A bright red sun is positioned in the upper center. Its reflection is depicted as a series of red brushstrokes on the water's surface. In the lower left, a dark silhouette of a boat with a figure is visible. The water is rendered with various shades of blue and green, suggesting movement and light reflection.

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IMPRESSION SUNRISE

DIALOGUE WITH

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COLOMBET'S RISING SUN

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Writer and Philosopher



Claude Monet, Impression, Sunrise - 1872 - Oil on canvas - 50 x 65 cm - © Paris, Musée Marmottan Monet



Vicky Colombet, Rising Sun #1427-19 - 2019 - Oil, pigments (Ultramarine Violet Medium) and alkyd on canvas - 182.8x182.8 cm - Collection of the Artist

One winter morning in 1872, from the window of a hotel in Le Havre, Claude Monet observed the sunrise over the basin of the outer harbor. He set up his easel in the open window and began covering the canvas with dark touches, working hastily, because the position of the sun was constantly changing. Its color and that of the sky changed, he had to get down what was getting away from him, that was the painter's goal, his anxiety. Seen from this window, the scene had no ground but floated, poised on the water that occupied two thirds of the canvas. Between the sky and the water, cutting off the horizon, a confused mixture of masts, of cranes and factory chimneys in a gray and blue mist. Mauve smoke rose from the chimneys, their shadows and their reflections in the water of the basin, turning violet under the multicolored, unstable sky in a mix of grays, oranges and purples.

Quick, he must seize what was changing, this breaking day. Sweeping oblique strokes for the sky, a dark patch

for a little boat in the center of the canvas and for its two figures, one sitting, the other standing, wielding the steering oar. A smaller mark, not as dark, for a second boat, a bit more distant on the left. A final gray mark lost in the reflections of the masts for a third boat lined up further back, along the same diagonal. Hatchings, slashes, sweeping movements—a feverish rush of touches to capture the moment: the disc of pink-orange sun in the mauve mist and its reflections in the basin. Reflections that come down from the sun and become more interspersed and fainter towards the painter. Or that, conversely, guide his eyes and ours towards the sun, like the magical steps of a staircase rising up towards the light. *Impression, Sunrise*

One day in 2019, in her studio in Columbia County, a rural area not far from New York, **Vicky Colombet** was looking over a big canvas that she had laid out flat. Its surface was unevenly sanded to achieve the texture she wanted, the canvas rubbed smooth in places by the emery paper, more grainy elsewhere, leaving a surface for sedimentation on which liquid events could occur, the catching of traces and colors determined by the different pigments ground and diluted in a fluid medium. She would spread the mixture quickly over the canvas with a fine brush and observe its movements over the slightly sloping surface. Its work. Its progress determined by their weight and their different struggles with the medium. It was as if the pigments were in control of their progress, of their speed, of the zones they chose to stop at, a surface accident, a different grain of the canvas where they mass up until the brush passes again, still fluid, heightening or diluting the color. Having provoked the movement of these pigments, it then fell to the artist to accompany them, to follow them, to correct them. Or to stay there if the effect seems right. Drips, trails, shimmering, waves, movements like those of water or reflections on water.

In this canvas titled *Rising Sun*, horizontal streaks spread unevenly across the canvas on which white is dominant, on the right and left, where the passages of

pigments seems to stop, to slow down, the better to thicken in the center. It is as if the purplish pigments started at the top and then forged a path to the center, gradually dividing into two vertical zones whose color dies away at the bottom of the canvas, leaving two broad white margins on either side, like a reflection in water, shaped like a V. Here too there is a sunrise. It is not Monet's orange disc in the foggy sky of *Le Havre* but a reminiscence of it. The evocation of its light in the purple traces where the artist has combined the reds and blues of Monet's canvas.

There seem to be only differences between these two canvases, *Impression, Sunrise* and *Rising Sun*. On one side is a mythical painting that gave its name to Impressionism. A painting so capital that it inspired endless speculation about its creation. Where was Monet standing? What day was it? Some sales catalogues give its title as *Impression Sunset*, so was the scene set in the evening or the morning? Researchers studied old maps of Le Havre, meteorological tables, tables of tides and sunsets. In the Musée Marmottan Monet exhibition catalogue *Impression Sunrise* research by a team at Texas State University whittled the possibilities down to two dates, 13 November 1872 and 25 January 1873. Everything is important in this canvas whose sun we can now see as rising on a





Vicky Colombet, Evening Light #1449-20 (Evening Light series) - 2020 - Oil, pigments (Ultramarine Blue R4, Mars Red, Viridian Green, Titanium White and Lithopone White) and alkyd on canvas - 182.8×182.8 cm - Collection of the Artist

new period and pulling with it the very movement of painting.

