

sex

Julien Ceccaldi

Interview by Fiona Duncan
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Eyes like bundles of grapes, checkmark noses, and ample conic chins, broad built shoulders, narrow hips, and six packs, in style – a Julien Ceccaldi girl is unmistakable. She wants to be It, she yearns for it. She's fab, if only she could see herself from the outside. Inside, turmoil. She aches, in high fashions that bind like her deep insecurities. She doesn't fit in, or



feel herself to, but like, who does? She fits in our hearts, heart on her sleeve. She heals. The Ceccaldi treatment: vulnerability and show, glitzy truths, see me? I see you. Where might have you seen Julien Ceccaldi's work? He's decorated canvas, clothing, comic books, vinyl sleeves, stained glass, and the cover of Artforum. He's made plays, and illustrated horoscopes for Kenzo. Sex has loved him long time. And here we have him in interview.

Where did you grow up?

In Montreal, Quebec, and for a few years in France.

Were you a nerdy kid?

I tried not to be too much of a nerd, but I paid attention in class and then I'd go home and draw with my online friends, which is very nerdy.

I remember you telling me how you had online friends very early, like pre-Millennium. Are you still friends with any of them?

No, I dramatically said goodbye to all of them on my 18th birthday via Livejournal.

How come?

University had started, and there was this pressure put on me to stop drawing manga. I kept drawing in that style in secret, but exclusively on paper.

Where did you meet these friends? On forums?

On Oekaki boards. They're bulletin boards that only let you post images you draw with the website's application. And then people comment on your work, usually with compliments. It's originally a Japanese program and the tools are tailored for manga artists. But the thing I liked even more were these websites that let users draw together on the same canvas, with a chat box at the bottom of the screen.

Who started these sites?

Artists would set up the application for a board or for a chat room on their personal website. The users would have this shared appreciation for the host's art. At one point I was on this one chatroom so often that the site's owner asked me to be an admin; it was an honor. She had a big fan base, so trolls would come deface the whiteboard often. I'd seen her work on the cover of a video game magazine, looked her up, and that's how I discovered her website.

Do you remember your first experience of a computer, of the internet?

We got the internet at home in 1996. I didn't see the appeal of chatrooms then. I preferred to go on the Capcom Japan website. I'd print off the pages that had character illustrations on them.

Cute. When did you start writing comics?

I won't count my attempts at drawing comics as a teenager, I kept giving up after two pages. But in my early twenties, my best friend and I were partying a lot, to the point where we felt guilty for not making anything. So we sat down and wrote a list of things that made us laugh, it was mostly about the future as seen in early noughties RnB music videos: insane outfits, girls punishing a cheater in a creative way, small spaceships entering in a big club-spaceship... We each did a little story about that, and about how fabulous people at the club must feel broken inside in secret - just like us. Then I derived dozens of 4-panel strips from this. The dialogues took a turn for the intimate, duplicating preoccupations I have about sharing too much about my personal life for example, and about what that means about my relationship to others.

Social dynamics.

Yeah, I wanted to talk about how everyone probably feels like they're on a different plane from everyone else, even within the group they can be a part of. About how a group doesn't actually exist, in the sense that it's not this solid homogeneous block that you may perceive, because every single person in that group also personally feels excluded from it.

Totally.

Doesn't everyone feel like that?

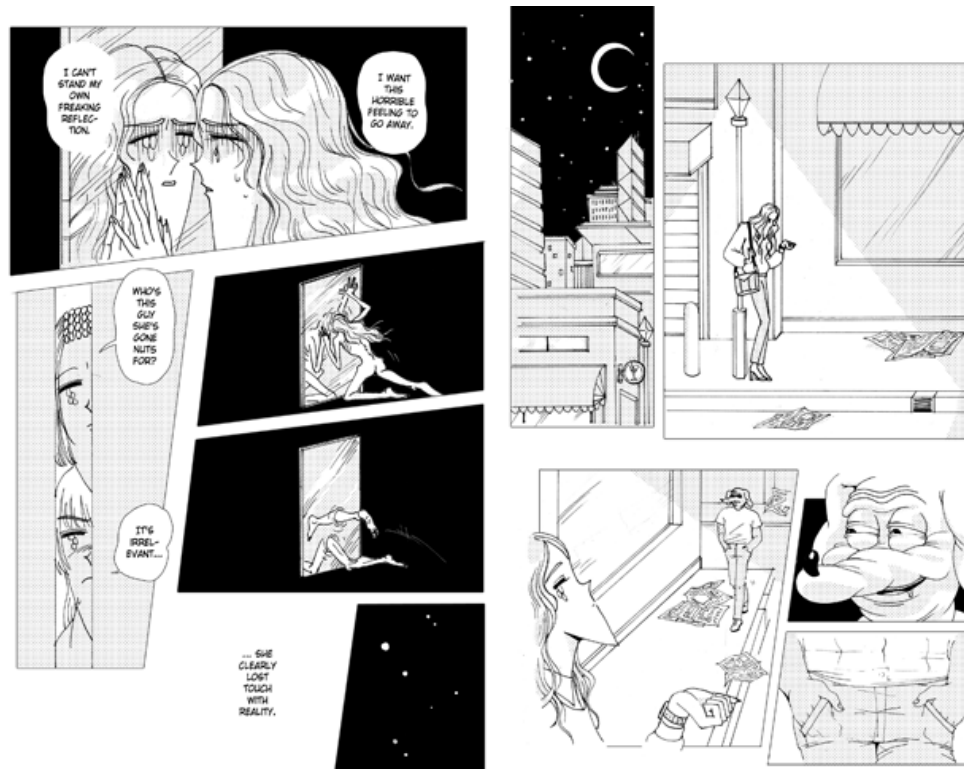
Your comics are darkly relatable. The content could almost be mocking, like this is "Young-Girl" stuff, but you pull it off with empathy. How do you feel towards your characters?

