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THE PASSIONATE - OLIVIA BRANSBOURG





- Olivia Bransbourg by *Kanak Guo*

We have learnt many things over the years, through meeting and interviewing great personalities. Olivia Bransbourg most certainly taught us a thing or two about fate. Founder and director of the brands *Attache-Moi* and *Sous le Manteau* ; herself an emblem ; both art historian and music lover, Olivia Bransbourg fully wears many hats, managing all with an exalting energy and disarming sympathy. Chance lead our paths to cross and to celebrate the opening of her pop-up boutique on Madison Avenue this **Thursday 29th of November**, we asked her a few questions, making this Interview one of the most beautiful moments of this year.

[The Advent Interviews are a series centered around women. Four women, four exceptional lives, four different paths leading to and from perfumes. Four life-lessons which ought to be listened to and learnt. We wanted to choose four utterly different women, four different backgrounds and careers linked with perfumes, because women are under-represented. Because they are the womb of our lives, of all humanity. Because they are more and more present in the world of perfume. Because their stories are meant to be told and need to be heard.]

Alexandre Helwani – Olivia, you have quite an impressive and stunning résumé, to say the least. You started as headwriter of ICONOfly, moved on to becoming creative director for Takasago New York before launching two brands, Attache-Moi and Sous le Manteau. How did you come to go from the press to the perfume industry ?

Olivia Bransbourg – It all started with my magazine ICONOfly. In 2009 I was working on an issue about bracelets and their many metamorphoses : culinary, literary, pictural, historical etc. and I dreamt of a perfume which would whisper, like a bracelet : « Attache-Moi » [Tie me up]. Two perfumers, Christine Nagel and Benoist Lapouza gave this dream its breath and Serge Mansau, the perfume bottle designer, gave it shape. At first I only imagined a limited edition but Serge Mansau liked the project and created eight blown glass bracelets covered with gold leaf. Le Bon Marché heard about the project and asked to meet with me and later during the summer 2009 they put up an exhibition which lasted a month. They asked that I conceive a more affordable version of the perfume and I imagined simple bottles bound with ribbons. Alas, a few weeks later I had to leave Paris



it's exactly what we want. Can we launch it in the US ? » Nathalie Feisthauer recommended me a packaging factory in Grasse and it was a success. By the end of 2010, 2011 and 2012, Attache-Moi was amongst the bestsellers of niche perfumery in Barneys with full page ads and was showcased with the most beautiful brands at the time like Frédéric Malle and Le Labo. Since the perfume was performing so well in New York, I wanted to release it in Paris again so I met with Charlotte Tasset, whom at the time was redesigning the Belle Parfumerie of Printemps and she said : « Your perfume is splendid but it's too small for my displays. However I do love your magazine, could you release one about perfumes ? You have six months. » So I had six months to interview Jean-Claude Ellena, Serge Lutens, Thierry Wasser, François Demachy, Frédéric Malle and go back to the origins of perfumery starting from the Antiquity and meet wonderful people like Annick le Guérer and it truly was a dream. I was suddenly immersed in the other side of perfumery, with the perfumers, with the labs, with the raw materials – something I had never done before. When I released this issue in October 2011, Arnaud Roche from Takasago came to me. I had worked with him on my first perfume Attache-Moi and we'd stayed in touch. So he came to me and asked that I help him for a six-months project in New York and gave me the opportunity to work with incredible perfumers like Françoise Caron, Francis Kurkdjian, Jean Jacques, Antoine Lie etc. We finally won the bid and I became the creative director of their lab in NYC. I spent three years creating perfumes for quite a lot of brands, mostly niche and I really had fun on the creative side. After three years I decided to quit Takasago and re-launch my magazine with a New York special for which I met with British artist Shezad Dawood who wanted to be part of this issue. We started chatting about perfumes and he told me « I'm about to release a short-film, I'd love to have its olfactive transcription ». We thus created *It was a time that was a time*, a real collaboration between he and Nicolas Bonneville, which was inaugurated in Pioneer Works, an arts centre in Brooklyn opposite the Statue of Liberty. We diffused the perfume during three months so you'd enter in this atmosphere – it was magical. But, like for my other magazines, I managed to cover the costs but didn't earn much money so my husband said : « Enough, every time you throw yourself body and soul into it » and at the same time I met someone who ended up becoming my associate for *Sous le Manteau*.

A.H. – It would seem like chance guided your career and encounters...

