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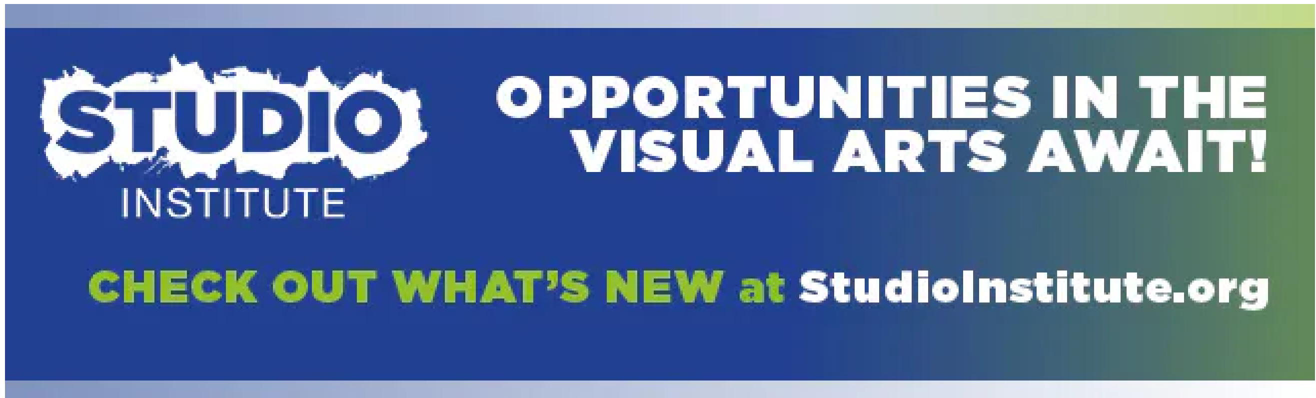

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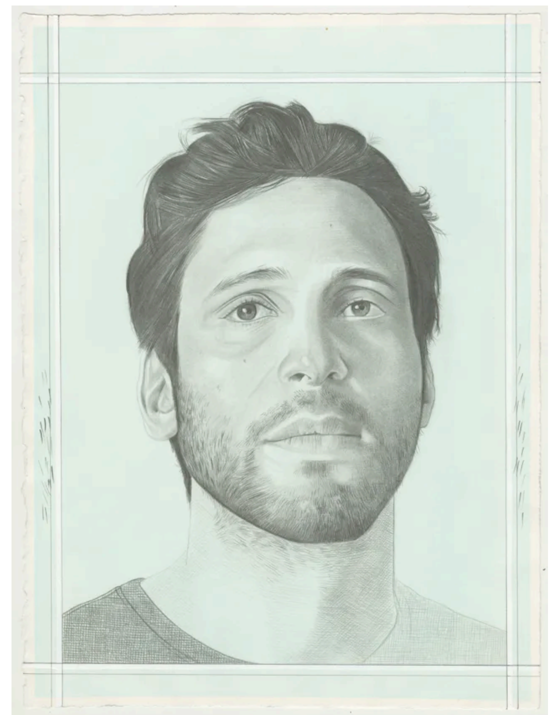
ALEXANDRE LENOIR with Charles M. Schultz



Portrait of Alexandre Lenoir, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Between dogs and wolves
Almine Rech

Alexandre Lenoir (b.1992) is a French painter with studios in Paris and Brooklyn. Over several years he's developed a

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New York

particular system for making paintings that is based on sets of instructions, or "protocols," as Lenoir has come to call them. Every painting has a unique set of protocols, which are carried out by assistants. And the protocols make room for interpretation, even improvisation. The question is whether works of art can occur as a result of people living and working within Lenoir's system. His paintings are the answer.

When I arrive at Lenoir's studio the curtains are drawn and the lights are dimmed. One assistant is sloshing red paint from a six-liter soda bottle, soaking a canvas and letting the wet paint flow all over the floor. Across the room another assistant is tearing a blue tape into little bits and rapidly sticking them onto a canvas. They wear headphones and their focus remains unbroken by my arrival. Lenoir tells me they are provoking the paintings to emerge.

