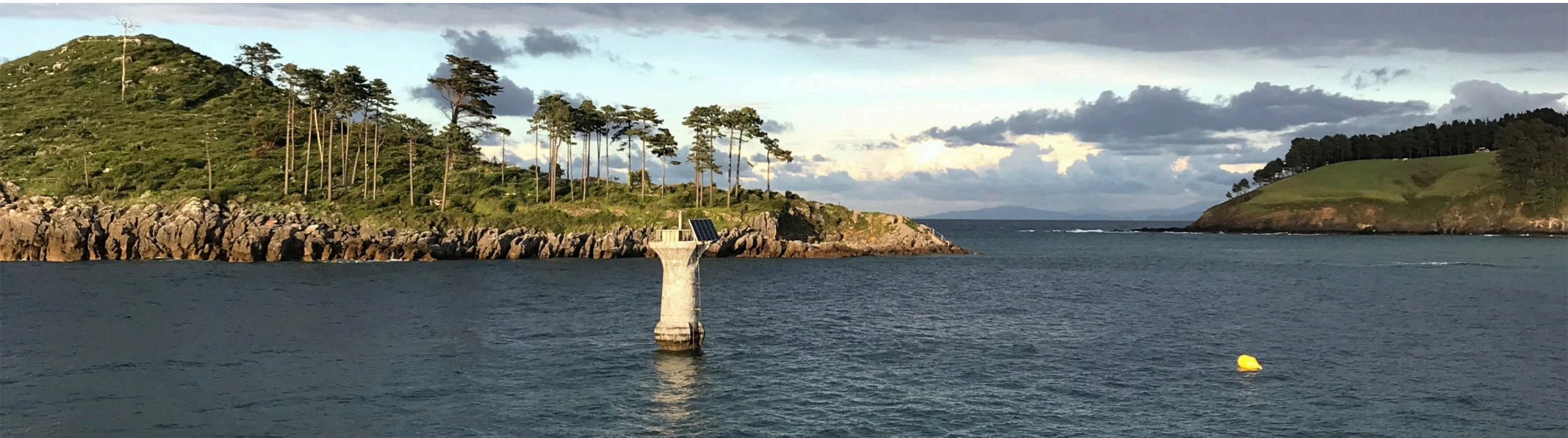


CORBETT  
VS.  
DEMPSEY

THE BIG DIG: MAGALIE GUÉRIN • THE LEKEITIO DRAWINGS







MAGALIE GUÉRIN  
IN CONVERSATION WITH  
JOHN CORBETT

**John Corbett: What does *studio* mean in your practice? The idea of a specific place. Because you've moved around a lot and have engaged in many residencies, including this one in Lekeitio, Spain, where you've made these drawings.**

Magalie Guérin: When you talk about place, do you mean the place *where* the studio is located, or the place of the studio?

**JC: The place of the studio.**

MG: Place of, ok. The studio for me is a container for work. I understand how to be an artist through the concept of work. So it's my workplace—I go to work in order to engage with art. I like the non-questioning 9-to-5 schedule, seven days a week. I get up in the morning and I go. I arrive in a messy place, where my books, my materials, and my thoughts are—it's an environment within which art can land. That space can take any form, it just has to be outside of my living environment. When I figured out that my studio could be mobile, I got really excited about the possibilities of being an artist working in the world-at-large. I need the studio, but that studio, thankfully, can be located in any place. And that really excites me—the mobile quality of it.

**JC: I think for each artist it's very different. Some artists are habituated to having the one space they go to, and that space, in turn, reflects, let's say, the city where they live and their patterns. This takes me to the concept of "comfort zone" and the way in which I see you consistently establishing habits and then pushing yourself outside of those practices, that comfort zone, both in the work and also in terms of the place in which the work is made.**

MG: It's interesting that you call that breaking out of a comfort zone, because for me, being still is uncomfortable. So it's the opposite—when I leave, I'm breaking away to go into my comfort zone. I'm more at ease when I'm not settled. Or perhaps it's that I find myself more curious, and I enjoy being a curious human being. A new location brings me alive in ways that the old one does not—I take advantage of the exterior and that brings me more joy and more engagement, strangely enough, in the interiority of the studio. I'll still have a strict work schedule but I surround it with play so it's a more curious way of engaging with the world.



