

# Frog



**Sylvie Fleury**  
photographed for *Frog*  
by Flavio Karrer

*“Because frogs swallow their prey whole, their digestive juices have to be potent. You’re dealing with a chemical and acidic environment that is built to pull things apart and break them down.”*

*Katherine J. Wu, “There Are Two Ways Out of a Frog,”*  
The New York Times, Aug. 3, 2020



# Richard Kennedy

Richard Kennedy had just come back from Greece when we met on a Sunday in their Berlin studio. They saw the Acropolis, emptied of tourists. They saw the Acropolis and Crete and Athens like very few people will ever get to see them. To them it made sense to hit Greece at this time, after living in America for so long and moving to Berlin a year ago. Eventually, they created a place of their own in which, in a very short period of time, they blossomed tremendously. Opera is one of the words, one of the many words Kennedy owns and transforms, erect and delights in, indulges and works, hard, to make it theirs, as a gift of hope for the community, a message of love.



**W** here are you at the moment?

*Interview*  
by  
*Lucas Leclère,*  
*portrait*  
by  
*Tianna Strickland,*  
*photographs*  
by  
*Matthias Kolb*

In mining aesthetic expression, I am able to conjure the possibilities of my own experience, and to use my art practice to implement new worlds by bringing out these experiences as images from whatever multidimensions they exist in. Rather than saying "I don't have the language" I am actively creating the language to describe my non-coastal American queer experience. Through painting, I am able to see progress immediately. I see it as a bold move that pushes beyond the homogeneity of abstract painting into something super queer and a little camp—maybe its fabstract. What would it be like to be a fabstract expressionist painter? I work with this hyper contemporary, very extra energy and use queer vernacular to transform that experience into forms and objects.

—*There is, I feel, a desire of exposure and representation of the black body that was vital?*

I've been thinking about new ways to represent the black body, specifically a black body that is not required to sweat in order to be valued. I have been reading *The Black Shoals* by Tiffany Lethabo King, which examines borders and boundaries between Native and Indigenous studies and Black studies. Nationalism and racism are agents of the colonial genocide project that have no value whatsoever erect, the future relies on the destruction of these violent constructs and systems of decimation. King talks about African American life as represented by the sea, and Native American life represented by the land. By focusing on the shoal, you see where they rub up against each other and are connected at this liminal intersection. The arrival of Europeans in Africa and the first boat of slaves sent to the Americas released a curse onto the world. 2020, the future has us all witnessing this psychic battle as the Fuku burns what we knew have accepted as normal. The deaths of Kobe Bryant and Danny Tidwell shook me to the core. I could feel an energetic shift and spotted this cosmic tidal wave. The ancestral sacrifice of Black star God energy opened a portal to what will come next. The Revolution we have all been waiting for since the start of the European global genocidal projects, period. Divide. Conquer. Exterminate. I often think "why Black people" but quickly imagine who was running the fastest, jumping the highest, creating music and driving the beat that echoes the pulse of the earth before modernity. People want to control Black bodies and energy rather than control their own admiration that spins out into Swim Fandom.

—*What is your first memory linked to opera?*

I went to The Sorg opera house in my town [Middletown, Ohio] where I saw *Die Zauberflöte*. The Papageno and Papagena duet resonated in me. It was my first glimpse of Germany. I started studying opera in high school and after six months was winning local scholarship competitions. The local high society ladies didn't like that I was winning, even though I actually needed the money to continue my studies, and this tension made me realize that the culture of opera would never vibe with my own reality.

—*Can you think of one existing opera in particular you'd like to direct say if *Deutsche Oper* gave you carte blanche?*

I'd love to direct the Ring cycle. I admire the scale of Wagner but I imagine there are things that I would pick up on and bring out from the subtext that would make German audiences uncomfortable. Opera has a way of holding up nationalism and conquest as heroic projects; that narrative serves no one.

—*What do you mean by people deconstructing what they could not build?*

Experimental theatre and dance are very homogenous and privileged spaces. I question the creation of "new" ideas developed in bourgeoisie liberal art schools. These spaces continue to dominate discourse and create language that shuts people out. What is experimental music? Once a genre is recognizable then it is not experimental. I see being experimental as a way of abstracting perspective and synthesizing it into new forms using the various information systems available.

