

## IMAGES >> JEAN-XAVIER RENAUD

Laurent Dubreuil is a former editor of *diacritics*. A professor at Cornell and at Tsinghua University, he is the author of more than fifteen scholarly books. In 2024, he will publish a collection of “adult children’s tales,” written in French, and inspired by Jean-Xavier Renaud’s art.

Email: ld79@cornell.edu

“Jean-Xavier Renaud lives and works in Hauteville, France.” What would normally be a relatively meaningless biographical note here instantly becomes the indication of a singular viewpoint. Few people ever actively chose to live in Hauteville, a large village in the administrative department Ain, situated halfway between Lyon and Genève. Hauteville currently counts less than 4,000 inhabitants, and its—relative—growth in the nineteenth century was due to its selection as the French center for sanatoriums. But in the mid-2000s, Renaud deliberately relocated to Hauteville in what should be read as a both existential and artistic statement. It is there that, together with sculptor Gaëlle Foray and others, “JX” contributed to the recent transformation of a disaffected hospital into a collaborative workshop and exhibition space for artists, craftspeople, and collectors, named *La montagne magique* (the French translation of the title of Thomas Mann’s novel *Der Zauberberg*). Despite its name, Hauteville will never be the locale of “high civilization”; it will never be referred to as the “capital city of the twenty-first century.” Now, in this precise moment of the history of “Western” art, the dominant narrative of urbanization as a condition of, and for, modernity should be interrogated, and probably eschewed. The outskirts of the city, from *banlieue* to *suburbia*, were always implied, be it negatively or positively, in the understanding of modernity, as early as in Charles Baudelaire’s prose poems.<sup>1</sup> Today, in Europe especially, the continued deindustrialization, the ongoing dismantling of the rural world, the rarefaction of public services, and the plan for a government-controlled repopulation of the countryside with migrants are striking elements of a social experiment that make Hauteville one of the emblematic, though perpetually displaced and dispersed, loci of the contemporary after the exhaustion of modernity. Collectively, and for many of us, life is partially moving to some internal periphery. We are no longer at the center of anything, and not even able to enjoy the pleasure of the fugue amidst the monuments and temples of the century (kenosis affects both *flânerie* and *dérive*). We can no longer be completely withdrawn or isolated, lost in wilderness, not only because cities continue to expand, but also because, despite our sometimes best efforts, we are constantly touched by the communicational rumor of the globalized network. Modernity is extinguished, through all its guises and forms of prefixation. Art is not, and it is from the distance of relegation—name it Hauteville if you will—that Renaud is illuminating our unenlightened epoch.

Renaud, the illuminator. Renaud, the chronicler. “JXR” is not exactly recording facts and documents, although he often paints on the basis of “found images,” taking digital photos he collects from websites as a basis for his own work. He is not an archivist either, although he uses collage and routinely incorporates pictures or logotypes into his digital drawings. The chronicling work remains. In Renaud’s oeuvre, the times are being shown in all their glorious stupidity. An optimist nevertheless, the artist exhibits through the grotesque dehiscence of the ordinary the raw nature of survival. By his alliance of artistic métier and critical force, of iconoclastic crudeness and reflection on

society, of laughter and precision, Renaud's art is undoubtedly related to that of Honoré Daumier, George Grosz, or Philip Guston. JXR has in common with all three painters that he excels at displaying the ridicule of adventitious grandeur and the vulgarity of the norm. In his digital drawings, Renaud, like Guston in his post-1968 figurative work, is able to mobilize the childishness of the trait to denounce the most scandalous extremism. Aesthetically, in his ink drawings, watercolors, or oils, Renaud is probably closer to Daumier and to Grosz through his sense of overall composition, his revisitation of art history, and his facility for representation. However, caricature as such remains rarer in JXR's pictures when he works with more traditional media. It could be found in some portraits, especially those of French political figures, such as Damien Abad or Laurent Wauquiez, which are reminiscent of Daumier's serial depictions of French peers and deputies; and those of TV and internet celebrities, whose ugly "beauty" is close to the models of Grosz's *Ecce homo*. But instead of the sharp contours that are so characteristic of caricature in general, Renaud rather opts for the blending of watercolors. His commitment to a punk-like, instant mode of visual creation is less a function of the allegoric simplification of the human face (as in Daumier and Grosz), and more related to the visible exposition of overlapping layers and folded complexity. As for the shocking ferocity of satire that Renaud shares with Guston deriding the Ku Klux Klan, with Grosz depicting interwar Berlin, and with Daumier attacking the monarchy and the empire, it does not prevent him from posing a more tender gaze on reality.

