

A GOOD LIFE: THE JULIE DOUCET INTERVIEW

BY DAN NADEL

Not so long ago, **JULIE DOUCET** sent me a Big Nose. As we all know, nothing is funnier than a big nose. Nothing, that is, except a big nose and glasses. But her “Le Big Nose” is enough. It is a bulbous paper mache object packaged in a vibrant box with a loopy drawing on the front and circuitous text running along its surface. It, like so much of her recent work makes hugely entertaining art out of rather neglected subjects. Her series of limited edition artists books, *Sophie Punt*, as well as her prints, are often given over to visual riffs on the everyday, rendering the familiar just unfamiliar enough to spark a new thought, a smile, and a bit of awe. Tools are named for ex-boyfriends, the concept of “slowness” is advocated, and men and women are molded into near-abstract forms. These projects are never less than immaculately crafted, utterly compelling and impishly funny. Behind them is a hard working and brilliant artist in full control of her sensibility.

Oh yes, and she used to draw comics. Her long-running title, *Dirty Plotte* (1987-1998), was a hugely popular exploration of life, love, femininity, sex, and the dream lives of us all. Her visceral and uninhibited comics had a tremendous influence on a generation of young artists. Julie's books include *My Most Secret Desire*, *My New York Diary*, *Longtime Relationship*, and the recent collection, *Lady Pep* (all Drawn and Quarterly). But having given up the medium in 1999 she moved on to art-making of a different kind. She's produced a stunning array of books, prints, pamphlets, paper tools, and sculptures from her studio in Montreal. They continue her old themes, but rely on the ample power of her linework, sense of color, and meticulous design to function. And Julie's wordplay is never far behind—both in her prints and in a recent French-language book, *J Comme Je* (Seuil), her prose autobiography until the age of 16. She wrote the entire book word-by-word using letters and phrases clipped from 1960s magazines. Her most recent project is an evolving installation at a Montreal art space that juxtaposes bio-morphic sculptures with text about the hardships of love. In 2006, my own company, PictureBox, will release an as yet-untitled book of Julie's art, and in 2007 Drawn and Quarterly will release a 300-plus page collection of her visual diaries. I interviewed Julie in my Jackson Heights, Queens apartment on November 5, 2005. She was passionate, wry and very thoughtful, though a mischievous chuckle was never far behind.





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IN THE 80'S IT WAS LIKE, "WHAT'S THE USE, WHY BOTHER, NOTHING WILL EVER CHANGE IN THE WORLD." I JUST THINK THAT NOW **IT'S POSSIBLE TO CHANGE THINGS**. OF COURSE IT'S EXTREMELY SLOW, BUT I DON'T LIKE THE ATTITUDE OF BEING DOWN ON EVERYTHING.

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DAN NADEL: We were talking about a book earlier and you said that its view of life was too ugly for you to enjoy it, but that 15 years ago you would have liked it. What's changed?

JULIE DOUCET: I guess it's about cynicism. In those days in the '80s it was like, "What's the use, why bother, nothing will ever change in the world." I just think that now it's possible to change things. Of course it's extremely slow, but I don't like the attitude of being down on everything.

DN: Do you think things have changed in the world, or have you changed?

JD: I've changed. The world is certainly not getting any better. [Laughter]

DN: Do you find yourself more optimistic as you've gotten older?

JD: I wouldn't say optimistic, no, not at all. It's just a question of attitude. I've seen too many people who do nothing—just waste themselves, their talent, do nothing thinking it's hopeless. Also what changed everything for me was when I quit comics and started to do other things like printmaking. I remember the day I started to print. The first one I did was a total shock for me. I thought: "That's what I'm supposed to be doing!" I'm happy I did the comics, but this was a very important change for me. I'd met people in the past who were so passionate about what they did, I didn't think I had that in me, and I certainly didn't have it for comics, but when I started to do other things I became just like that: passionate. I am now working everyday and I love it. I could work all the time.

DN: And what was it like when you were making comics?

JD: I'd get a good idea and be excited about it but then to sit down and draw was very difficult and a very slow process. And I'd find an excuse not to do it—not to do anything—wash the dishes, anything.

DN: And why did you quit comics?

JD: I quit comics because I got completely sick of it. I was drawing comics all the time and didn't have the time or energy to do anything else. That got to me in the end. I never made enough money from comics to be able to take a break and do something else. Now I just can't stand comics. I'm not interested anymore.

DN: So you don't even read comics anymore?

