

## **On the road to hell or paradise**

An interview with collagist Lula Valetta on *Purgatorio*

by Mr. Pelham, 13 May 2018

*What are you doing, Lula?*

I'm in the middle of preparations to climb the mountain of Purgatory. That's a mountain supposedly situated between hell and paradise. And it's also the title of my solo exhibition in HOK gallery. Besides, I'm rather fat at the moment. Especially in the tummy region. Or should I say: tum region.

*How come you are so fat?*

A baby in there. In fact I'm climbing the mountain for two persons at a time.

*Has the one to do with the other?*

No. You do think more about yourself, though, and about where you stand in life. But the real impulse for investigation was that mountain towering there: Purgatory. The idea of washing away your sins. An interesting theme in a reflectory kind of way.

*You're not a sin-washing sinner yourself?*

No.

*Why not?*

Why should I? Like Jerry Lee Lewis says: we are all going to hell. Except for Johnny Cash's holy wife, June Carter. So sinner or not, it won't make any difference. We know our final destination beforehand. So maybe it's the stations getting there that count.

When taking a trip around the island of Sardinia, the other day, me and my man were looking for a place to eat in a small mountain village, Tempio Pausania, sandwiched between cork trees and pine trees. Maybe the sandwiching made us feel a little hungry. Anyway, we stumbled upon a restaurant called Purgatoria. It was located on a little square named Purgatorio, opposite a church also by the name of Purgatorio. Despite my catholic upbringing, the divine message did not immediately get through to me. Only back home it struck me: hello, Dante speaking. So that is when I got *The Divine Comedy* off of the bookshelf. What I have is the 19th Century English translation by Longfellow. A bit old-fashioned maybe, but you will not hear me complain about the English language of someone who also wrote the *Song of Hiawatha*.

*How did you like it?*

It's mysterious, and crystal-clear at the same time. With an obvious penchant for Christianity. According to Dante, Inferno is where I come from, Purgatorio is where I am now, and Paradiso is where I'm heading for.

In fact, I will be in Paradiso, Amsterdam, later this year where I will have a stand at the Paradiso fair for special publishers on 9 December. But I guess that's not what Dante meant. However, if Dante is right, and our purpose in life is to find our way to paradise,

that leaves me with a bit of a problem. For if we all go to paradise, Jerry Lee Lewis would turn out to have been talking nonsense. Which is kind of hard to accept for anyone in his right mind.

*But just to get along with Dante: what is his representation of things?*

With Dante, Purgatory is a kind of mountain consisting of several layers. Laboriously advancing from one layer to the other, the human soul will have to work his way through a succession of so many layers of suffering and spiritual growth.

*In what way does this translate into your exhibition at HOK gallery?*

The layers of Purgatory mountain are to be taken quite literally. The ten layers of Purgatory mountain will reflect in exactly ten works of art, that's to say: ten collages.

In fact, the first two layers are not part of Purgatory mountain as such, but together form the coast of the island where the mountain is located, the so-called Ante-Purgatory. It's the place where the excommunicated from the church and the late repentant are left behind. First, when arriving at his island straight from hell, one is greeted by Calliope, daughter of Zeus and the Muse of Poetry and Writing. She is the reason why my exhibition will have a strong calliopic tendency.

The gateway to Purgatory mountain, by the way, has three steps: one white, one black and one red. White is for purity, black is for mourning and red is for the blood of Christ. Incidentally, white, black and red are also the colours of HOK gallery. And of course, these were the Nazi's as well as the Anarchist's colours. And the very same colours that the White Stripes took over from De Stijl. Red is also the colour that I am fond of mingling into my black and white art works. Last year I had an exhibition entitled Arpsianism at the Grafische Werkplaats in the Hague. It consisted of a series of Risographic prints all executed in these three primal colours.

*So what layers of the Purgatory are there, really?*

It's seven layers, which one may easily recognize as the seven deadly sins: Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony and Lust. The roots of sinfulness, and may I add, the ingredients of all good Rock'n'Roll and human life in general. The very same things that are extorted in Jerry Lee Lewis's book of songs, however, are examined in the light of salvation in Dante's book of Canto's. Jerry Lee Lewis just gets enthusiastic about all things bad, basically, while Dante sets out to lay bare the core of love, hidden in all of these seven sins. Pride, Envy and Wrath are the three manifestations of perverted love, while Sloth is nothing but deficient love, and Avarice, Gluttony and Lust are excessive or misdirected love of basically good things.

*You mean that what Dante puts into perspective are exactly the very same perversions, deficiencies and excessions that Jerry Lee Lewis is celebrating on stage and off stage? That's rock'n'roll.*

*Two layers in the Ante-Purgatory, and seven deadly sins to be washed away in the next seven layers of Mount Purgatory. Isn't there one layer missing?*

Not really, because right on top of the mountain is earthly paradise or the Garden of

Eden. Last stop before entering the real thing: Heavenly Paradise.