Created in mind of a dialogue with Monet, *Rising Sun* raises no such questions. The light of this big painting and the play of highlights that ripple across it belong to no time or place, even if it can be said that this liquid quality, these undulations and moiré effects do have their distant source in a river in the Cévennes.

Nothing in her early life seemed to single out Vicky Colombet for an artistic career. Born in Paris in 1953, her father owned a print shop and wanted her to study law. She opted for political science instead. However, it was not long before she dropped out and started working with her father, where she dealt with the creative aspects of printing. This was the 1970s,

a period of feminist militancy, and Vicky joined the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (MLF, the Women's Liberation Movement). She worked with Simone de Beauvoir to create the journal "Les Nouvelles féministes" (the New Feminists) and befriended fellow activists Delphine Seyrig, Ioanna Wieder, Carole Roussopoulos and Christiane Rochefort. It was a time of collective writing, of struggle and protest, and of life-changing encounters. For example, through friends she met artist Henri Dimier. Vicky showed him the small drawings she was making. He was interested and invited her to freely attend his atelier. There she learnt to draw from memory and, above all, to use pigments—the pure mineral colors that she saw Dimier grind into powder, measure out and dilute. This was a new world. She decided she would be an

artist.

Colombet's first canvases reflected Dimier's influence but she was soon striking out on her own, trying landscapes, semi-abstract, semi-figurative compositions, all intensely colorful. The young artist was working out an identity. She thought the answer might in the light of the south and moved to Barcelona. There years later she returned to France. It had not worked out.

She started looking for a place to live and a studio. Someone suggested she rent an abandoned spinning mill in Lasalle, in the Cévennes. The village was an old Protestant bastion and center of silk weaving, spreading over its low-mountain valley. A poor, austere region where life is harsh. Stone houses, granite rock, chestnut trees, flocks of goats and sheep. But also the

river, the Salindrenque.

The spinning mill, standing on the edge of the river, was where for many years orphans would work, plunging their hands in scalding water to unwinding the silk thread from the cocoons. The memory was still strong when Colombet moved in during those tumultuous years. As she now likes to say, back then the thought that she had "lost my thread" and needed to concentrate on finding it, just like those orphans. Her painting, which tended towards abstraction, now struck her as too effortful, too loaded. Overwrought, laborious. She had to lighten, simplify. Besides, why always dwell on difficulty, the way her father had taught her? Why not just abandon yourself? To the river, for example, to its soothing, elementary power, and *bring it onto the canvas*. Something had clicked.



Vicky Colombet, Sunset Series #1450-20 - 2020 - Oil, pigments (Cadmium Orange, Cadmium Yellow, Mars Red and Titanium White) and alkyd on canvas, 182.8 x 182.8 cm - Collection of the Artist



Vicky Colombet, Water and Light #1387-17 - 2017 - Oil, pigments (Mars Violet, Ivory Black, Mars Black Red and Bleu de Sèvres) and alkyd on canvas, 162.56 x 157.48 cm - Collection of the Artist

“I would like to give the impression that nature is doing the painting,” says the artist today, “that it is the elements that are producing the painting.” The river, yes, but also the earth, the vegetation, the minerals that the pigments come from. The wind, when the artist’s breath orients the flow of the medium, or when the brush skims swiftly over the canvas. Or stones: those little pebbles that she sometimes laid out on the canvas to create slight hollows and grooves that are barely perceptible when the canvas regains its elasticity yet help guide the path of the colored medium.