It is a few weeks before Lenoir's second solo-exhibition in the United States, *Between dogs and wolves,* will open at Almine Rech's Tribeca gallery. Lenoir is excited to show new work. In the conversation that follows we touch on his formation as an artist, the development of his unique methodology for making paintings, and his deep appreciation for the processes of nature.

Alexandre Lenoir, *Entre chien et loup,* 2024. Acrylic and tape on canvas, 65 3/4 x 90 inches. Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech Gallery. Photo: Charles Roussel.

Charles M. Schultz (Rail): Why did you pull this painting?

Alexandre Lenoir: My show is named after this painting: *Entre chien et loup* (2024)—"between dogs and wolves"—which is an ancient expression. It refers to dusk, the moment of the day when the light goes down and you cannot recognize if the animal you see in front of you is a domestic one or wild one. In earlier times, this distinction was crucial because one protected the sheep, while the other preyed on them.

Rail: Okay, so recognition was important. I don't see any sheep in the picture.

Lenoir: Yeah, recognition was very important! [*Laughter*] This moment of the day interests me a lot, because it's when the evolution of the light is the most obvious. Here, two lights are fighting, one light from the sky and one from the domestic area—they're overlapping. The evolution of light reflects

my practice at the studio. When we work, we project an image onto the canvas, and we alternatively put little pieces of tape on the projected pixels of the light—which go from the darker pixel to the lighter pixel—and layers of paint. We are sculpting the light.

For me, this moment of the day is interesting because of the way the different sources of light interact. Light goes from one area to another. My work is about opposition, about contrast. It's where I find a sense of energy, an energy generated by the contrast of the domestic and the wild. For example, the domestic might be me giving some instructions to my assistants, which is very rational in a way. These mathematical instructions allow me to build my painting like an architect with his plans, which means that I don't paint the canvas directly. After doing that for ten years, I have a rough idea what this process will create with tape and painting. So I can go further and try to find areas where I have no control, a moment when the process just goes over me.

Rail: And what about the wild part?

Lenoir: The wild part is always at the end of the painting. Before or after the removal of the tape, I will make some fast, intuitive gestures, decisions, or add a chemical component that will affect the painting. It might only take five minutes. So it's completely the opposite of the long process of taping and putting on layers of paint. At the end, the painting becomes charged with these two energies: one of preparing and layering the canvas, and another that comes at the end with some random instruction. I like something I can't control—it comes from my gut. I can push that energy with my brush at the end, or I can do it with my choices. For example, for *Entre chien et loup,* the choice was to leave the tape on the canvas on the areas which are darker. I randomly decided it when we were removing the tape from the canvas. I said, "Okay, we're gonna leave the tape on all this area, but we're gonna remove all the tape on the domestic area."

Rail: I was going to ask you about that. I was surprised by how much tape was still on the canvas. I had an impression that you would continuously remove

the tape, but here it becomes a material component of the painting itself. And I can see—as the light rakes across it—how much the tape interacts with the painting. In those dark areas where there's still tape, there is shadow. The tape bits cast their own shadows. Tell me if I'm misunderstanding, but in this instance, the shadows are an example of the kind of randomness that you describe insofar as the little bits of tape are catching light in ways that are outside your control. They express something wild.

Lenoir: Yeah. And that's exactly what I love about this painting. Sometimes you move something which was considered as a means, and it becomes an end. So the way of making the painting is included in the image itself. And these areas where the tape is still present—like you said—have their own autonomy of shadows and lights.

Rail: What about that section where it's much more gestural? How did you decide that area would be gestural? How do you make that sort of a decision?

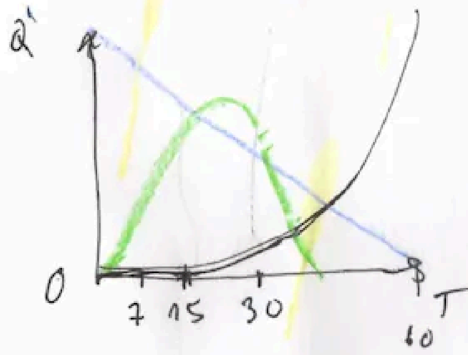
Lenoir: It's coming from the application of the protocol. So I create a specific method in the studio. My protocol could be, "tape the sky at the beginning"—which is the handwritten pencil note on the sky area. By the way, this is the only canvas where I decided to write down the protocol on the painting. The other parts of the protocol have been covered by the painting, but we still can see this instruction.