In his selection of works for this present issue, the artist first makes his technical versatility quite evident, also demonstrating his intent and his thoughtful use of the specificities of each medium and format. Despite the varied temporality of execution, relative to each genre, a sense of action through gesture dominates all the pictures, typical of the dynamic conception one finds from Michelangelo to Hans Hartung, or from Wu Daozi to Arnulf Rainer. There, life and art are taken together, as a will, a drive, an *élan*, to speak the language of psychoanalysis, of Arthur Schopenhauer, of Henri Bergson. More importantly, and less theoretically perhaps, the sheer violence of the present is rendered by the artistic performance itself. What present, exactly? I would say that the selected works exemplify three key dimensions of Renaud's visual critique of the contemporary, all of them eminently political and interrelated. We can identify a triple denunciation: of the armature of everyday life in the "surveillance society," of the manufacture of globalized representations, and of rising reactionary, totalitarian tendencies.

While not a neo-Luddite in the strict sense—JXR is an avid gamer, an amateur of virtual reality—, in his digital drawings, Renaud has represented himself as worthy of

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being rewarded for his decade-long rejection of cell phones, or for being an absolutely remorseless violator of Facebook. In *Bitcoin* (see page 156), he is amalgamating two technological mutations tied to digital capitalism. The scene is inspired by both the practice—still more common in Europe than in the United States—of “contactless” payment with a credit card, and the e-currency whose English noun, once heard in *Franglais*, is allowing for a simple and salacious pun (and there are quite a few of them in Renaud’s oeuvre). Since a *bit*—a unit of information—is, in French, the homophone of a *bite*—one of the many slang terms for penis—, the naming of the bitcoin suggests the ithyphallic presence of the artist, who, from the far left of the picture, is emerging from nothingness to ironically pay his respect to the mutations of “dematerialized” currency and to *sign* this image as a middle finger gesture addressed to both electronic control and the world of finance. *Alpha Condé* (see page 29) exposes the militarization of the police, a widespread international trend. Under their new, sophisticated armor, the *forces de l’ordre* of today paradoxically appear as more archaic and brutish entities than before. *Homo homini lupus*, certainly, but, beyond the generality of the Latin dictum, Renaud shows the *transformation* of officers into wolves, while continuing the visual tradition of hybridized human animals illustrated by Charles Le Brun’s physiognomic research, J.J. Grandville’s *Les Métamorphoses du jour*, or Edmond-François Calvo’s and Art Spiegelman’s pictorial narratives of World War II and the Holocaust. The police, it is true, is not only a profession, but a state of mind. Electronic culture has trivialized mobs in their digital forms, and

vigilantes are no longer a mainly American phenomenon. Neighborhood watch communities have recently been translated in French society as *voisins vigilants* (see pages 80/81 and 147), which form, in Renaud’s paintings as well as in reality, the civilian counterparts to the *Alpha Condé*.