**JC: What limitations does working that way impose on you? In other words, the idea of doing periodic residencies, where you go someplace else and you work—you did that regularly for quite a while, part of your own willful program to be a sort of peripatetic artist, setting up temporary bulkheads in a number of spots—Berlin, Marfa, Spain. I’m wondering what material limitations, or others, it has put on you and what kinds of specific things it has opened up?**

MG: That’s the difficulty of this particular need to be on the move, because it does take a little time to acclimate and get into a good workflow. And it’s not always possible to bring my ‘regular’ materials so I have to resort to what’s available. But that’s where new possibilities arise—and that was the case in Lekeitio. I was only able to fly with water-based mediums like ink, gouache, and watercolor, which I typically never work with. And I had zero idea of the type of studio I was about to land in—my host was very mysterious about that! But I figured I could probably work on paper so I went with that. These drawings would not exist if it weren’t for the particularities of that situation, and that’s exciting to me. New limitations equal new ways of engaging.



Oehlen's Studio, Spain.

**JC: That's the nature of constraint for artists, a love-hate relationship. They force you to do something new, they can be the springboard for new ideas. The myth of total freedom is that—oh I have access to everything, I can do everything. But we know that, after a certain point, the more that's available the more trouble we have making decisions. I have a feeling it's like that for artists too—if you have everything at your access, then it becomes very difficult to narrow it down, unless you put constraints around it.**

MG: Exactly.

**JC: So, it's interesting that this idea of moving from place to place inherently presents you with certain obstacles that can be turned into something positive.**

MG: I work that way even when I have all the materials available; I still put up a lot of limits, you know—repetition, for instance, and I build systems within which I'm allowed to play, but these systems are fixed. Within each body of work, there are always some rules put there in order to push against or work within. I wouldn't be able to do it any other way. Yeah, it would be too much freedom. And who wants that? (laughs)

**JC: Were there specific rules aside from the material constraints in these drawings that you're willing to divulge? Or (laughs) not?**

MG: Yeah, I definitely had a system, similar to the one I use to make my paintings. The work would need a ground first, and that ground was about letting the liquid of the ink do something to the paper. And then I would add a fixed shape, which I found by walking around town and paying attention to forms that are jumping out at me. One particular shape was repeated in all the drawings as the structure with which to interact. So that's very similar to the way my oil paintings are made but because the medium was so different, I had a lot of learning to do in terms of how to move it around. That was the hard part but also, the interesting new development.

**JC: Did you find in this case that there were specific shapes endemic to this Spanish town? Are they shapes and inspirations that you could get in many different places?**

MG: Well, I mean, they're not specific to Lekeitio in a touristy way—they are specific in a personal way. They are of my time there, related to my daily walks.

**JC: Right.**





MG: I'll become intrigued or attached to a little detail that keeps popping up at me on my route, so in that way, it couldn't have happened anywhere else but there. For me, the shapes signify my relationship to the place, not the place itself.

**JC: I think these drawings are incredibly beautiful and there are a lot of things going on in them that continue your work. Looking at them, you would know that they were yours—I would certainly know they were yours—but they're also very different. They have a very different color palette, a much more reserved color palette.**

MG: Yeah, they're black and white.

**JC: They're basically black and white, they have a little bit of chroma in them, but it's like...**

MG: Oh that's true, they have a little brown. I keep forgetting that brown. It's so neutral-looking.

**JC: Yeah, very neutral. But they have a very, very particular sensibility as a result of that. They mark themselves as being a group, you know, unto themselves, related to that time and place. Which brings us back to this question, this nagging question about the image and abstraction, which is sort of at the heart of a lot of what you're working on. It's abstraction with a very strong specificity to it, which I think is something that marks your work. It has the power of an image, because it is an image, but it isn't necessarily an image of something in the world.**

MG: That's right. My handling of shapes and what they represent in my work has stayed consistent throughout the years and across different mediums. You know, I say my work is about something that looks familiar but is unknown. The Lekeitio drawings were a little bit more about marks as opposed to shapes though. That's why they feel different to me—it was a very different approach. The shapes were kept as lines, as opposed to solid forms, so the boundaries were looser, more fluid. You know, that was probably related to the fact that I was working in Albert Oehlen's studio, and he was free-handling his material next to me in a way that probably made me want to experiment a bit more with mine. That was definitely interesting, working alongside him.

