

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRÉGOIRE ALEXANDRE
FASHION BY KONSTANTINOS EFSTATHIADIS

Based in Paris, Tarek Lakhrissi moves between poetry and image with the ease of someone who trusts both the page and the body. His work drifts from video to installation, then returns to performance and text, where pop culture brushes against literature and tenderness sharpens into critique. We spoke on a day he was home for a moment, briefly out of the studio, about the theatre of social media and the politics hidden in accent and syntax. Lakhrissi keeps circling the point where desire and race meet power, and how that pressure shapes visibility, vulnerability and self-invention. His projects have appeared in major international institutions and biennials, while his works sit in both public and private collections. This exchange stays close to lived feeling, while tracking the larger forces that script our bodies and the small acts of voice that let us slip the script.



NICOLAS VAMVOUKLIS: I've been following you on Instagram for quite some time, so it's nice to finally talk. How do you feel about social media as a working tool?

TAREK LAKHRISSI: Social media is a performance, and it's useful. I post to announce things, but I also treat it playfully. Sometimes I spam gym photos because it keeps me in real life. I don't want to be the artist cliché, trapped in a studio and only speaking through "work". I want to show something bodily, personal. I'm obsessed with Kathy Acker's *Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body*, written out of her bodybuilding practice. I reread it a lot. I love that clash between an intellectual life and the very physical work of training. Different sensations, different context, and a way of thinking through the body.

NV: Is it the real you that you're presenting, though, or more of a persona?

TL: I don't feel like I'm acting. I'm not thinking "Now I'll show the best version of myself". But I do control what I post. That's normal. The gym is important to me right now, so the question becomes: how do I share intimacy without it turning into showing off?

NV: Besides the muscles, do people approach you there for projects?

TL: Yes. I get messages from institutions, collectors, curators, or people who are just curious. Social media has become the direct way to reach artists. You don't have to go through a gallery or write an email. It can be fluid, and I appreciate that.

NV: It's like skipping the system.

TL: Absolutely. But I also refuse to be online all the time. Sometimes I delete the apps and disappear. It helps me reconnect with the rest of my life. Social media can be overwhelming, and it can push you into hyper-performance, outside of yourself. That's not healthy. It's also a way to protect desire from noise.

NV: Are you in the studio today?

TL: No, I'm at home. I needed a break. But I love the studio. It's near Opéra, in central Paris. For me, it's focus, a bubble. I draw these days. Drawing brings me back to feelings and stops me from intellectualising everything. I need that balance.

NV: How does the space look?

TL: Minimal. A desk, a few drawings on the wall, printed references, some weird symbols. The rest is empty. It's new; I moved in a month ago, so I'm still settling in. I don't even have a plant yet.

NV: You seem very well organised.

TL: I wish I were more chaotic, but yes, I'm organised. My worktable has become a disaster: oil pastels, crayons, charcoal, trash. Outside that zone, nothing. I like the distinction. I want the room to stay clear so I can dive into the mess without overthinking.

NV: What are you working on now?

TL: *Bold Tendencies* in Peckham, South London, commissioned a new public work. Their theme this year is euphoria. I'm making a large sculpture, my first in a public space. I've shown video screens with CIRCA and huge panels at KANAL-Centre Pompidou, but a sculpture outside is another responsibility: weather, the way strangers meet it on their way somewhere else. I'm thinking materials: concrete and metal. I want it heavy, a bold statement.

NV: How will it relate to the theme?

TL: I'm drawn to the moment before euphoria: what starts inside you, that pressure, that anticipation. How your body holds something, almost like a cocoon. That "before" lets me talk about queerness, mutation, being a person of colour, and the adaptation society demands. Science fiction is in the background for me, and it's coming forward again. At the same time, I'll have a solo show at Galerie Allen in Paris, an upcoming project in Copenhagen, and a commission for Istanbul Modern toward the end of the year. I'm excited to return to Istanbul, with all that mingling of cultures. It's magical, and it brings me back to my background in Morocco.

NV: When you hear the word "language", what's the first thing that comes to mind?

TL: Power. I'm from a working-class background. In France, being Arab is political. I understood that language shapes your life: the jobs you can access, the doors that stay closed. If you speak "the wrong way", you're punished. It's institutional racism. Language signals your culture, your social class, even your sexuality: the tone, the softness, the codes. And language can betray you. Even now, you and I are speaking English and we sound different; you hear our histories in the accent. Language takes up so much space in our lives that we forget how much it governs relationships, emotion and belonging.



