

# SOVIET LIKE NIGHT



# SPIRIT

## WRITTEN BY ANNE COULLAUD

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN, HOW DOES IT FEEL TO "ENTER THE NIGHT OF THE NIGHT"?

Artist Myriam Mechita's interpretation, an installation bearing the title *Entrer dans la Nuit de la Nuit*, reveals as much as it keeps a mystery. During an artist residency in NY this year, a chance encounter lead Mechita to dematerialize this work and by doing so to blur and extend its meaning. The unexpected encounter was with the talented perfumer Bruno Jovanovic who officiates within IFF. Jovanovic, the father of fragrances such as Armani's *Idole* or Calvin Klein *CKin2u*, is not foreign to visual arts, having collaborated with artist Pierre Huyghe in the past. Mechita and Bruno Jovanovic met and so began to collaborate on the creation of a perfume that would translate the essence of *Entrer dans la Nuit de la Nuit*. The poetic endeavor would become part of a new installation the artist was preparing for the Sevres Manufacture in Paris for October 2011, *My Name is Nobody*.

The oneiric and elegant cornerstone installation *Entrer dans la Nuit de la Nuit* was completed in 2008 for a French art center in Normandy. It was made of several sculptural and drawing elements carefully assembled in two rooms. Entering the space, one first noticed the title of the exhibition, *Entrer dans la Nuit de la Nuit*, marked on the wall with a branding iron. Close by, the musician Thierry Lhiver provided an improvised heartbeat-like tempo, taking inspiration from the installation's title.

In the first room, the viewer encountered the bodies of two decapitated deer, piled on top of each other, covered of aluminum pieces, with two rivers of pearls flooding from their neck. In each river sat a transparent bowl where a crystalline bird was crying. Surrounding this macabre though sparkling scene was a mural made of black and blue glitter. Enchained roses and a

head were carved out of the material, exposing the wall behind and creating a dramatic landscape. This imagery, borrowed from Russian criminal's tattoos, was chosen by the artist for its ornamental as well as its symbolic power.

While this first room was beautifully and tragically frozen, the second evoked motion: an iridescent purple and green moped stuck in a flood of pearls; a video with a performer (Mechita's long time accomplice the talented Chloe Mons), singing a song in Monument Valley, next to a black LEGO ghost town and a house of cards pierced by hundred of pins. Graphite drawing of an interlaced snake on a wall completed and closed the composition.

The physical, sensorial experience of this installation at times radiant and decadent provoked thought and kept viewers wandering through the space. Something about it was fossilized and morbid and yet vibrant, sharp and emotionally loaded.

Myriam Mechita has never been afraid to use images – beautiful and highly symbolic ones. She excavates from a deep knowledge of art history. Her labor-intensive process gives birth to meticulous forms and patterns. She always produces carefully staged and very tactile environments where light and scale are as crucial as the objects and images themselves. The "viewers/wanderers" of her dreamlike and evocative sets may be seduced or repelled, often finding themselves disoriented, tripping over her enigmatic charade.

Mechita's installation is as mysterious and dark as the night of the night it translates. For her, it is in the dead of the night, specifically between 3 and 5 AM, in which limits are

pushed back, where material and concrete life disappear and time seems suspended. The artist believes that this is a moment when we are truly ourselves, our naked selves. The duality brought by the night of the night, the hypersensitivity and the suspended time, the crystallization and the movement, is translated in the two spaces. Here exuberance and melancholia coexist.

In translating this artwork into a perfume, something present though dematerialized, there was the promise to both extend and summarize it. In collaborating with Bruno Jovanovic, Mechita wished to get as close as possible to the heart of the installation,

to the heart of the night. Mechita enjoys collaborations and regularly includes other people in her projects. She does not expect these collaborators to stick to or translate her world; she asks them to expand the work with their own.

With Jovanovic, a brilliant perfume artist, there was naturally the hope to be transported. This was not a commission and for Jovanovic who has never experienced the installation, it was quite a challenging task. Mechita recreated her mindscape for him by describing her ideas using precise and vivid imagery.

Bruno Jovanovic is a discreet, sophisticated young man whose great talent has been recognized and acclaimed by his peers. He seemed to be absolutely at ease with the project. After "reading" the installation with Mechita's lighting, he next invited her to smell the many things that came to his mind when he invoked *Entrer dans la Nuit de la Nuit*. He instinctively drew from a family of scents that evoked ideas that are nestled in Mechita's work: animalism, nature, death, melancholia, beauty and terror. Jovanovic wanted to communicate both the conceptual underpinning of the piece as well as the stunning visuals. He considered for example that colors and glitter require a responsive scent. Jovanovic's talents are singular, he is able to vividly imagine odors, he dreams about them, and continually translates visual stimuli into fragrance. His memory of a scent is keen. As a counterpart, Mechita reveals herself as highly sensitive as well, but her relationship to odors is intensely visual. So how do you encapsulate such ideas as animalism, nature, death, melancholia, beauty and terror?

The lab smelled like earth and undergrowth, a very powerful scent. Jovanovic warned us that people are not always comfortable with the odors in general. The many bottles (about 400) that compose Jovanovic's perfume organ are arranged side by side on shelves. Smells, both synthetic and natural, waft from the bottles. One might notice apricot, dry wood, apple and cellar, musk. The pineapple smell is nuanced; there is a fruity pineapple and then a dry one. Jovanovic has all of them in mind. His palette is quite specific although part of it is similar to his colleagues' as they are all doing commercial perfumes in this IFF lab. It is clear that each of them have their own sensibility and is known for emphasizing certain scents over others. During this first intense meeting, Jovanovic's olfactory palette leads the show. For him, as a chemist, smells not only have an olfactory form but also a physical form. For instance there was a synthetic essence he pulled out of his perfume organ that looked like white artificial snow and smelled like raspberry, for him, it was the manifestation of the smell of glitter.

