

CHARLEROI NAILS by Serge Stephan

Watermarble is a nail art technique that I find particularly hypnotic when revisited through the medium of video. The technique is the following: use a glass of water, in which you will pour nail polish of different colors drop after drop. It will immediately create a succession of concentric circles; a colorful target, reminiscent of an eye. As soon as you find the result appealing, you dip your nails in it and the colored pattern is transferred on them. I watched many of those tutorial videos and I decided to join this community and do my own water marble videos. It takes only one video to teach this technique to the whole world, and yet there are thousands of those on youtube. It is a fully-fledged medium with its own set of codes.

My videos were filmed in different locations of the gigantic Palais des Expositions, in Charleroi, Belgium.

As in most parts of the Belgian industrial backbone, the mining, metallurgic and glass-work activities in Charleroi collapsed. This extinction left a grim environmental mark on the vicinity, as well as a massive unemployment. Everywhere in Charleroi I saw sculptures, monuments and memorials dedicated to the male factory workers and to the miners. But it occurred to me that in no case this heroic position was extended to the female workers. No memorial statue was dedicated, for instance, to the «porteuses de canons» (so called, because their work was to carry glass tubes which were very fragile and imposing).

In its golden age, Charleroi's industries were often presented in a huge convention center called «le Palais des Expositions», but nowadays the place is very rarely opened. I saw one of those openings as an opportunity to shoot my watermarble videos in it. To me, this huge idle warehouse represents the city's unemployment. It is the perfect frame to display those watermarble tutorials : an activity which is shared actively by thousands of women all around the world (some of them even earn money with it). I made a desperate attempt to place this invisible yet industrious and creative activity in the concrete space of «le Palais des Expositions».

I deliberately changed places with each video, trying to fill the entire huge empty space. I played with this industrial and imposing place: a most incongruous context to accommodate such an intimate activity as Nail Art.

I also changed the watermarble colors for each video systematically, in order to respond to the color scheme that the architects of the Palais had designed. My aim was also to create an intricate pattern of "difference and repetition" all along the video thread.

Could those empty 60 000m², for once, host the countless invisible crowd of industrious female workers from the Nail Art scene ? Would the socialist mayor of Charleroi be interested in showing how the people will always find a way to work, even when this right is officially taken from them ? How would it be to create a permanent exhibition for this hybrid form of work ? To have a real watermarble factory opening in Charleroi with the city becoming the Nail Art scene's beating heart ?

Let's say all this will take place in a near future, right there : in Charleroi. Such is the subject of «Charleroi Nails» : a novel I wrote. I tried to transfer the original futurama dream from Chicago in the Sixties to a bright and queer dystopic future in Charleroi.