On all continents, communicational technologies inform a globalized layer, an additional, homogenizing, “cultural” dimension that spreads out its mottos, words, pictures, and other hashtags to which we are summoned to answer, and,

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usually, conform. The ubiquity of fake “private” pictures of “personalities” and “influencers,” their virality and vulgarity, are the topics of entire series in the work of Renaud. The transposition of the digital image providing “content” to the social media industry into a slightly distorted, often enlarged, and handmade painting is turning ordinary obscenity into a motif for artistic affirmation and salvation. Among Renaud’s regular objects of fascination in this respect is Kendall Jones, formerly known as “the Texas Tech cheerleading hunter,” whose repeated performance as a living Barbie doll enjoying the death of animals is a troubling example of lethal and pornographic narcissism. *Kendall blanchiment* (see page 120) is a depiction that is less violent than some others,

and based on snapshots of Jones's preferred procedure for whitening her teeth and for keeping her carnassial smile intact. The huntress is a beast, hooked to her machine.

The kiss on the mouth between soccer player David Beckham and his daughter, another item of internet virality, is reproduced by Renaud under the original title *La quatrième dimension* (see pages 148/149). This is in direct reference to the French name of Rod Serling's TV series *The Twilight Zone*, where the mere derailment of the banal led to the most outlandish. The show featured aliens more than once, and in fact, the odd deformation of the two kissers' heads gives them a slightly alien appearance. *Star qui allaite* (see page 3) is another instantiation of the public circulation of staged private photographs, here a breastfeeding scene, with a "star" playing her "own" role as a mother. Such shots have now become part of the deceptive clichés of an ambiguous "female empowerment," in a derivation of Guy Debord's spectacular, and a visual standardization of the living. Renaud's intervention consists in contrasting, from within, the old, religious mode of representing maternity (in the Christian context, especially) with its current commercialized avatar.

As another direction in his work, JXR is giving us *Rhône-Alpes Auvergne* and *Ici c'est l'Ain* (see pages 79 and 155). The painting is a portrait of Laurent Wauquiez, a potential nominee for the French presidential election, and currently in charge of the wealthiest administrative region of the country (outside of Paris's *Île-de-France*). Wauquiez achieved a certain national and local fame by attacking the unemployed and migrants, by claiming to defend Christian values against secularism (and Islam), by reinventing large portions of his own biography to better cater to right-wing populism, and by recently withdrawing subventions from museums, theaters, and other artistic endeavors whose direction he personally dislikes. In this watercolor, Wauquiez's puffed-up face makes his ambitions apparent, as he is bloated with pride (*bouffi d'orgueil* in French). With the chromatic symphony of his blue, red, rose, and grey skin, the politician is literally showing his true colors.

*Ici, c'est l'Ain* quotes the newly minted motto of the administrative department (*Ain*) that Hauteville is part of. As a poorly referential statement (of the type  $p=p$ ), the phrase, probably adapting another plainly stupid slogan coined for the Paris-Saint-Germain soccer club (*Ici, c'est Paris*), is also embarrassingly close to xenophobic pronunciations of endogeny (such as the outdated *La France aux Français* and the now trendier *On est chez nous!*). In Renaud's ink drawing, *Ici, c'est l'Ain* is a case of micro-fascist reterritorialization (to borrow terms from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari). It can therefore be equated with the show of force of the Taliban, and the two look like diverse expressions of comparable tendencies. In a similar register, *Hauteville, Texas* (see pages 58/59), a large-format oil painting, synthesizes many of the features I have dwelled upon here. A composite image, like the murals by Diego Rivera and those favored by the American New Deal, the piece documents heterogeneous facets of Hauteville. There are precise depictions of circumstances, such as the snow cannon (once seen by the city of Hauteville as a way to turn the village into a ski resort and thus attract tourists), here producing a rainbow, or the figuration of Ain's motto on the truck's flags. Beside the accurate speci-

ficities of the representation, what is visible is a quest for making artistic sense of the grotesque chaos of the contemporary. The title of the painting, transporting Hauteville to the State of Texas, is not only an ironic commentary on *Américanisation*. It is additional proof that, once taken as a supernumerary layer of the real, the globalized culture we partake in, whether we live in Ain or Texas, must be counterbalanced by the living power of creation in situ, against both localized and transnational conformation.