POLYESTER COAT, COTTON T-SHIRT AND WOOL
AND POLYESTER SHORTS *COMME DES GARÇONS HOMME PLUS*;
COWHIDE CREEPERS *COMME DES GARÇONS HOMME PLUS* X GEORGE COX;
SOCKS TAREK'S OWN

NV: You work across different media. When you start a project, how do you decide what form it needs?

TL: It starts with obsessions. A sentence, a rhythm, a shape that keeps returning, almost like intuition. I draw, research, write an idea, then draw again. I check my Tumblr archive, ten years of references. Tumblr was where communities of taste formed. Then I share with my boyfriend or close friends, many of them artists. I need that bounce, that test. I don't want to be alone in the process. If it's the right direction, production begins, and the medium reveals itself through making. Working across forms keeps me free, and I protect that freedom.

NV: Your projects feel immediately legible. There are strong colours, bold forms, a kind of pop clarity. Is that something you consciously aim for?

TL: Yes. I'm trying to build sensitive spaces for queer people and people of colour, spaces where desire exists, but also defence, survival, escape. I see the work as a battlefield of poetry. Pop is a trap and a gift. It attracts the gaze, but it also creates complicity. I don't want people to feel excluded. Access matters, and the art world can be elitist. I'm currently mixing historical references with pop elements that are close to me: Beyoncé, X-Men, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Aaliyah, FKA twigs (who is maybe the new Madonna).

NV: Do you consider yourself a "queer artist"?

TL: It's complicated. I'm queer and I'm proud, but I'm cautious with labels. I don't want to be boxed in. For me, queerness is a way to move: through forms, through time, through the body, against fixed narratives. It's a practice, a methodology. José Esteban Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia* about queerness as a horizon, a future. That resonates: less an identity stamp, more an ongoing method.

NV: I read your work through desire, sometimes as play, sometimes as tenderness. How about love?

TL: Right now, I'm in love. We need feelings that push us outside the frame, that make us think further. Valentin is also an artist, and we're very different, which is good. Sometimes our themes overlap, sometimes they clash, but our daily conversations feed us. Sharing is how you grow and transform, how you learn empathy for what you don't immediately understand. Love is fuel. But I also believe in rage: discipline, control, energy. Maybe that comes from working out. I like the ambivalence.

NV: You're the angel and the devil. I can see that tension in the works, sweet and sharp, innocent and dangerous. I love your glass pieces, *Tongue Songs*.

TL: They're playful, eerie and very sexual. It's the tongue as organ, and the tongue as language. In high school, I spoke with an accent. I'm French-Moroccan, and my French teacher humiliated me in front of everyone, telling me I wasn't speaking "proper" French. That was a turning point. I understood the violence and the power in language, and the question of whether you intervene or stay silent. It connects to survival, especially when you're treated as a foreign body. As Mirene Arsanios writes, language "can turn against me at any moment and deprive me of my words". When I started working on these sculptures, the Asian-American poet Justin Chin was important to me too. His book *Bite Hard* is about sexuality, fetishisation of his body and mental health, and it felt brutally honest.