There are no representations of landscape in Colombet’s canvases, yet viewers know: what they are seeing is a trace, an imprint, an X-ray of natural events—waves, folds, flows, a gust of wind, sliding,

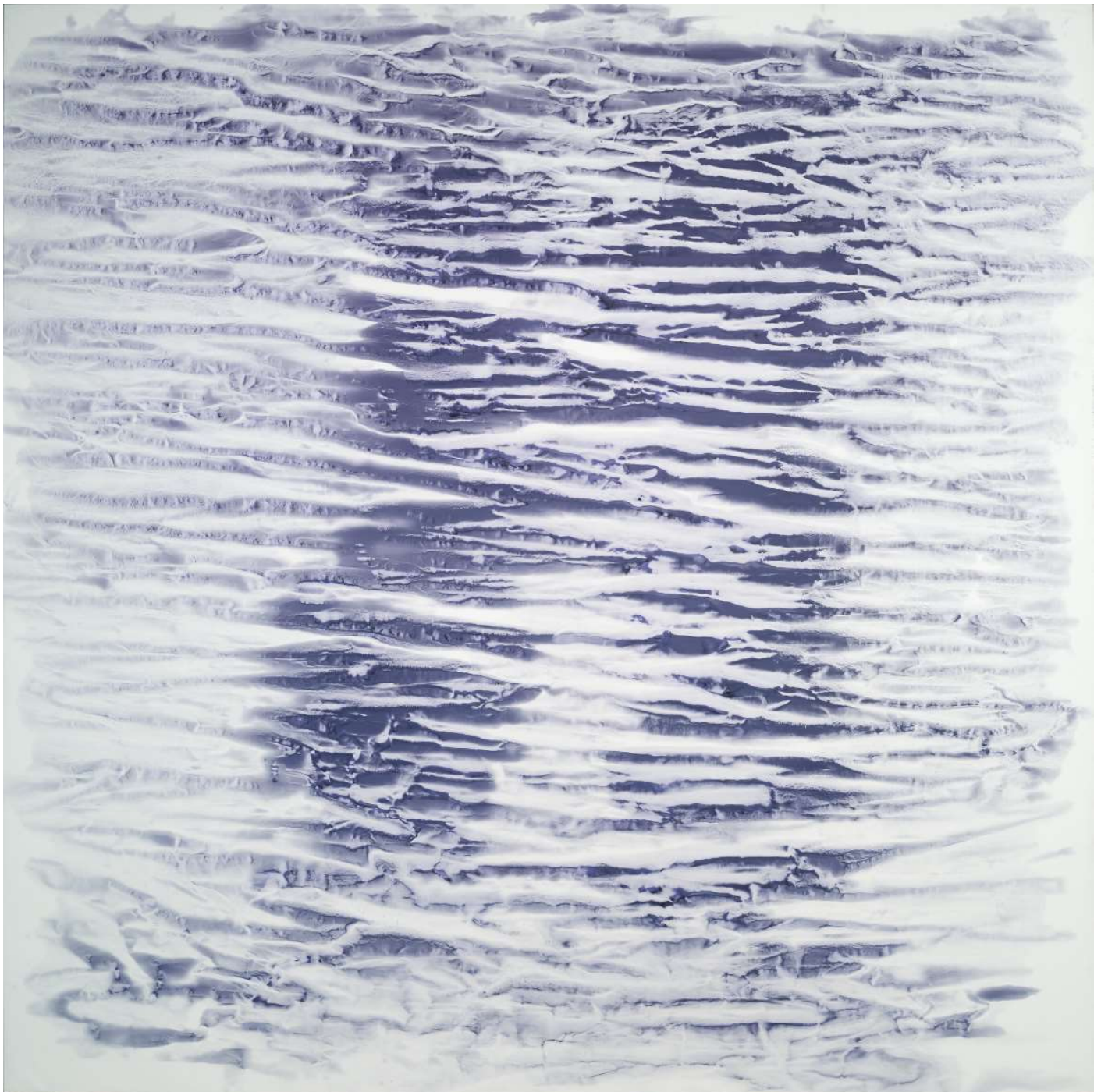
shimmering, tremors. Clouds, light, reflections. Landscape translated into its essential components. A collection of its forms and its movements.

There is something oriental about this contemplative position, acquired by the riverside, in this letting-go to the *accidents* of the trace, in this painting where a form of renunciation is felt, or again, a practice of *restrained action*, as Mallarmé understood it. Travels to Asia, India, Japan and Thailand were regular events in Colombet’s childhood when her mother, born to an Asian father who came to Spain as a young man, was journeying in search of her origins. Those family tombs were never found but Asia—its colors and light, its spiritual dimension—left the child with unforgettable experiences. Eastern philosophy—

impersonality, wakefulness, the closeness to nature—are part of her life and are reflected in her work, right down to that passion for landscape which reactivates the childhood experience of sitting at the back of her parents' car and playing mental games, recomposing the trees, houses and fields that flashed by outside the window.