JD: Barely. I read my friends, of course, but I wouldn't go out and buy a comic. I haven't done that in years. [Laughter]

DN: Did you also feel like you'd done what you needed to do with the medium? Did it also stop being interesting you as an activity?

JD: Yes and no. For me, pictures and words together will always be extremely interesting, but that can take so many different forms. I feel I am a writer. Now I think I really underestimated that. Writing is very important to me, really.

DN: You underestimated it when you were making comics?

JD: Because it was a mixture of the two, I didn't use the words that much, they were there to support the images most of the time...

DN: Right, they weren't a force on their own. Also, comics is much more plot-based, so sometimes the writing is just to move the story along, nothing else. But you're still very interested in narrative...

JD: Of course! Hugely!

DN: You're interested in all kinds of narratives. There is the *J Comme Je*, and *Sophie Punt*, which is an abstract narrative. And there is the portrait series, which is a sequence of sorts. What kinds of narratives interest you most? Does they have to be visual?

JD: Well, I couldn't sit down in front of the computer and write. There has to be a graphic part. In the case of *J Comme Je*, it's because I'm not confident enough to just write so I do it that way...I cut out pages from magazines, I have a general idea of what I want to say and I find the various words there, but sometimes I take entire parts of a sentence and something really unexpected happens.

DN: So there's an element of limitation and chance. You're limited by your source material and there's a chance of finding something new. But do you ever find that it's a crutch as well?

JD: Yeah, that's exactly what it is. But I do want to write by myself eventually. I will get there. I have an idea of a novel. But it's not for now. I will do two other books like *J Comme Je* and then...



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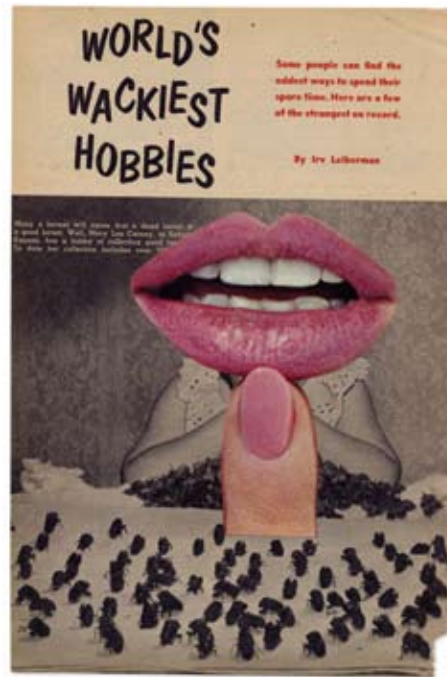
03

01 Bill, 2004

02 World's Wackiest Hobbies, 2002

03 Elle-Humour, 2004

04 Feet, 2002



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DN: Is the most important thing to you making the work?

JD: It's very much the form it takes that interests me. A book, a print...

DN: Is there anything that is most important above all else?

JD: Well...I would say the content is most important. The words. There are always words in my work.

DN: You've also said recently that you don't like to draw anymore. So why is printmaking easier than drawing for you?

JD: When I started the printing then at that time I was still interested in drawing. Now I'm more interested in general in exploring abstraction. Writing is a form of abstraction, no? I'll probably come back to drawing some day, I guess.

DN: Are the abstractions a meditative exercise for you? How is the process different?

JD: The process is the same in my head. I don't know. What I would like to do these days is abstract collages. Probably with words, but more shapes than words.

DN: Why didn't you show much of your stuff in the last 6 years?

JD: It seemed to me like too much work. And I feel, I think that in Montreal it's not really worth it. Also because of my relationship to Montreal... I just don't exist in Montreal to people. I come to the States or Europe and it's like I am suddenly somebody. In Montreal, nothing any close to that.

DN: Is it important to you that people see your work? Are you ambitious for another layer of recognition?

JD: I remember as an art student I was very frustrated because I had this comics style and people would tell me I should illustrate children's books. I hated that. I just didn't fit at all. I was so frustrated! So I thought, "ok, I am going to show them!" And now because I am famous...

DN: Do you think of yourself as being famous?

JD: Well, yeah, in a certain crowd, of course. I think I am because my name opens doors, I don't have to struggle, people know who I am. It sure makes things easier. So, you don't get addicted to it but you get used to it. At least I do. It's not like I'm working for that, but I realize that it's good, it helps a lot in that way. It's more positive than negative, I would say.

DN: Do you see this recent work in an art historical lineage at all? Does that concern you at all? The larger context?