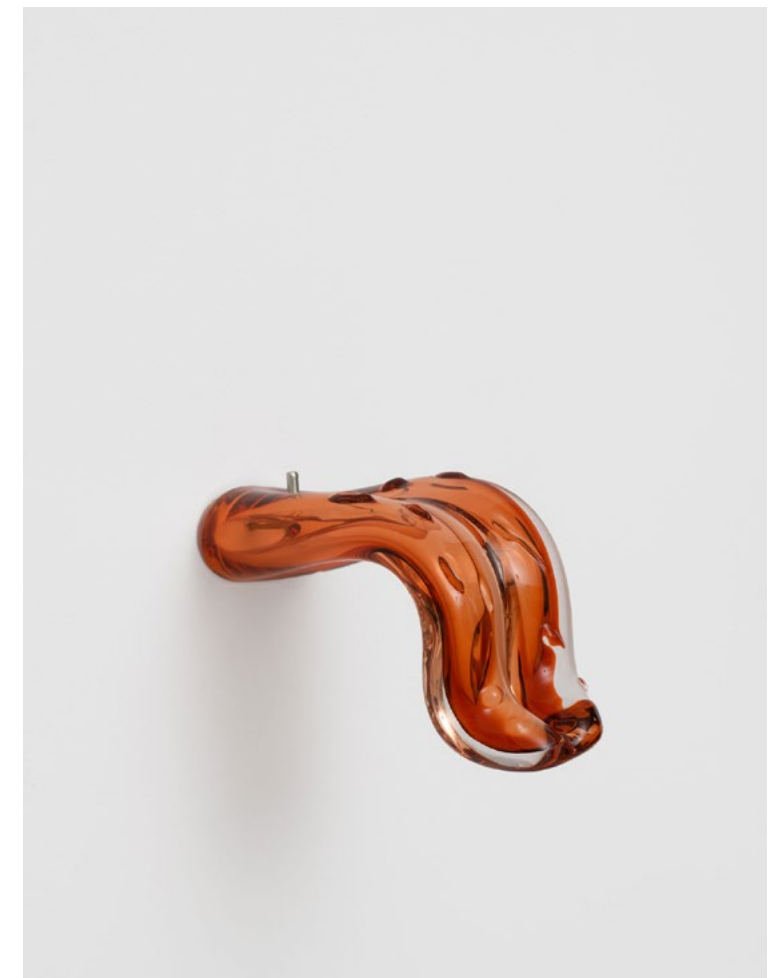
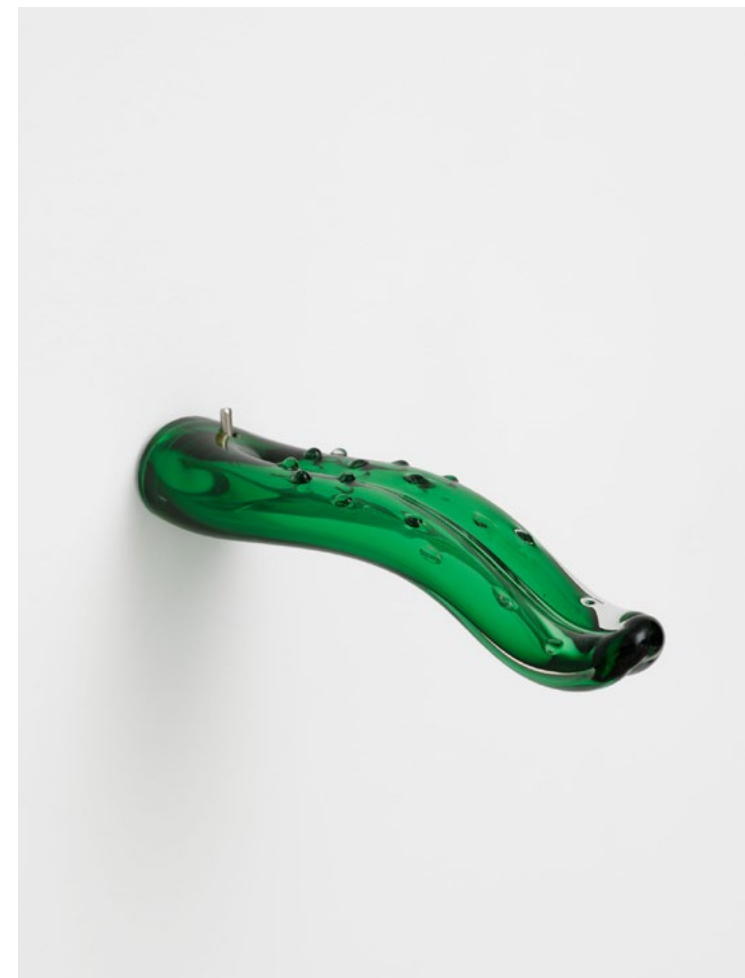
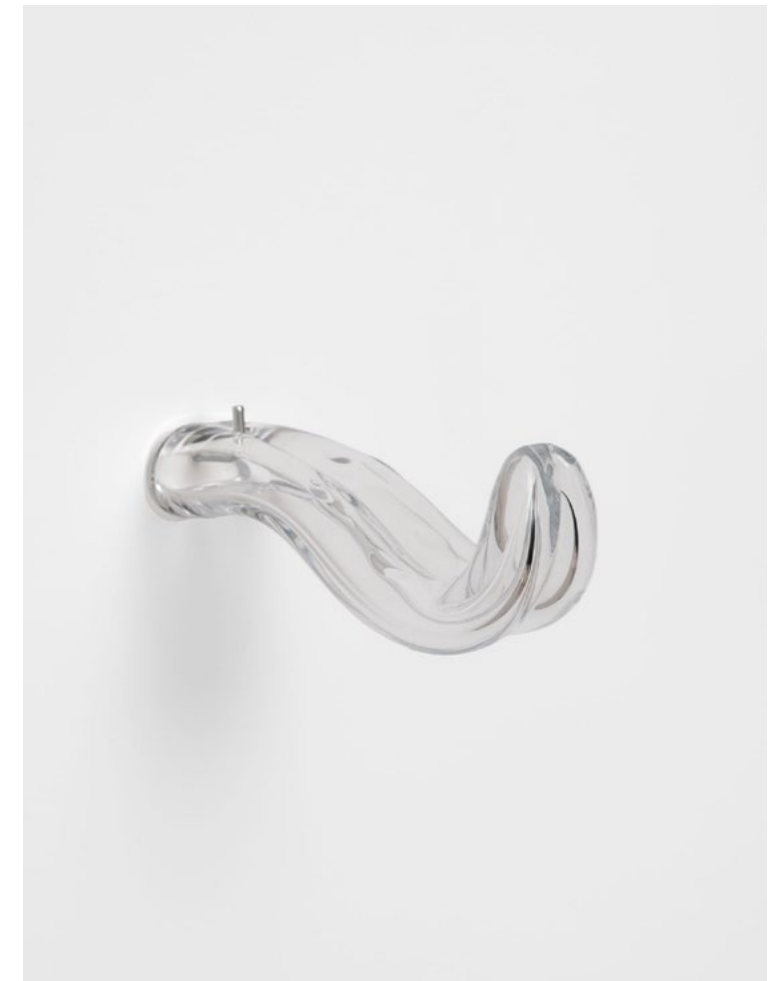
NV: You also write poetry. When did writing enter your practice? Did it come naturally?