Two of the works included in this issue strongly exemplify this trust in artistic affirmation against all odds. *Réchauffement climatique* (roughly the French equivalent to *global warming*; see front cover) is not a reassuring picture, and I am not implying that Renaud is a romantic, seeking refuge against human destruction in the safe retreat of the countryside. Indeed, as outlined by the title, the focus is on the ongoing ecological crisis and the definite contamination of “nature” by human agency. But this painting is also a vigorous reinterpretation of early modern still life. The genre, in French, is called *nature morte* (“dead nature”), starkly hinting at the very presence of death within *phusis*. In practice, from the European Renaissance to the seventeenth century, a dominant convention for such paintings consisted in showing decay, often symbolized by a fly or a snail. The snail dominates the upper part of Renaud’s picture, otherwise piling up flowers, herbs, vegetables, and objects (hammers), as in a classical Dutch *stilleven*. The contemporary continuation of the genre, beside the warning it contains, is an equally vibrant testament to the enduring relevance of the visual arts. To this, we should add that Renaud, as much as he believes in painting, is an apostle of the whimsical. I briefly mentioned an optimism that neither the most acerbic satire nor the most stringent political concern can dissolve. Visually, Renaud’s optimism shapes a persistent, light, humorous fantasy that I recognize in his *Laïka* (see page 121). In this self-portrait, the artist plays with another paronomasia, the sonic proximity of Leica, the well-known brand for binoculars and cameras, and Laika, the Soviet space dog that was sent into orbit in 1957, and whose picture was reproduced at will in USSR mass culture. Looking through the optic instrument whose name visibly corresponds to that of the dog once “looking at us” from above, the painter is producing a double human-animal portrait of two seers artistically inspecting the visible world, far beyond the frame of any readymade image.