JD: I wish it could be, in the sense that I wish my work would be recognized by a larger crowd of people as more art than be stuck with the cartoonist label for the rest of my life. That's what's killing me about those comics guys. Dan Clowes is mostly a writer, a great artist, and has tried different things. But a lot of those guys, their drawing style never changes—the content neither—and it seems it never will. I just don't understand that, how you can spend 50 years of your artist life doing the same thing over and over again.

DN: Well, it's a different approach to drawing. For them the drawing is more of a tool—it moves the plot. But for you it's something else. What is it?

JD: There are so many things to do! I guess it completely liberated me when I stopped doing comics and I realized I was so right about trying other things.

DN: A lot of the stuff in Lady Pep is concerned with a few things: The stuff of everyday life: suitcases, tools, bodies. There's a sense of you noticing and then transforming your surroundings. Your comics tend to be more interior, but this seems more exterior. I wondered about that. It seems more about things outside of you.

JD: In most of those cases it's about graphic exploration. It's not like I choose objects to focus on, it's just there. I love tools. All the mechanical things, machines...

DN: Tell me about the Slowness Movement.

JD: The Slow Action Movement. That's an idea I came up with with Benoit Chaput. We were sitting at the kitchen table one evening and we came up with that. It's for the promotion of slowness. The first thing we did, well I did, was to print little posters. That was my first silkscreen printing experience. I put them up around Montreal and surprisingly it really got people's attention. People were collecting them. I did a new one every week for about six weeks. I stopped because Montreal was getting too cold, it was in the fall. I couldn't ride my bike around anymore and put them up, my hands were freezing.

DN: So what happened? Is it still going?

JD: Well, it's very slow. [Laughter] No. We had a bunch of ideas together but I was the one who was actually making something out of it. Benoit was talking a lot about it, but never really did anything. He was supposed to write a manifesto, but...

DN: You work all the time, right?

JD: Yeah, every day. Weekends too.

DN: Do you enjoy it?

JD: Of course!

DN: Well, some people hate the process of their art.

JD: That's how I felt about comics.

DN: You actually find it enjoyable. Does it come easily?

JD: Oh yeah.

DN: Do you keep a sketchbook?

JD: No, art school made me hate it, ruined it for me. And/or, I was always too lazy to do it.



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05 Love Tool, 2003

06 Slow Knife Spoon Fork Kit, 2003

07 Sexe Tool, 2003

ON A PASSÉ UNE PARTIE DE L'APRÈS-MIDI À CHERCHER LE PORTE-MONNAIE VERT DE 5.T. QUI FINALEMENT ÉTAIT SUR LA GRANDE TABLE, SOUS UNE FEUILLE DE PAPIER. À 6HRS30 C'ÉTAIT LA MARÉE HAUTE. ON A ÉTÉ SE BAI GNER AVEC UN AMI À ELLE *qui habite le coin.*



ces deux là sont très gais et très minces
les c'est pas chaud!

CET AMI, R.F., C'EST UN TYPE AVEC QUI J'AI TRAVAILLÉ DANS UN CENTRE DE PHOTOCOPIE, EN 1988. C'ÉTAIT MA PREMIÈRE ET DERNIÈRE JOB. J'AVAIS PAS REVU R.F. DEPUIS!.. ON A TOUS LES DEUX DÉTESTÉ L'EXPERIENCE. ON A ÉTÉ ENSUITE CHEZ LUI SE RÉCHAUFFER et MANGER DES NOUILLES.

J'AI AUSSI

02.08.03. Samedi. J'AI RÊVÉ QUE J'ÉTAIS DANS UN SHOPPING-MALL SOUTERRAIN ET QUE JE MAGAZINAIS LES SOULIERS. CE QUE JE VOYAIS DANS TOUTES LES BOUTIQUES C'ÉTAIT DES SOULIERS TRANS

RÊVÉ QUE J'ENVOYAIS UNE LETTRE *genre*, D'AMOUR À CE TYPE... PARCE QUE JE VOYAIS PAS DU TOUT COMMENT L'APPROCHER AUTREMENT. ET JE REGRETTAIS MON GESTE.



oh mon!!
oh c'est ce que j'ai encore fait!??
chuis foutue c'est fini. il sait tout!!