"Who would ever choose to be a heterosexual?  
Why limit yourself when you can taste it all?  
Look at the news at the super intellectual  
Burn it all down watch the patriarchy fall  
I got life on earth present constantly examine  
What's chosen  
and given"  
From HIR; an apocalyptic creation myth opera  
Act 1 COMEUPPANCE

—*This queer painting of words brings me to the recent chromatic explosion I witnessed in your painted work lately. Where did that come from?*

My relationship to language changed drastically at Bard College. In learning to articulate my ideas and define myself, I started recognizing the power in communication systems. I struggled my last summer with the "what next," would I keep it simple or really scale into the vision of the future that I saw. Choosing to lean into opera, and the gradual increase in scale that this required opened up a lot of space for growth and color. I met Javier and Nick [from Peres Project] and they saw my future and have been such a great source of support. This support allowed me to experiment with new mediums and ultimately led me to painting and sculpture. Centering the visual elements of my work precipitated this period of acceleration and explosion. I have always been interested in world building, and the hard shift into constructing a visual world has allowed me to shift towards a practice that preserves my body and expands my mind.

—*There is something mystical in your approach, like in the mantras you write in your paintings.*

I have always had visions and radical thoughts. Society tried to tell me that it's mental illness, that the most interesting and special things about me were wrong. That queerness and otherness aren't essential forms of magic. Since moving to Berlin I've learned to view my imagination as a superpower and I am developing tools to channel that productively. I use my work as a container for holding big ideas and overwhelming emotions. Mental health problems in Black and queer communities come from violent and imposed systems of suppression and oppression. A lot of kids I grew up with were very talented, quite often more so than the privileged kids I studied with. I always think of my friends Fernando and Shayla and what ways in which the world should have done better by them. I tap into ancestral energy and my interests are far from

## I'm exploring the concept of the non-sweating Black body; Mariah Carreying through performed non-performance.

contemporary. In order to find my power, I had to acknowledge my family's abduction, but also develop ways to communicate with what came before. In our critique of the state of the world we always center the same narrative, I think the mystical qualities of my work have a lot to do with how far back in time I'm always reaching for inspiration, energy and power. The space between times illuminates the magic that it took us to survive and renders my existence as radical, miraculous, and eternal.

—How long have you been painting for?

I've been drawing and painting with my body my entire life. Painting on canvas for a year. I noticed how performative painters were at Bard. The seriousness of a curmudgeon German professor, and the bizarre and obtuse ways in which she interacted with students socially was more compelling than her work. Thinking of painting as performance allowed me to quickly enter into that space as a refusal of this performed, all-knowing, hierarchal position of the painter. I wanted to see what it was like on the top of the pyramid, I use painting as a way to change my view, to spark new conversations, to represent my black body without sacrificing it.

—What is the next performance you are working on?

I'm presenting my new opera Fubu Fuku in Berlin. I will be presenting Black Rage at the Zabudowicz collection in London and my first OpeRave Evar at the Palais De Tokyo in Paris in summer 2021.

—Filmed?

No, live. I'm exploring the concept of the non-sweating Black body; Mariah Carreying through performed non-performance. The deconstruction of the Black body as entertainment, through

the refusal to sweat. I want to eliminate the over-worked, laboring, Black body in the white cube through my artistic practice.

—And quite literally in your sculptures also.

Yes, these are replicas of my body, my body is being moved around but I am not sweating. The paintings are hyper performative and action-based, they resemble the different directions I have been pulled in and my drifting into what I actually am. I now make these installations in which people come through it and move around as I remain fixed, absent, and conducting remotely.

—I feel that is very true in the video that resulted from your residence at Open Forum for example. There is a strong sense of you creating a whole universe with very reduced means.

(G)Hosting is a metaphor for a lot of crisis phone calls, and community concerns... I wanted to explore the disconnect in connecting through gay digital dating spaces. We are able to build communities and the realities we want through our phones. The idea was to make an opera without an audience, all the while making it available to a wider audience, and the composition process really accessible for anyone. Smoke and mirrors was a concept I was meditating on a few years ago and I stripped everything back to reveal the root and explore the core. I use concepts of collage to layer information and create texture so the world appears simple and straightforward. African American culture has a way of making the most out of the least, often smiling, innovating, and dancing through said discomfort.

*Prophetess 3*, 2020. Acrystal, acrylic, 18 x 13 x 10 in.

*Prophetess 1*, 2020. Acrystal, acrylic, 18 x 13 x 10 in.  
Courtesy of the artist and Peres Projects Berlin.