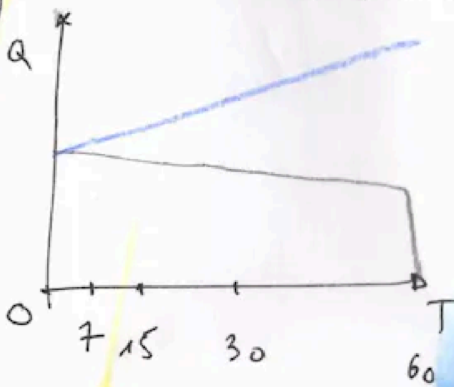
The area you are asking about is a couch. I asked my assistant to "dab it off"—the brush at the end of their layer—in this area. I love very simple and basic instructions. When a painter is in his studio, he paints on his canvas, and afterwards there is still some painting on the brush. What will he do? He will just dab it off—his brush outside of the canvas—to clean it. So, to build my images, I include simple events around the act of painting, like "dabbing off" the brush on a specific area of the canvas. Even if it's an instruction which gives a mechanical gesture, I can never predict what kind of brush stroke it will turn out to be. I developed different ways of cleaning the brush on the canvas: they can "dab it off" in line, they can "dab it off" in point.

There is also the wild “dab it off”—a wild “dab it off” is when you do a fast and crazy line. So at the end, I don’t know what it’s gonna be, but I love the idea of painting with life and not painting with skills.

Rail: So you create instructions—protocols, processes—that set up actions, but remain open to interpretation. I understand how that can create uncertainty, not so different from the twilight of dog and wolf. I’m wondering, when you’re in an early phase of looking at an image, do you have an intuitive sense of what the protocols or processes will be?

Lenoir: Definitely. It’s always an impression that comes from the image. I can have the image for a month, and I might paint it after a month. Or I will choose an image after having it in my computer folder for ten years. Choosing an image depends on how I evolve in my work and how the work resonates inside of me. When I develop my process, I aim to capture the emotion the image evokes in me. I’m creating a system that emphasizes this feeling by finding an alternative way to express it, rather than directly painting on the canvas.





Protocol for *The Stage*, 2024. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: Do the instructions change as you work? Or are the instructions you decide on at the beginning—do they remain all the way through the process?

Lenoir: It's an interesting question, because sometimes I just let it go because I forget my own instructions. But let me back up for a minute. I have two studios—one in Paris and one in Brooklyn—where I alternate between staying for a month or two at a time. Before I leave, I provide detailed instructions for a few paintings. On the painting that I don't have the inspiration for, I leave it on the wall of the studio, and I let the image work in myself until I have the intuition to create the protocol. And when I write down the protocol, it could take ten minutes, or an hour, but I need to be ready for that moment. I need to write it down very quickly. It's very intuitive, and very unique—every painting has its own instruction set.

So when I give the instructions, I leave and let the painting germinate. I can check what happens, because I can follow all the evolution on Instagram. I created an Instagram account for both of my studios, and the assistants post a story every night of the making process of all the canvases. So I can see a kind of a blurry image growing. I don't see exactly what's going on under the tape, but I can see how the process is applied. Sometimes I might say, "Okay, there is too much blue in the mixing," or "Oh, stop the dab-it-off here." I do that on some canvases, but on others I just let it go. Sometimes it's just too far for me to interact. And after a while, I see the image appear, and it's always a surprise, which is how I imagine a memory could work.

The action of remembering something doesn't give us a very precise image in our mind. It has evolved—perhaps disturbed by time, distance, and experience. Since I paint memories, I strive to establish the same relationship with my canvas as what occurs in our minds when we recall an image. I do this by adding layers of time and distance, which bring a level of objectivity that I couldn't achieve on my own. So sometimes I forget the protocol, and the image appears at the end of the canvas. Sometimes I leave this elusive image like this, or I continue working on it. Anything can happen.