ON A MANGÉ NOTRE DÉJEUNER DEHORS, FA A PRIS PLUSIEURS HEURES. FA FAISAIT UN MOMENT QU'ON S'ÉTAIT PAS VUES, AVEC 5.T. PAS MAL DE CHOSSES À SE RACONTER... JE L'AI BIEN, ELLE... LONDRES, BERLIN, BELGIQUE, LONDRES À NOUVEAU... ELLE EST TOUJOURS PAS FIXÉE!



JE COMPREND BIEN FA...

AVEC C. ON A ÉTÉ SE BALADER UN MOMENT AU BORD DE L'EAU. C'ÉTAIT LA MARÉE BASSE EN CE DÉBUT D'APRÈS-MIDI IL Y AVAIT À PEU PRÈS UN KILOMÈTRE de BATTURE. ON EST RESTÉS SUR LE BORD DE LA TERRE, ASSIS SUR DES CAILLOUX LE SOL ÉTANT TROP GLAISIEUX ET MOUILLÉ... *on parle de matériel, où se trouve son'il y a pas grand'chose pour moi (pas de parler les d'amour...) etc. d'habitude n'est pas d'accord.*



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IT'S NOT BECAUSE I'M LUCKY - I WORK VERY HARD. BUT I LOVE IT. I THINK I HAVE A GOOD LIFE. A VERY GOOD LIFE. WHATEVER BAD HAPPENS IN MY LIFE, I HAVE TO ADMIT TO MYSELF I CAN'T COMPLAIN, I HAVE A PRETTY GOOD LIFE. OH YES...

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DN: So where do you develop your ideas? Do you do it as make the work?

JD: Yes, almost all the time that way. I hardly make sketches. I'll have the general idea before I start, but I don't really plan. Same with the writing. It's also because of comics—you had to plan so much, to pencil everything before you get to the actual drawing... I will make a drawing over and over again until it's good—I don't care. I'd rather do that than pencil it first.

DN: Why did you start the *Sophie Punt* series? It's almost like your other series. And what does it mean?

JD: It's the name of a girl I went to high school with. It's funny I didn't make the connection between *Dirty Plotte* and *Sophie Punt*. I was inspired by a Finnish friend of mine—Matti Hagelberg—whatever he would do, he would give it the same title. So I decided that whatever I did as an experiment I would call Sophie Punt. And what's funny is that eventually I got an email from Sophie Punt. She wrote to Drawn and Quarterly saying she wanted to get in touch with me. I got really scared because her e-mail address was from the Ministry of Justice. I was like, "Whoah, trouble..." She had been doing some research on her family name and searched for her name and my name came up. So, I wrote back to her and it turns out she's a secretary at the Ministry of Justice. I explained to her what it was all about, that I wasn't making fun of her or anything like that. Somehow she never got my message, because she never commented. I didn't really dare to send her another message with the explanation. And that was it.

DN: Do you think of yourself as a romantic?

JD: No, not at all. The guys are usually more romantic than me. They want to hold hands on the street, things like that, which I totally hate.

DN: It's something that's run through all of your work.

JD: Well, I guess relationships have never been that easy for me. Part of it is that, guys don't like to go out with someone who has

more success than them. And for the longest time, being in a crowd with mostly boys I didn't get the occasion to talk to women much at all. And when I finally did I found out I was not crazy and it was like that for a lot of other women. So... When you're with somebody and you know you can expect him to tell you something not so nice about your work and yourself it just can't work. You can't have a relationship if you don't trust your partner. You can't.

DN: You once told me that you didn't care about selling your art that much because it was like money in the bank. And you've also just talked about the trouble of finding someone comfortable with your success. You think of yourself as a success, right? You're more confident than most artists I know.

JD: I think of myself that way because I compare myself to other artists I know.

DN: But do you also just feel confident as an artist? Do you feel in control of your talent and mediums?

JD: Oh yeah. Yeah. I guess it's because my parents always encouraged me, everybody around me complimented me on my drawings. I suppose that builds a solid confidence.

DN: You're not mortified by your own art. One last thing: Some artists are professional artists, they separate art and life. But you don't seem to separate your art and your life. Everything filters back and forth. Do you distinguish between the two are both running at the same time?

JD: Running at the same time. It's all I do all day. I don't care if I don't make any money. I just make enough money to pay my rent and buy books. What's important to me is to be able to spend all my time on whatever I want to do, art-wise. That's very precious. I feel very spoiled. But it's a lot of work, too. It's not because I'm lucky—I work very hard. But I love it. I think I have a good life. A very good life. Whatever bad happens in my life, I have to admit to myself I can't complain, I have a pretty good life. Oh yes...