After eight years by the river in the Cévennes, Vicky Colombet went to live in Columbia County in upstate New York and fitted out a studio there. Her big canvases were at home in the birthplace of abstract expressionism. Colombet knew the works, of course, but in New York she became truly aware of her heritage. She had no shortage of fathers in painting

but she was longing for mothers. And here they were, by the names of Helen Frankenthaler, Agnes Martin and Joan Mitchell. The latter's connection with France and the painting of Claude Monet kept Vicky close to her roots. Indeed, Monet is never far from her work or her life. He is a tutelary presence, an inimitable and unimitated master. For this artist, to approach his banks of the Seine, his wisterias, his water lilies through the collection at the Musée Marmottan is not to copy them but to enter them visually, to take from them an élan, to “swim” there, she sometimes says and penetrate them in an “almost animist” way. With her colors, for example, by lifting the different cobalts, the blacks, the oxides of a painting like *Banks of the Seine at Giverny* and laying them on her own canvases to



Vicky Colombet, *Rising Sun* #1427-19 - 2019 – Oil, pigments (Ultramarine Violet Medium) and alkyd on canvas – 182.8×182.8 cm – Collection of the Artist

let them work there, to run and form waves in which the gaze mysteriously finds itself back in the world of those reflections on the Seine.

Or take *Water and Light*, from 2017, a large canvas (1.98 m x 1.98 m) that seems to be run through by liquid tremors. In tracing their path, the ultramarine blue, the white, the Mars black and the cobalt purple are concentrated at the top and bottom of the canvas but do not go to the edges, or to the right or left, where the cobalt dominates. The center of the canvas forms a sheet of brightness, as if the movement of the pigments had slowed down to let through the gleams of a light coming from who knows where.

It could be the Seine. Or a gust of wind on the pool in Giverny. Or a close-up view of the Salindrenque. Or the Hudson. One could see these crumplings, braids and folds as aquatic, but also as tellurian in some of the evocatively titled series: *Earth Series*; *Antarctica*; *Folds and Landscapes*. The world seen from above. Our Earth.

There is indeed an obvious porosity between canvas and world. Each painting is a universe where natural forces are at play. Working with the elements or, rather, letting them work, is akin to working the land. To lay pigments on the canvas with a brush is in a sense to sow, to sow there grains whose germination and development are watched, guided, cared for, with the vigilance of a person weeding, watering and taking cuttings. There is indeed a garden in Columbia County, a few steps from the studio, like an extension of the painting.

This is not the garden at Giverny. Here we will not find the teeming, the colored density of layers of irises, of hedges of gladioli, or the hoops of roses and tunnels of wisterias that provided Monet with a reservoir of motifs and the concentrate of visual elements he needed.

Vicky Colombet's garden is an ecosystem in which

the flowers—nasturtium, milfoil, marigold, borage, hyssop—are there above all to attract the right insects. This garden grows food: basil, onion, sweet peas, lamb's lettuce and rocket, artichokes, tomatoes, sorrel, spinach, cucumber, mint, tarragon, leeks, following the thoughtful order of permaculture. Surrounding the vegetables with big stones that store up the heat and diffuse it at night, building raised beds on cedar wood for plants that need cool and shade, acting as intermediary between animals, plants and man: Colombet's garden seems to extend the enterprise of her painting. Painting that is receptive, painting that can be traversed by elementary forces and must needs reflect the ruptures of the 21st century. The earth today is suffering and nature as Monet knew it is threatened. The feeling of osmosis experienced by the visitor in the double gallery of the *Water Lilies* at the Orangerie, the feeling of fusion, of being one with this aquatic, celestial universe, a euphoric experience of the healing totality of nature, that feeling and that impression may now belong to a bygone age.

Colombet's paintings, which are constantly reminding us of the permanence and the fragility of the elementary, recall all this. The sun rises in the breaches of color, the river flows on the canvases and in our eyes, the earth cracks but the pigment holds it, exposes it, elevates it. Outside, bees are drawn to the lavender and birds to the grasses. Here, cobalt purple, an Italian red ochre, a Titanium white, a turquoise cobalt taken from the depths of the earth combine, strive and invite us to the endless contemplation of the agitation and its luminous resolution.

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