Rail: That's so interesting. Tell me about how you developed this process.

Lenoir: Well, I discovered painting when I was eighteen years old. I painted with my brush, and I was very happy! It was just a few months before I went to the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. So I painted a lot in my room with the three primary colors and some white on huge sheets of paper. And I just painted. I created a series of self portraits. I didn't know painting at all. I just discovered it and when I got to the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, I saw all the students painted like me: with their hands and with their brushstrokes. And I thought, "Everyone is doing that. I want to do something different."

I wanted to establish a new way of relating to painting that I thought would be more genuine, without my hands. I wanted another way, because I wanted to represent nature, and nature is not made by the human hand. It's created by itself. So I wanted to find a way to make it happen by not painting it with my brushes.

At that time, I was very spiritual. I liked the way a mandala is made: the repetition of the monk, the prayer, and simple mechanical gestures. I liked it because there is something very human about it. Everyone can do it, and they are working for something bigger than themselves. I felt painting was bigger than me. So I wanted to represent this water, which was very impressive to me because of the reflection, and I aimed to achieve it with as few brushstrokes as possible. At that time, using tape was simply a way to prepare the canvas. I didn't know what I was gonna get. It was like three full months of taping and putting layers, and taping and putting layers. I applied the painting like a printer, from the left side to the right with a big brush—it was very mechanical. So I had an aesthetic shock when I removed all the tape from this painting. And from that moment, I became obsessed with this relation to painting. It started as a kind of technique, but slowly it became my medium. And now it's completely the way that I want to interact with images: with memory and natural elements.

Rail: When you describe having that moment of revelation, it makes me think about traditional analog photography and how photographers wouldn't see

their images until the chemical process of the dark room was able to reveal them. And there could be a lot of time between those two events, a lot of room for expectation and anticipation. When digital photography removed that psychological aspect from the process, it also undercut the emotional experience of the darkroom—that revelation, which could go either way. After all, the photo may not come out.

Lenoir: Definitely, yes. The way that I paint, it's the same relation that an analog photographer would have with his medium. I was working exclusively with the three primary colors for a long time. And to give another example, I work with an unprimed canvas, so I include the glue that painters use to prepare their canvas in my paint mixtures. Some areas of my paintings are just raw cotton, some have a thin layer of glue, and some are saturated with paint and glue. And at the end, the painting is prepared to receive a final gesture. So I apply a mix of oil painting and white spirit to the back of the canvas, and—by reaction with this irregular preparation in the canvas—this mixing will just pull through some areas and will not get through in others, making the image appear like a photographic development.

Rail: As I look at *Entre chien et loup,* I can see that you begin with a photograph. The dimensions of a 35 mm lens are familiar. But I can't locate the image in time, or in place. I can see an interior, and I can see that the interior has illumination. I can see that there's a canvas on an easel, and in the exterior, I can mostly see what I interpret as nature—trees, vines, bushes. I think I see some sort of structure in the background, perhaps with steps, but I can't really identify it. I also can't gauge time. It could be 2015; it could be 1968. The whole image essentially wobbles in my mind because I can't establish much footing. Is that something you intend, or does that washing out of detail occur in the process?

Lenoir: When I started painting, I wanted to have a holistic experience in the studio. I wanted the process to be the image, and the means to be the end: to create a system which is close to life, that uses the basic instruction to make a

painting happen, which might overtake painting skills. I was seeing the painting as a portal in some way, which has the ability to move the viewer.

So for me, it is important that image doesn't refer to something that we can easily recognize. Because I want to create a relation of "right now," and in two, or in ten years, it will still be "right now." I want to achieve this kind of feeling that the painting has always been here. If the image we start with is too specific, there's not enough room for other people's visions.