O.B. – Well, we launched the brand by the end on 2016 but on October 1st of the same year, there was the *Nuit Blanche* in Paris which honoured an incunabula from the late 15th century, *The Dream of Poliphilus*, around love encounters. Artist friends of mine, Jean-Luc Ferrari and Estelle Delesalle had been chosen by Jean de Loisy, *Nuit Blanche* commissioner and director of the Palais de Tokyo, to put up an installation on the Debilly Footbridge to « mend broken hearts ». They invited Nathalie and I to present our original love philtres formulae and their modernised versions. We imagined a questionnaire –it is still on the website– which would propose you the most appropriate perfume according to your answers. Thus, from 7pm to 7am on this October 1st, we mended broken hearts, we initiated encounters and created very precious moments. We had printed little sheets, people would



and there came a group of youngsters, some hotshots in leather jackets. They passed by, looking like they didn't care at all but later one of them came back and did the test. He ended up with Essence du Sérail. By the way, there's a real enthusiasm about this perfume, we actually know people are being followed on the street because of its sillage. Anyway, the boy came back and his friends teased him but half an hour later they all came back and all did the test. We decided that we'd launch the five perfumes at once, not one or two at a time like we initially thought, because they were all so different. And it imperative that we keep the test, so we put it up on the website.

A.H. – Actually, the genesis of your brand Sous le Manteau owes something to chance, doesn't it ?

O.B. – It all started in an antiquary where I unearthed a pharmacist's treaty dating from the 19th century and I discovered a recipe for an aphrodisiac perfume. And in my family, there are four generations of physicians and surgeons and everything is always very ordered so to find recipes for love philtres in these medicine and pharmacopy treaties really made me think. And I said to myself : « Whether I believe it or not doesn't matter, I just want to see what it is » and that is why I went to see Nathalie. I had always wanted to work with her, for many years and as she'd just become independant, it was obvious that she'd be the best person to go to for this project. After all she loved cooking, she loved ingredients etc. I sent her the five first recipes that I found in the treaty and asked her to recreate them identically – I think she hated me at the time. By discovering them in these treaties, I asked myself how they ended up there so I did a little research. I found wonderful things in the Capitulare de viliis, in which Charlemagne ordered that all abbeys start harvesting 90 plants and herbs deemed essential. I found in other works a list of aphrodisiac and anaphrodisiac plants to grow in the gardens of simples. This is a historian's work and it is fascinating.

A.H. – You do seem to be quite thorough in everything that you do.

O.B. – That's what I keep telling my children : I don't mind whether you become a surgeon or a pastry chef. Whatever I do, I ask only one thing : that you give your fullest and always aim at excellence. It is the only way to succeed, to go through one's own history.

A.H. – Why so much fascination with history ?

O.B. – What I love is the idea of heritage. I like to understand lineages, filiations, and it's the same with apothecaries' formulae.



painting by Velasquez, one of his last works "Las Meninas" and in the background there is a scene of angels floating in the sky and I discovered that in fact, Velasquez had picked up an element from Rubens whom had actually copied Titian whom himself had been looking at Raphael's work. And I thought : it's the exact same thing in perfumery. It's the same everywhere. In your Interview of Nathalie, you were talking about olfactive signature and Jean-Claude Ellena, whom I really like. And I was telling him a few years that one night, I was wearing Angélique sous la Pluie and as I embraced my son, he was 10 years old at the time, he told me : « Mummy, you smell just like your parents » and my parents wear Hermès' Un Jardin collection. I congratulated him whilst thinking : two brands but he recognised the signature, the touch. This is genius : when you see the unspeakable.

A.H. – Is it essential for you, for your collaborations, this unspeakable becoming visible ?

O.B. – The jewel that I'm wearing came from a collaboration with a designer, a formidable person Jaimal Odedra, which we'll launch in New York. I had met him a little less than a year ago, thanks to another friend, Jean-Christophe le Grévès [Founder of the brand Thirdman], I presented my perfumes and he asked if he could keep them all five and a few days later I received sketches of five different pearls. They're in bronze, handmade in Morocco and signed by the artist. What's funny is that I was being interviewed by Madame Figaro Chine and they'd sent me their photographer whom also asked to keep the bottles so as to photograph them. He touched all five bronze pearls and he immediately knew which pearl corresponded to which perfume. And it is the same thing with Nathalie, with Jean-Claude, with Christine. So we are going to present our perfumes with the pictures and the jewels all, in New York, on Madison.

A.H. – How does one stay grounded when one always goes from a project to another ?

O.B. – I am not really grounded. It is terrifying. More often than not I wake up in the middle of the night. It is always utterly new although I think that I've come full circle because this fascination for one subject, I have it with Sous le Manteau.

A.H. – In this vertigo, do you manage to tend to your inner garden ? Or is it the sad cost of liberty ?

O.B. – I need my freedom. For instance, when you write, it is always about different subjects but it is still writing, it is still your peace. Indeed, there is a vertigo which feeds me but is also my reason for being. It is formidable. All the encounters are wonderful, I never get bored. I love meeting artists, it is something worth fighting in this world. There is nothing worse than being silenced because then you lose yourself. As long as you're fully committed to what you're doing and that you think good,



to do the same thing as others and I wouldn't to be blamed for stepping on somebody's toes. I try to stay true to myself. That's what I'm trying to pass on to my children by telling them : do whatever you want, go through with your ideas and be proud. Never be ashamed of what you do.

Translated from French by Alexandre Helwani



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