LAURENT DUBREUIL

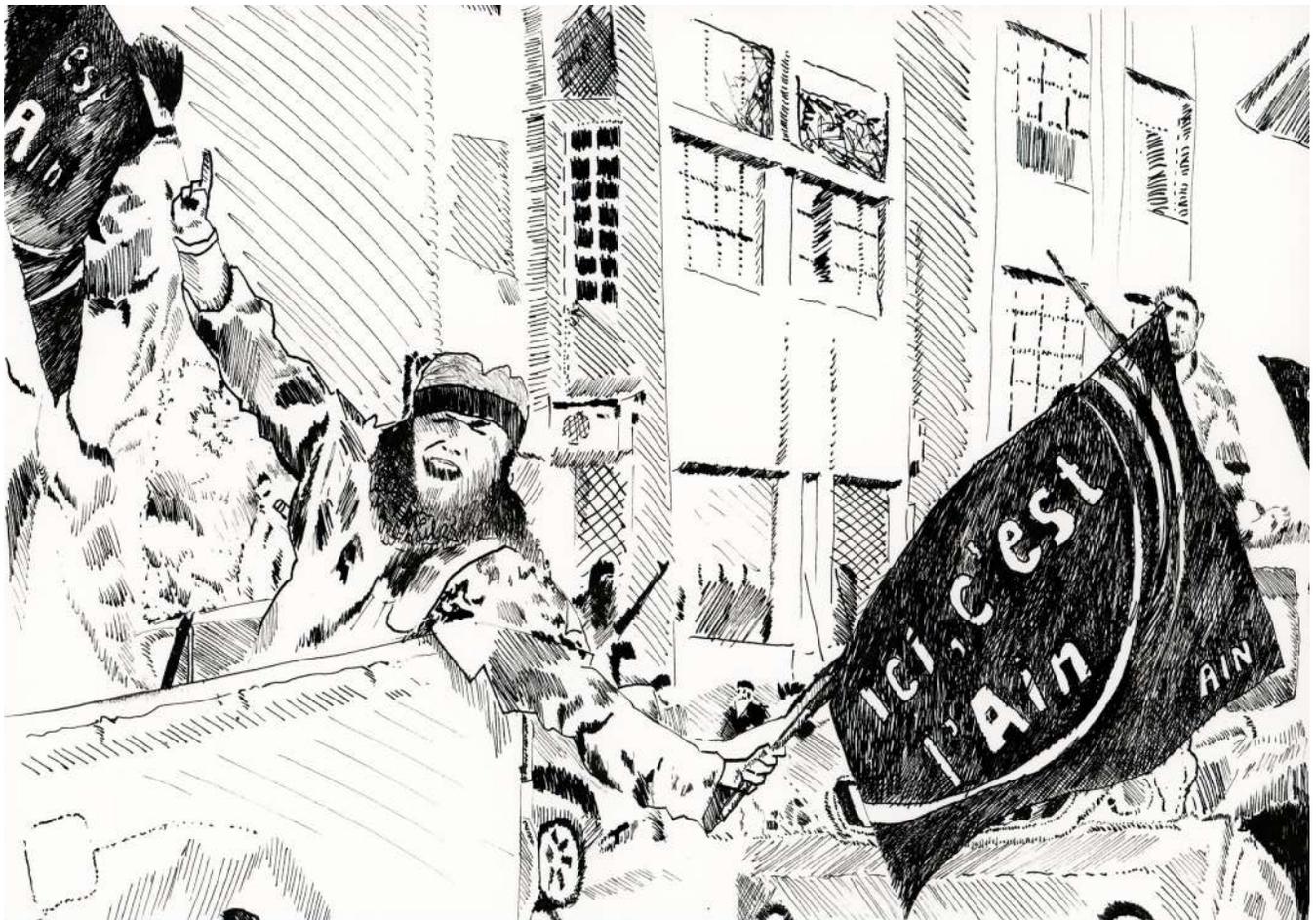
**IMAGE:**  
ICI C’EST L’AIN, 2022  
Encre de chine sur papier  
21 x 29.7cm

## Notes

1 Baudelaire's last two *Petits poèmes en prose* are devoted to the *banlieue*. For more on the matter, see Dubreuil, *Baudelaire au gouffre de la modernité*, 64-7.

