



Winston Wächter Fine Art

Q&A: In Conversation with Nicole Charbonnet," *Noma.org* (August 3, 2017).

**NOMA**

New Orleans Museum of Art



Nicole Charbonnet, *Superman*, 2008,  
Acrylic and mixed media on canvas

Nicole Charbonnet is among the many artists represented in *Pride of Place: The Making of Contemporary Art in New Orleans*, an exhibition featuring more than 70 works of art donated to NOMA by renowned New Orleans' gallerist Arthur Roger. "My paintings are very textural and built up over long periods of time," says Charbonnet. "The superimposition of textures, images, words, loose, watery washes of paint and veils of translucent fabric or paper, creates a visual threshold in my work which is something to look at as well as to look through. These surfaces retain or reveal a 'memory' of preexisting stages or structures. The result is a palimpsest, in which some images,

colors, textures are obfuscated, while others remain visible, however shaped or shaded by previous or subsequent gestures, images or events.” The artist shared her thoughts in an interview with David Johnson, editor of Arts Quarterly, in advance of her Artist Perspective lecture on Friday, August 4, at 6 p.m.

### **How did you come to be an artist?**

I grew up in New Orleans. I had some good art teachers in school. It was something I always did. In college, I majored in art and then went on to get a MFA after college. So, that’s really it, pretty basic.

### **Your work has a distinctive patina, a layered and textured effect. How did this style evolve?**

Well, I really do think it has something to do with growing up here and being affected and inspired by the local architecture, which, as in any old city, it built up over time and changes over time. Because New Orleans is old and there are rundown parts of the city, history is always visible. The walls crumb, paint peels, and you can see what color something used to be. That was always present in the cemeteries and the old buildings. So, I think my style comes out of that—layering is a way that I can artistically recreate what I see around me.

### **What materials do you use to achieve that layered effect?**

When a work is labeled mixed media, that’s just an easier way rather than listing out all the materials. I think the one at NOMA right now is basically paper. When my son was young, I used to save all his old homework and I used the mail I got and newspapers, all sorts of things, just the debris from your life. But I also use fabric and coloring books and all sorts of stuff, whatever’s around.

I just lay the paper or fabric down and then paint on top of it, and then sometimes I carve back into it. I layer different materials in different spots. Each one is different. I think the one you have up in your museum is probably the most simple one, mainly collage paper with just acrylic paint on top. I’m usually working on two dozen paintings at the same time and each one of them is different. Some have fabric and paper, some just have fabric, some have only paper, so it depends.

### **How do you go about choosing your subject matter?**

Usually, I look for contemporary life or politics and try to use images of familiar people. It creates a sense of nostalgia and a feeling of recognition to draw viewers in. So, for example, I did a series of war paintings that were all taken from older post-World War II movie westerns. I started this series right when George W. Bush was president and we were invading other countries and he was using language like cowboy language like “Smoke ‘em out,” “Dead or Alive,” and to me it was a metaphor, like going back to the old westerns. Everyone recognizes these images, right? Cowboys, riding their horses through open land, the images are beautiful and nostalgic but, because my process makes things look old, or historical, I was trying to bring a message of questioning—why are we just recycling old ideas in the twenty-first century? It’s just my kind of political commentary. My work is also an exploration of a collective visual unconscious, the images we carry with us from popular culture and that everyone is familiar with. I’ll go back to other artists and copy a pattern they made and then erase it. It mimics how I think creativity happens. You see something, you take a piece of it, and then you make it your own.

**Does *Superman* have any symbolic message?**

I'm sure it does ... the desire for a hero and the setbacks we face, how we are always looking elsewhere for someone to come in and save us. It's just human nature in general ... the desire to believe in a higher power, someone stronger. I don't necessarily have any answers but I do feel like it's the artist's role to raise questions about the society he or she is in.

**How did you come to know Arthur Roger and how has he affected your career?**

I started off my career showing at Simonne Stern Gallery, which was a really wonderful gallery, but it closed in the early 2000s. So, I moved to Arthur's gallery because he had a great reputation, and he's lived up to that reputation. He's been a great art dealer, a collector with a great eye, and just a great person to work with. There's something great about his gallery where he has a lot of local artists but he also shows artists from out of town and all of whom I respect. I'm proud and I'm honored to be included in the show!

**How has the contemporary art scene in New Orleans changed in the course of your career?**

I think it's probably as good as it's ever been. I grew up in New Orleans, so I remember when I was a kid there really wasn't much to see. Now we have Julia Street, Magazine Street, St. Claude Avenue, all with galleries. When I was a kid, none of that existed. I've been doing this long enough to notice this ... a lot of the art graduates, they can find galleries, they can show their work right out of school, which just did not happen before. You would never see work from some graduated 20-year-old anywhere. So basically you were denied the view of what was happening in contemporary right then and there.