Rail: As you were talking, you made me think of two things. One was that having the image slide out of its specific time is a kind of dog-or-wolf moment insofar as the indeterminacy goes. And that makes me wonder about your relationship to your studio assistants. I'm curious about how much agency you give them in the decision-making process. I know you assign a protocol, but also you leave room for them to activate it, right? How does that work?

Lenoir: I like the idea that the viewer can project their own memory on the painting. I believe that's why the image shouldn't be too clear. I love this connection. It's a link that I have with the viewer, and they can tell their own story. And most of the time, when people ask, "Oh, is it the south of France?" or "Is it the Caribbean?"—it's just whatever you want it to be, and I like that. I like the idea that the painting can be something where we can merge, where my memory meets your memory. In a sense, my memory becomes another memory because you add to it, and it can eventually become like a collective memory. This idea of collective memory—I am very keen on this.

Alexandre Lenoir, *Dream house*, 2024. Acrylic and tape on assembled canvas, 105 x 154 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech Gallery. Photo: Nicolas Brasseur.

My painting, *Dream house* (2024), is based on a photograph that my father took of my mother's house. To make it, I used leftovers from older canvases—probably seven or eight years old—and I assembled them on a big four-meter canvas. Then, after being placed on the wall of the studio, we painted some paintings with a thin canvas on top of it, so the paint passed through. *Dream house* was made without being painted at all. This memory is made of memories of paintings.

So that was for the first part of your question. For the second part, I want to tell you about a very interesting experience in Casablanca. I was twenty-five, and after finishing school in Paris, I flew to Casablanca because I wanted to work with a team. I couldn't afford a team in France, because I wanted to pay them the right way. So I went to Casablanca after I sold my first painting to experience what it was to paint with people.

So for like six months, I had very precise protocols. I didn't call them "protocols" at the time, but I gave instructions. We were working on a few canvases; there were four of us in the studio. I gave them instructions, and we worked together on the canvas.

After six months, I decided to remove myself completely from the process. I did that slowly. Firstly, I was working with them. Secondly, I just let them apply the tape and layers of painting. The last step was letting them choose their own photo and apply layers without any instructions from me. They just needed to remember what we did for six months. And even if they didn't want to paint, that was fine. Whatever you want to do at the studio is fine. I just want you to be in the studio and tape and paint, and tape and paint, and tape and paint, and we'll see what it reveals. I did that for—I think—two or three months. And after this experience in Casablanca, we had forty paintings. And we removed the tape to see the images for the first time.

It was a very interesting experience, because I wanted to see if someone could immerse themselves in my process—live in the world that I created, live in my system to bring out images from another world. These assistants were just applying gestures and just being themselves without knowing the end. I wanted to capture an image that reflected that: an image of somewhere. So at the end we made forty paintings, and I kept six. There was only one painting which was very moving for me, because it was very close to nature. It's not close to it, it's very natural.

Rail: Did you show that painting? What is it called?

Lenoir: Yeah, I showed the painting. It was called *Casablanca* (2018). But after that I stopped. It was too much time, energy, and money spent to arrive at a single piece.

Rail: So in the end, would you say you're more interested in the process that replicates nature than in replicating a particular image?

Lenoir: I think there are two ways to think about it. Right now, I paint images, but when I started painting, I was looking for natural elements, and I was looking for the best way to represent water, the best way to provoke material to represent a stone. So I had different ways of painting regarding the element that I wanted to paint, and the canvas was the place where all these elements merged. Before it was really about nature and, in a way, the reality of life versus the reality of painting in the studio. When I talk about nature, it's not nature in the way of vegetation or water. It's more like when I think of the idea of nature, it's something which just happens by itself, without human intervention.

Rail: So, in *Entre chien et loup*, I wonder about all the paint dripping. The drips seem to embody that natural quality you are describing. It's not the painter's hand that draws the paint down the canvas, it's gravity. The drips aren't totally in the painter's control.

Lenoir: Right, yeah.

Rail: That gives the drips a different energy than the areas that have been heavily touched, or the bits of tape that have been kept. The drips have a faster quality. There's a lightness to them, and I can see through to the bare canvas. It feels quicker, as opposed to the dense vegetation area, where it's evident that there's more layers. If we read the density as time, then there's more time in that zone, which gives the composition this multivalent sense of speed. I mean, when I think about a forest, some things grow rapidly, and others take a long time, but they're all growing in the same patch.