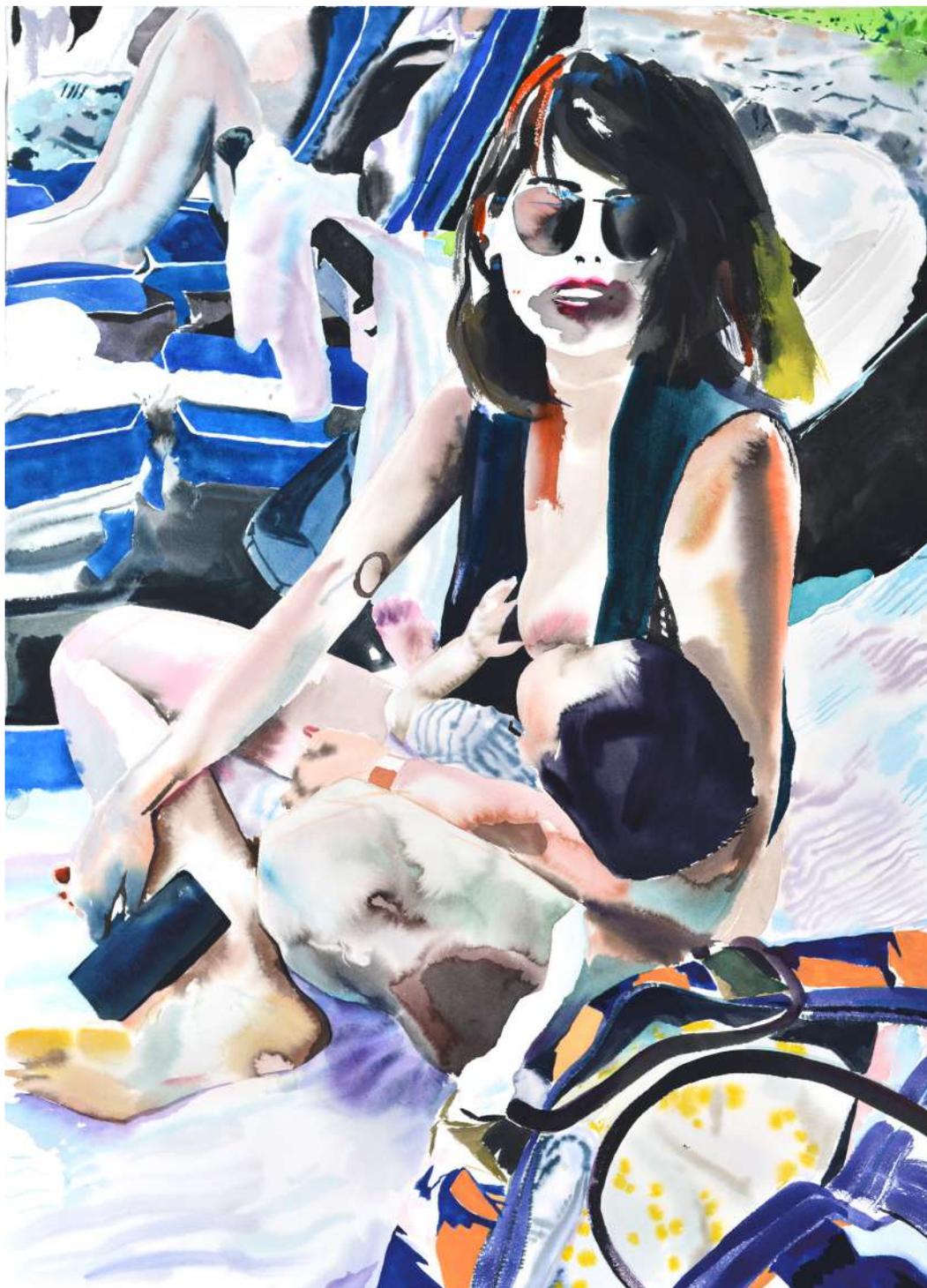
## Works Cited

Dubreuil, Laurent. *Baudelaire au gouffre de la modernité*. Paris: Hermann, 2019.