**JC: Albert was around for part of the time that you were there, right?**

MG: Yeah, he was there for a couple of days when I first arrived and helped me settle in. Then he left and I was completely alone for three weeks, with occasional communication with Carlos, his assistant (and a painter too), via Google Translate. He came back for the last week of my stay with two other artists, Andreas Breunig and Henning Strassburger, and we all worked together in this giant studio. It was the four of us, painting during the day, then going out for food in the evening. It was very special.

**JC: How did the Lekeitio residency come to happen?**

MG: Albert was my advisor in grad school and he mentioned his studio in Spain that I could use if I wanted to. At that time, ten years ago, I didn't think he was serious. Then I saw Albert in the summer of 2018, when I was in a residency in Berlin. You and Jim were in town too and we all had dinner together. Albert asked why I was in Berlin and I expressed my desire to spend more time in Europe, working, so he offered the studio in Spain again.



Left to right: Henning Strassburger, Albert Oehlen, Andreas Breunig, Ernst Oehlen, Magalie Guérin



Carlos Baudi, grilling sardines, Dehlen's studio, Spain

This time I took him up on it. Albert is a very generous person—he has the space, and he wanted to give me that opportunity. He was not supposed to be around at all during my residency but he ended up on a tight deadline to make these giant paintings for his Serpentine Gallery show so we decided to share the space. It was thrilling to be working next to him—he seems to genuinely like having people around; it doesn't affect his bubble at all. His presence made it so much more interesting for me, because not only he gave me the gift of a new location, but he was also there for conversation which I was grateful for, especially since I didn't know anyone in town and didn't speak the language. So that was great—we would have dinner after our studio day, me and the other two artists, plus Albert, his son, and Carlos, and there were three languages spoken back and forth at the table, from Spanish to German to English. I could only participate in one of those languages, but I could understand a bit of all of them and that's exactly why I find it so exciting to be in foreign places. Especially in multi-lingual Europe. It was this beautiful, fluid lingual experience of art and conversation. It was wonderful.

**JC: That's so great.**

MG: And I ate the best fish I've ever had in my entire life!

**JC: I mean, it jumps right off the boat into your mouth, right, so, what are you gonna do? (both laugh) Are there other aspects of Spain, of being there, that were noteworthy? I'm thinking about light. Light is such a big factor, it's one of those things that sort of filters its way into some painters' sensibilities. You and I have talked about how different the sense of light, and also space, was in Marfa for you. I'm wondering if the aura of the Spanish landscape and environment felt like it had an impact on you.**

MG: I've never quite consciously put it together, but it's not the light that affected me there, it's the wind. Lekeitio is on the sea, right on the coast. I took walks around the bay every day, and there is the water, the waves, and the wind. Now that I think of it, it makes sense with the way I handled the material. The fluidity of the ink. It feels like there is wind right through these drawings. So yeah, it's interesting to think about those drawings and their location. I've never felt so foreign as when I was in Lekeitio. So it would be fitting that I would make completely different work there.





**JC: I think of you as being, like, never foreign. You feel to me like somebody who...maybe it's because you come from a place that's bilingual, first of all, and now you live in a city that's not your city of origin.**

MG: Well, I'm gonna correct you there. I was born in Montreal but I grew up in Quebec City, which was absolutely not bilingual in the '70s-'80s. It was all French.

**JC: When did bilinguality become a part of your life, because it is, yeah?**

MG: It is, but that was a conscious choice. I was obsessed with being bilingual as a teenager. I badly wanted to speak English and made all the effort possible. But it's not until I left Quebec City on my own, in my early twenties, and was immersed in an Anglophone part of the country that I became officially bilingual.