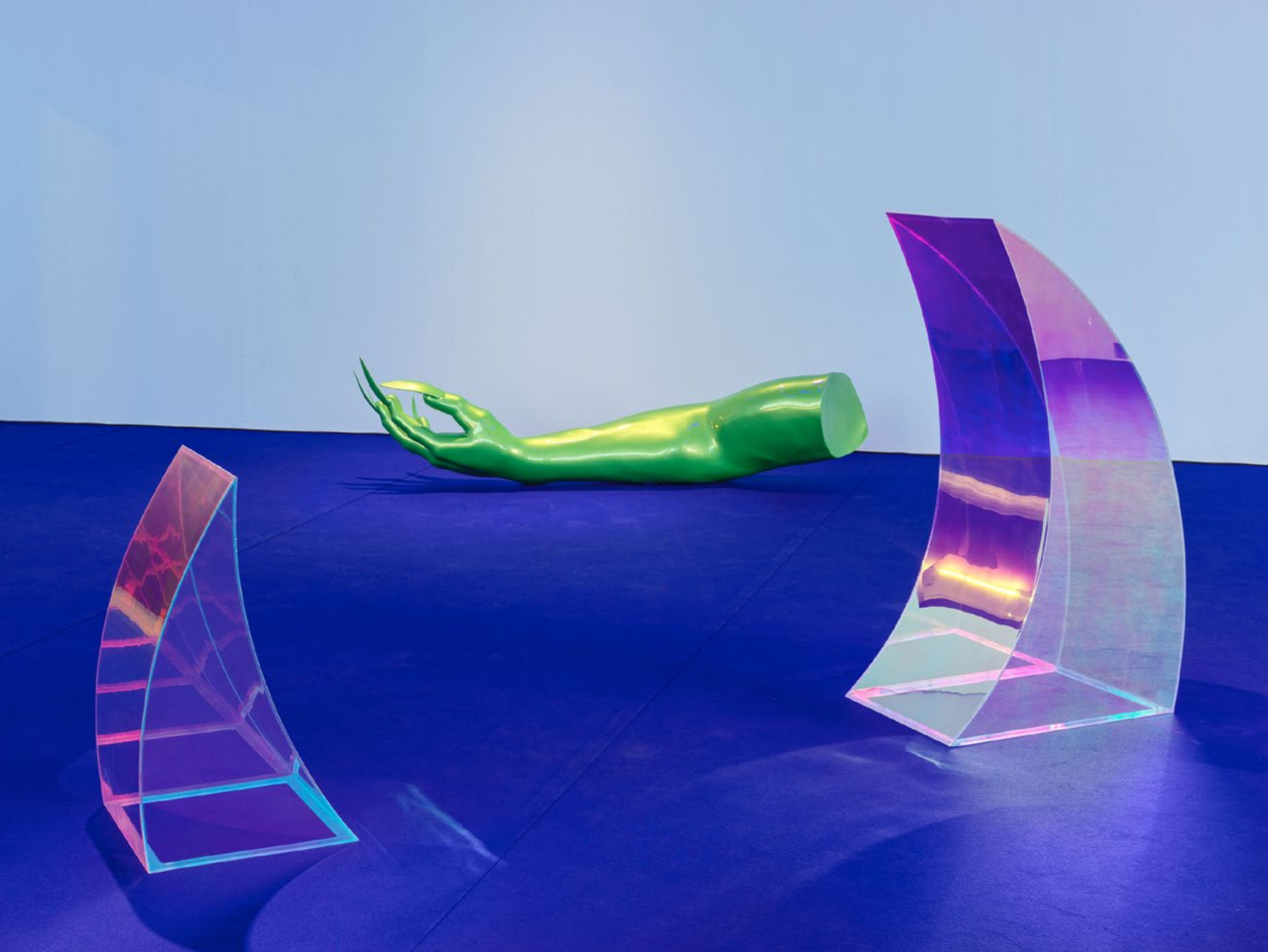
TL: I started with diaries as a teenager: love, anger, family. Then I read more experimental poetry. Online I found poets like Nayyirah Waheed and that internet-poetry economy: short texts, almost haiku. I began writing that way with digital tools, posting online, receiving reactions. That attention led to my first show in 2017. Curator Vincent Honoré, may he rest in peace, saw my poetry online and asked me to create something from it. I made a video, *Hard to Love*, shown at the Baltic Triennial he curated. That was the starting point. After that, things expanded through time, work and encounters, but writing has always been there, informing the worlds I build.