We started with animalism, how can that possibly smell? Animal versus animalism, this can be a bit abstract, preferably not too illustrative, but I understand it as earthy – an armpit or something woody. So, Jovanovic lead Mechita through different shades of musk. The first liquid she sniffed was barely there, hard to smell. It was a musk that evoked both animalism and humanity to the perfumer. She was told that for some people it smells quite strong, though she could barely detect an odor.

Together, we embarked on a journey of scents, coming

upon one called Ambrinol, it smells a bit like urine, but is mineral as well and brings to mind canon ball powder. Directly after was Anethol (Anise), and Labdanum which smells like a resin and incense. Then we took in the scent of Ambergrey something very abstract that is at times mineral and animal, salty and recall the smell of sperm. We sniffed a quintessentially floral scent that is used to give its character to orange blossom and that to everybody's surprise, evoked for Mechita, an institutional metallic grey color, or a hospital – something very cold. To refresh our sense of smell and our nostrils, we breathed into our elbows. Within an hour, we smelt more than 20 flasks. In truth, it was not an easy exercise trying to comprehend each smell and then moving to another and yet another. Our journey continued, Tonka Bean, Caramel, Heliotropin (this one so pleasing, soft, physical and, I can attest, so addictive, that we were not surprised to learn it is a regulated substance). Some essences were complex, for example, one that Mechita immediately responded to by saying it smelled like the Doors' song, *Riders on the Storm*. That particular fragrance was a mix of humid stone, tar and evoked our sensitive souls, sadness and death. Some were simple, like blackberry, Hawthorne, coconut (which reminded Mechita of flesh), santal or a natural essence of Iris, which is powdered iris root, made in Florence (the artist found the later disgusting).

Inescapably, it was a Proustian journey and each of us responded differently to these charged stimuli. Many times, we felt we did not smell the same essence. Certain smells triggered reactions that were quite physical like tears, some went down your throat, some returned to us three days after the visit. It was fascinating to experience instantaneously and at times, brutally something we all know very well – smell walks hand in hand with our emotions. To our surprise, even though Jovanovic tried to prepare us, smelling proved to be a tiring experience. We left the lab, tipsy and drained. It remained nonetheless a magical and fascinating experience.

At this point, what we knew was that Mechita was looking for a perfume: something invisible that penetrates. She pointed out the erotic dimension inherent in creative tension. She liked the idea that Jovanovic was translating it, composing it with his own sensitivity and, it was important for her, that he is a man. They did not want to arrive at an illustration but rather an evocation.

Their aim was to concoct something expansive that opened outward to other territories. The only thing we were sure about after this first smelling session was that it would be included in Mechita's next Parisian exhibition, *My Name is Nobody*. Mechita knew that she wanted the viewer to be able to touch it and if they wished, to wear it, but that was not a crucial aspect. A flask, a bowl or a vase were mentioned. A lot of things were put on hold that day.

From there, Jovanovic mixed a couple of compositions, keeping in mind Mechita's reactions as well as responding to his own interpretation of *Entrer dans la Nuit de la Nuit*, of the darkest of black. He submitted these solutions to Mechita during another meeting a week later.

Five compositions were carefully built around the same



All images: *L'infini En Plus Ou, My Name Is Nobody (tu vas comprendre)*, Myriam Mechita at Sèvres – Cité de la céramique – Copyright: Sèvres – Cité de la céramique / Gérard Jonca and Rebecca Fanuele



note, distancing us from the pure essences of the past encounter. Each marriage of essences was diluted in alcohol, as is customary in fragrance; however, these compositions were not classical, existing outside any recognized olfactory family. One was very green like a leaf or a garden in the morning and another one was more like open windows at night. The one that caught Mechita's attention was for Jovanovic the most visual, it was also the one in which the perfumer said he included the most animalism. Each of them had a strong personality, its own complexity; all were considered by Jovanovic asexual. This last aspect pleased Mechita, whose work is often considered girly in an art world still deceptively misogynous. She liked the idea of playing with this in the heart of her new body of work. A softly a firmative thing such as this perfume was important to her. At some point, Jovanovic mentioned that he would add to the final composition, a tribute to the perfume Mechita wears everyday, *Feminite du Bois* by Shishe do. It struck me at this point that we were actually going further than translating the installation as stated initially. It

became discernible through this meeting that Jovanovic was formulating a portrait of the artist.

We left the lab with two perfumes to wear for a couple of days and were encouraged to give him feedback afterward. Jovanovic would then fine tune the fragrances, adding new nuances and eventually myrrh and opopanax. Finally the perfume that completed Mechita's installation *My Name is Nobody* for Sèvres was presented in a bowl, in the form of an amber oil. It references the roots of perfume making, when myrrh and incense filled rooms and wrapped bodies. The bowl rests on a small pedestal next to a bed on which a manuscript by French writer Marie NDiaye lay. The manuscript talks about love.

Mechita, through this project stepped away from her usual modus operandi: heavy, exuberant incarnated installations where all the steps and details of the process are visible. Through her collaboration with Jovanovic, she feels that she is producing her truest work. Invisible and silent, the piece is very close to her, even though she did not create it. Strikingly, we realize that as we move toward comprehension of the night of the night, we get closer to understanding, and seeing Myriam Mechita.

Anne Couillaud – Independent Curator

Many and special thanks to Myriam and Bruno for their trust and for sharing with me this beautiful odyssey.

Myriam Mechita  
[www.myriammechita.net](http://www.myriammechita.net)  
& Bruno Jovanovic  
Perfumer, IFF, NY