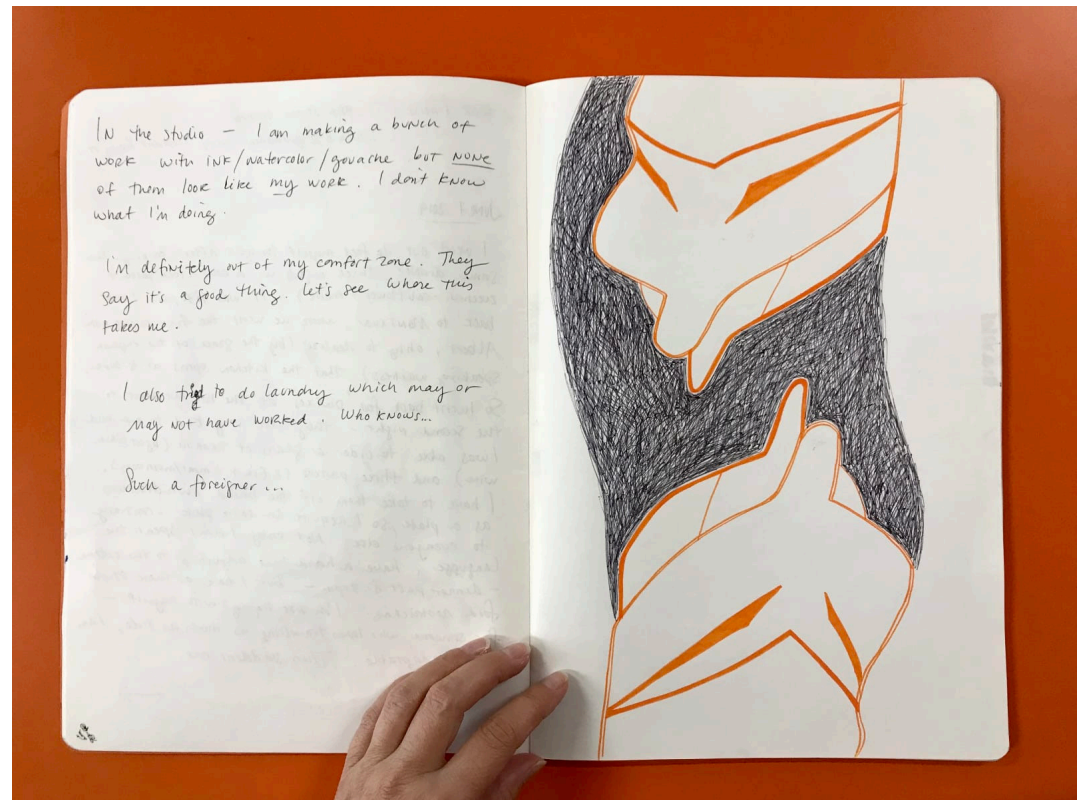


**JC: Right. So there you go. As a very young adult, you're pushing yourself out of your comfort zone, you're looking for new language and culture and that's obviously making you curious, so all of the things you've been talking about kind of roll into this. For me, the idea of you being foreign, it's like, you're constantly putting yourself in that position. I read that in the marginal notes you made in your Lekeitio sketchbook, you said "Such a foreigner." I think that's such an interesting observation—that helps me understand that a little bit.**

MG: Yeah, that's the thing: for me, foreign is not a negative connotation. It's uncomfortable, it's weird, but I obviously seek that. My entire being rejects familiarity and wants to be challenged. I think foreignness is a really special way of being. It expands your perspective; it makes you more a person of the world. It's an important thing for me, to be part of the world, and not just...you know, little French-Canadian me. (laughs)

**JC: You made these drawings in 2019. It was a very different time and we've been talking a lot about travel, the idea of being in the world, at a time when we're sort of forced back out of the world. Doing a project like this would be very difficult to imagine right now. So, I want to ask you, both in terms of the work itself, and then also in your way of thinking, coming off of this project, did it open things up or change things for you in terms of the work?**

MG: These drawings make me uncomfortable. They make me question how I work and how I don't work. They've opened up my desire to see what I can do with other mediums. So, since COVID, I started making ceramics, which I had been wanting to do for a long time. I've made some very uncomfortable ceramics! It felt scary, but in a productive way.



Guérin's Lekeitio sketchbook



Oehlen's studio, Spain

**JC: Well, you've already said that uncomfortable isn't a bad word in your vocabulary so, in a way, you being uncomfortable with them, we don't take that as a negative, but we can look at that as a positive.**

MG: Right. Yeah.

**JC: They have some of that juice!**

MG: Sure!

**JC: When I think about them relative to your work in general, I think, oh, this has a very interesting catalytic effect, that even though they're drawings and they're not bright, colorful as you have worked in the past, they still have an authority that partially comes from you having a space to open up with them and do something different.**

MG: Yeah, I think they're important in that way. I can't directly pinpoint where they're leading me now, but they've opened up some doors and possibilities.

**JC: Can you imagine having prospects to do other residencies once COVID is over?**

MG: Oh, yeah. I can't imagine not doing that. I feel very...

**JC: Restless.**

MG: Yes, restless.



PLATES