Lenoir: Right.

Rail: And so when you talk about nature, I think I understand what you're saying: it has nothing to do with the representation of nature, it has to do with your process being natural.

Lenoir: Yeah, because it's a provocation of something we cannot control. We make the gesture to make something happen, which is not the final gesture. So there is a contrast between intention and occurrence. So, for example, when I think of the drips in my vegetation painting, I like what you said about how there is a different speed for different elements. Maybe the grass grows quicker than the trees? We were taping the area of the vegetation, and putting layer over layer on the vegetation, but in the area where the grass is, I asked my assistants to leave the drips. I also asked them to tear the tape in a certain way, differently from the top. I left the drip from the beginning of the canvas, because the beginning layers are very watery.

It's kind of interesting, because this technique comes from drawing. When I'm drawing with a pen, it's very *binaire:* it's either black or no black. And I will use vertical lines to indicate grass, and that gesture creates the opposite of the grass, which is inside two vertical lines. At least my drawings are like this. [*Laughter*] When I ask my assistants to put the tape on the canvas, I ask them to do the inner line and the outer line, and the drips are just gonna choose if they go inside or outside, and they're gonna create what grass could be. The drips come from the sky, slip on the leaves of a tree, and feed the ground to create grass, like the rain in reality. This reflects the relationship between how we create a painting and how I believe life unfolds in general. We lay down the tape to guide the grass to grow in a certain direction, much like a gardener who can influence the plants but doesn't control them.

Alexandre Lenoir, *Emilio's*, 2024, (preliminary stage). Acrylic, oil, gold leaf and polyester on cotton canvas. 98 13/16 × 76 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech Gallery. Photo: Nicolas Brasseur.

Rail: I'm curious to learn more about your protocols. When I walked into your studio, I saw one person tearing tape and a second person sloshing watery paint on a canvas.

Lenoir: The protocol? I can show you an example. Do you want me to show you?

Rail: Yes.

Lenoir: Here's one. It's a single sheet of paper. I don't know which painting it was for, but you can see the pace of the handwriting, and you can see where I've worked out the ratio of paint layers to water with respect to the pixelation of light in the photo.

For *Entre chien et loup,* we have a light which comes from the sky and a light which comes from a house. So for this painting we will have two different mixings related to two different graphs with curves. On the protocol I wrote, "This painting will have sixty layers, and we're going to tape the black pixel." We use Photoshop to simplify what we see projected. So we can see an evolution of the darkness by taping the black pixel, or see an evolution of the light, like the light coming on some area by taping the light pixel.

Between all the sixty layers of taping, we're gonna adjust the mixture of paint to water, and the mixing will slowly evolve, like the light is slowly evolving on the canvas. So there is this sense of quantity to the painting. We start at zero and we apply sixty layers. And here, in the protocol, you see all the steps. At the beginning, there is a lot of water, but the water becomes less and less, so the paint becomes more tactile.

Rail: I wouldn't have assumed there were actual graphs and literal mathematics charting out how a painting might go. I'm surprised. Where does that systematic thinking come from? Is that something you studied, or —

Lenoir: No, I didn't study it. It's more part of my personality. I imagine paintings in layers. And I like using mechanical processes to create beauty, to create art. Wade Guyton, a painter who creates his works using printers, also

relies on mechanical processes. I always ask myself, “How do you shift something that follows the same gesture to create something different?”

Rudolf Stingel is another artist I think about. The show he did at Paula Cooper at the end of 2022 stays with me. He took Polaroids of his own painting and made portraits of his painting in the studio. The Polaroid added blur, and he painted in large format with another technique that he used from the original paintings. It’s a system, which creates art, but also expands our knowledge of what creation could be.

Contributor

Charles Schultz

Charles M. Schultz is Managing Editor of the *Brooklyn Rail*.

Critical Perspectives on Art, Politics and Culture

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