NV: What changes for you when the text is spoken aloud?

TL: I love performing. When words leave the page, something vibrates in the body. It becomes riskier, more real. Last October, during Art Basel, I organised a poetry salon at the apartment of collectors Iordanis Kerenidis and Piergiorgio Pepe. I invited four authors: CHOUF, Claire Star Finch, Joséfa Ntjam, Vir Andres Hera. It was simple; they read texts of their choice, we shared food, we stayed present. It was powerful. People need real moments, receptivity, interaction, even a good laugh. And live reading always carries the possibility of failing, which makes it exciting.

TAREK LAKHRISSI
TONGUE SONG, 2024
VERRE SOUFFLE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AURÉLIEN MOLE
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE ALLEN, PARIS





BLISS (2024), SOLO SHOW AT MIGROS MUSEUM, ZÜRICH (CH),
CURATED BY MICHAEL BIRCHAL. PHOTOGRAPHY BY STUDIO STUCKY - STEFAN ALTENBURGER,
PHOTOGRAPHY COLLECTION OF MIGROS MUSEUM (CH)

NV: You recently curated your first group exhibition at Galerie Allen. How was it to switch roles?

TL: It was refreshing. Joseph Allen Shea trusted me, and I felt freedom as an artist curating. I gathered people I love: close friends, my partner Valentin Ranger, Ugo Rondinone, who has been my mentor, and a historical figure like Jean Bouillet. The idea was “the nerve”: having the nerve to do something, but also the nerve in your body that drives you to move and connect. I wanted to honour friendships and chosen family: Soufiane Ababri, Ndayé Kouagou, Jasmine Naila, Neïla Czermak Icti, Jasmine Gregory. Coming as a group is beautiful. You give each other strength, guidance, jokes. It also reminded me that curators need to care for their artists, not just their concepts.

NV: Ugo Rondinone mentored you through Reiffers Art Initiatives. What did you learn from that experience? What makes someone a good mentor?

TL: Availability, dedication, generosity, seriousness. Ugo had all of that, and he still does. He wanted to know everything about every work I'd made, or imagined. I visited him in his Harlem studio in New York. It changed me. He made me trust intuition, rethink materials, and return to simplicity. We made a big show together, and I'm grateful.

NV: That duo show was titled Who Is Afraid of Red, Blue and Yellow? What are you afraid of today?

TL: A new McCarthyism. Censorship is increasing, and the debates around it hit artists hard. It feels like we're at a threshold—in the art world and beyond. That scares me.

NV: You teach at ZHdK in Zurich. Some people say artists shouldn't teach. What's your take?

TL: You can do both. Teaching is a practice, and it can be political. It returns to access, to what you can pass on. I try to prepare students for the world, but also to help them find their voice and experiment. I'm self-taught; I never went to art school. So I don't believe there is only one way to learn. I believe in guidance, conversation, listening, helping someone trust themselves. Technical skills matter, but I always tell students to travel, to see things outside the school. First, I'm an artist. I make the work. Teaching is one more way of staying in dialogue.

NV: If you had to describe your voice right now, what would it sound like?

TL: An old R&B song playing in the car while you drive through a foreign country.



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