BITCOIN, 2022  
Aquarelle sur papier  
107 x 70 cm



STAR QUI  
ALLAITE, OLIVIA  
WILDE, 2018  
Aquarelle sur papier  
107 x 78 cm



ALPHA  
CONDÉ, 2023  
Aquarelle sur  
papier  
106 x 78 cm

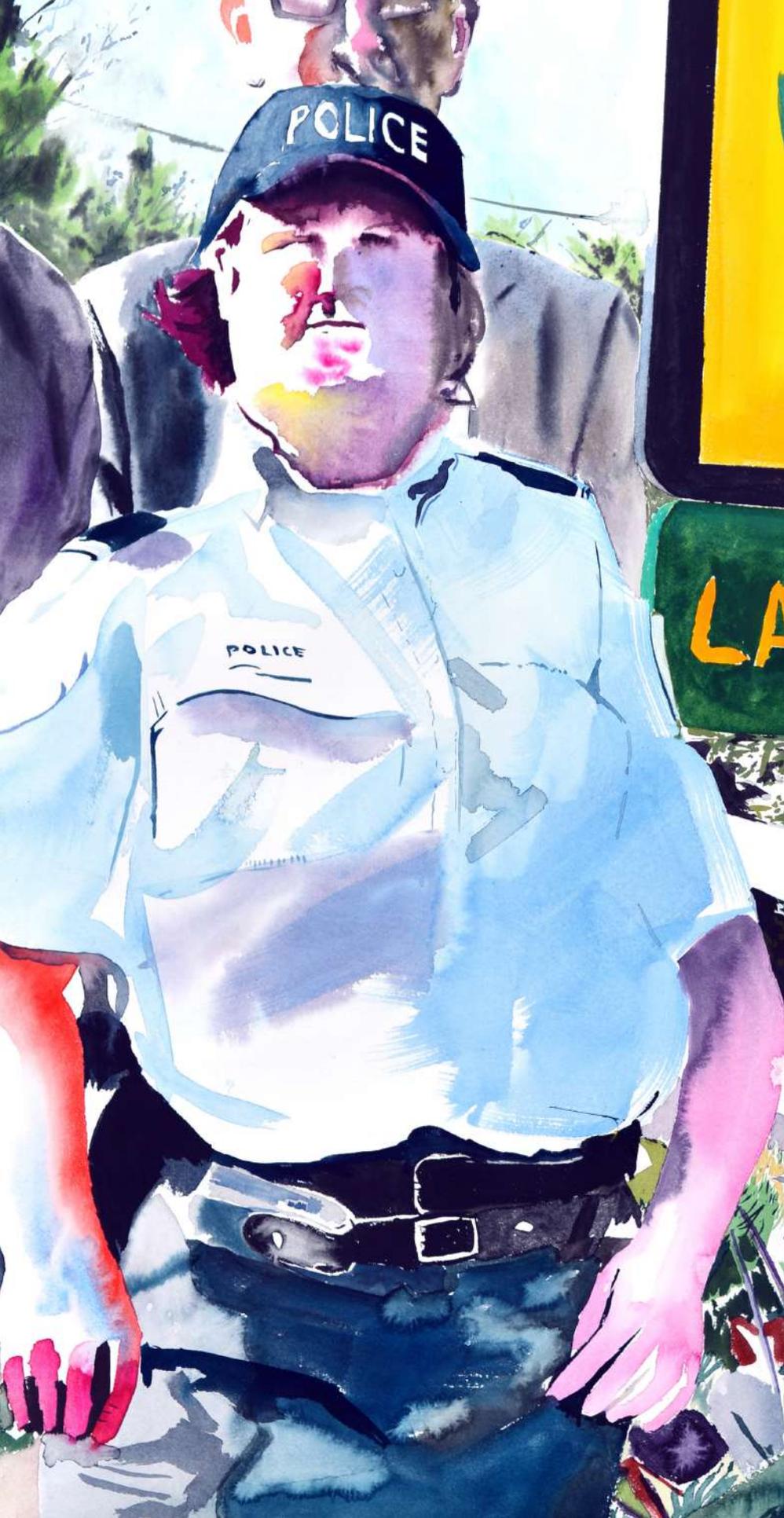




HAUTEVILLE-TEXAS, 2016  
Huile sur toile  
312 x 450 cm



RHÔNES-ALPES AUVERGNE, LAURENT 1, 2018  
Aquarelle sur papier  
107 x 78 cm



VILLAGE FLEUR

DES VILLES ET VILLAGES FLEUR

LAURÉAT INTERNATIONAL

VOISINS VIGILANTS



EN LIAISON IMMEDIATE  
AVEC LA POLICE

VIRIAT





VOISINS VIGILANTS POLICE, 2018  
Aquarelle sur papier  
78 x 108 cm





**IMAGE (LEFT):**  
KENDALL BLANCHIEMENT, 2021  
Aquarelle sur papier  
107 x 70 cm

**IMAGE (ABOVE):**  
LAÏKA, 2018  
Aquarelle sur papier  
78 x 107 cm  
Collection particulière



VOISINS VIGILANTS, 2018  
Aquarelle sur papier  
78 x 107 cm





LA QUATRIÈME DIMENSION,  
DAVID ET HARPER, 2023  
Aquarelle sur papier  
78 x 106 cm