*Which is a realm beyond the reach of your exhibition at HOK?*

Sure. My exhibit is entitled *Purgatorio*, and not *Paradiso*, remember? It took Dante three and a half days to ascend Mount Purgatory, and I will allow myself exactly the same amount of time to accomplish the series of collages comprising my exhibition. Before setting myself at work with glue and scissors, however, I will dedicate my time to the collecting of material for my collages, and the adapting of Dante's ideas to my own way of thinking. Which will definitely be less Christian and maybe a trifle more political.

*It will be all new works?*

Yes, especially made for the exhibition.

*And how are you going about, searching for material?*

As a collagist, one is constantly on the lookout for material. A collagist typically drowns in dirty old books, magazines and clippings. When sitting down to do a collage, I will browse around through this paper mess and will say to myself: nice picture, nice picture, and paste them together. This time, however, my way of working is much more idealistic, and I will let my choice of collage material be strictly guided by the purgatorial subject matter. But the subject matter seems to have been close to my heart in the first place, because I can easily make do with the material at hand.

Which is different from a project which I'm doing simultaneously with this *Purgatorio* project, about dancing and dancers. It turned out I didn't have a sufficient supply of material on that subject matter, which meant I had to go out and search second-hand bookshops, markets and trash piles for dance-related picture material.

For *Purgatorio*, the research is more on the spiritual level. Of course, I already knew about the *Divine Comedy*, but this time I have to fully immerse myself in it. Normally, I work a lot faster. But I guess this goes with developing myself as a collagist and an artist.

*How long have you been into collaging?*

I made my first collage-zine about twelve years ago. I was still a kid, then. Basically, I have been cutting and pasting since Kindergarten. I guess there were just too many old magazines laying around at home.

*When do you consider a collage good and finished?*

When you have the feeling that there is nothing more to be added to it, and you are happy with the result. Of course you can always keep on adding elements to it, but the same goes for a painting. You can always go on adding touches of paint here and there. Or glue some kind of clipping unto it. That's the power an artist has: if you say the work is finished, then it is finished. That's why collaging is such fun. It is the fastest way to produce interesting works of art.

*Is collaging an established art form?*

Among fellow collagists, sure it is. But at the same time it is a kind of anti-art. Some pre-

existing image is cut up and taken apart, only to be made into something different. Collaging was put to use by many an anti-movement in art history. Even Picasso did not shy away from glueing pieces of newspaper unto his paintings. The culmination point was when Dada perfected collaging as its main vehicle to make fun of the whole world and the pretensions of humankind inhabiting it. In the end, collaging is just punk. Underground art in its purest form.

*Is there an underground scene of collagists, then?*

Yes, you might say that there is an international collage scene. And it has expanded since maybe ten or twenty years ago. But then, it is nothing in comparison to other art scenes. Moreover, the expansion is mainly due to the internet, which tends to favor digital collaging. Me, I only go for analog collaging. If only because of the high-value quality of the basic material I'm working with: magazines from the forties and fifties. That is why most of my works are in black and white. These magazines were so beautifully printed, that it gives added value to the collages I cut and paste from them. At least when compared to the lousy laser-printed publications we have today. Let alone when compared to digital material. Analog is always imperfect. With analog collaging there is no hiding the occasional miscutting, the mispasting and the smears of glue. This special touch of vulnerability is hopelessly lost in digital collages.

*How about collagist exhibitions or magazines?*

Analog collagists are loosely united in a couple of international cliques. They keep in contact in the same way the whole world is maintaining its international contacts: by facebook and instagram. This way we manage to organize our collagist exhibitions, with contributions from all over the world. An important initiative in this field is Berlin based GlueHeads. The collage scene in Berlin is a whole lot bigger than in the Netherlands, anyway, and might very well be the centre of the world wide collagist web. After all, Berlin is bulging with artists. "Arm aber sexy" is the slogan attracting these artists from all over the world. I have lived there for seven years, and had my share in attending and curating some of these collagist exhibitions. While in Berlin I also started my very own *Prophit Art Zine*, published once a year and exclusively devoted to the art of collage. Theme of the first issue was 100 years of Dada, with contributions mainly from Berlin based artist, celebrating the role Berlin (and especially its collagists) had played in Dada. Theme of the second issue was 40 years of punk, with more international contributions. And theme of the third issue, to be published this fall, will be Existence. So no celebrating 20, 40 or 10.000 years of this or that, because Existence is eternal they say.

*Is collaging the first and last and everything for you?*

I have my steady job in the theater; I write about other artists in Art Reveal Magazine; I make a drawing a day; I publish a lot of my collages in Risographed booklets; I give workshops; I do some curating for other artists; now and then I engage myself in performance art and Dada-inspired Lautgedichte; and I designed the logo and the t-shirts for Swiss band The Hathors. But collaging is it. Collaging is sin, destruction, distortion. Basically, collaging is the eight deadly sin.