The conversations and the monologues I write, it's how things sound in my head on a daily basis. I talk to myself all the time. I'll look at my reflection in the mirror, and I'll tell it how ridiculous it is. We're so sad, so lost, and so confused, it's almost funny.

When you publish a story that's about vulnerability or something associated with the neurosis of an individual, and then all these people identify with it, do you feel like cleansed of that?

Wording out an issue through a character's mouth won't help me resolve it, but it will be a little weight off my chest. I try to never write about the very exact same problem twice. And yeah it's cool when people can relate. It's great.

Yes, of everything she's done. Everything she's filmed, or written, or said in interviews, it reveals things I've known all along without knowing. About the world and about myself. A Breillat heroine can lend her body to anyone and for free, even if, or maybe especially if, they're repulsive. But she can also be enraptured by plastic beauty. She might also give her entire self to one specific person. And it doesn't matter how deadly it feels to do that, because not being with that person will feel like an even worse death. All these possibilities of desire, and this mix of obscenity and romanticism, I take it like it's about me.



It was me who told you that.

Breillat talks about how men are this and women are that, but she's really talking about an all-encompassing sexism that is so deep-seated it's almost ancestral. She makes light of it, and she definitely takes a stand against it, without denying the part of us that is attracted to violence and death.

Speaking of men are this, women that. Are all men dogs? Or, why are they in your comics?

The first dogs I drew looked dopey and horny, like the ones you've seen, but they were chilled-out and cuddly masculine gays. I was expressing my conflicting feelings of attraction and repulsion for masculinity. Then that design came in handy when I thought of a gag that involved some random jerk. The women I draw are never reprehensible, but the dogs might be. Although lately I think maybe we're all dogs: pitiful, loving, begging dogs. Or maybe that's just me.

"Now I wanna be your dog." More on the influences. You have some strange ones, like you're really into YouTube personalities?

It's not so strange when you look at the numbers though.

Right, that's my oversight. It's actually this huge phenomena that I don't know anything about, except through you.

I think that's because the audience is young. Like when you see these YouTube conventions, where the YouTube personalities do panels and meet-and-greets, it's mainly preteens and teenagers attending.

What kinds of videos do you watch?

I'll watch vlogs, junkfood hauls, questions and answers... Makeup tutorials are very soothing to watch.

What's so soothing about them?

Listening to a guy or girl ramble forever about makeup, it's like you're killing time together, one on one, in their bedroom. It's a window into a very real world. The people I follow are not professionals, they do very everyday whatever makeup looks; but they are earnestly trying to communicate something with as much precision as they can. They're on their own, and the struggle to find the right words is palpable. I feel like that all the time, like my mouth isn't keeping up with my thoughts. When you upload a vlog on YouTube, you must be at peace with yourself in that regard. You have to accept that you've expressed yourself as best as you could. Inexactitude happens, it's called life.

Who's a really well-known YouTuber?

Well, the biggest makeup guru is Michelle Phan. She's a worldwide celebrity. If she was on the street, people would be taking photos of her.

Really?

I don't think I'm reaching, she's built a literal empire from scratch. But the YouTubers I really love right now are Gigi Gorgeous and Trisha Paytas.

You also love Gilmore Girls. Did you watch it when it was on air?

I did, in both French and English.

That would be a hard show to dub.

Yeah, rewatching it now, I catch the jokes that got lost in translation, and the ones that flew over my head. Fun fact, I found out that Sookie was a bit of a pothead when she was younger. It's not even a subtle reference, you just have to know what "baked" means. Also, it's funny because she's a cook. Anyway, it's surprising the program was so popular with teens, considering there's only like three teenage characters.

Yeah, there's all these oddball grown-ups.

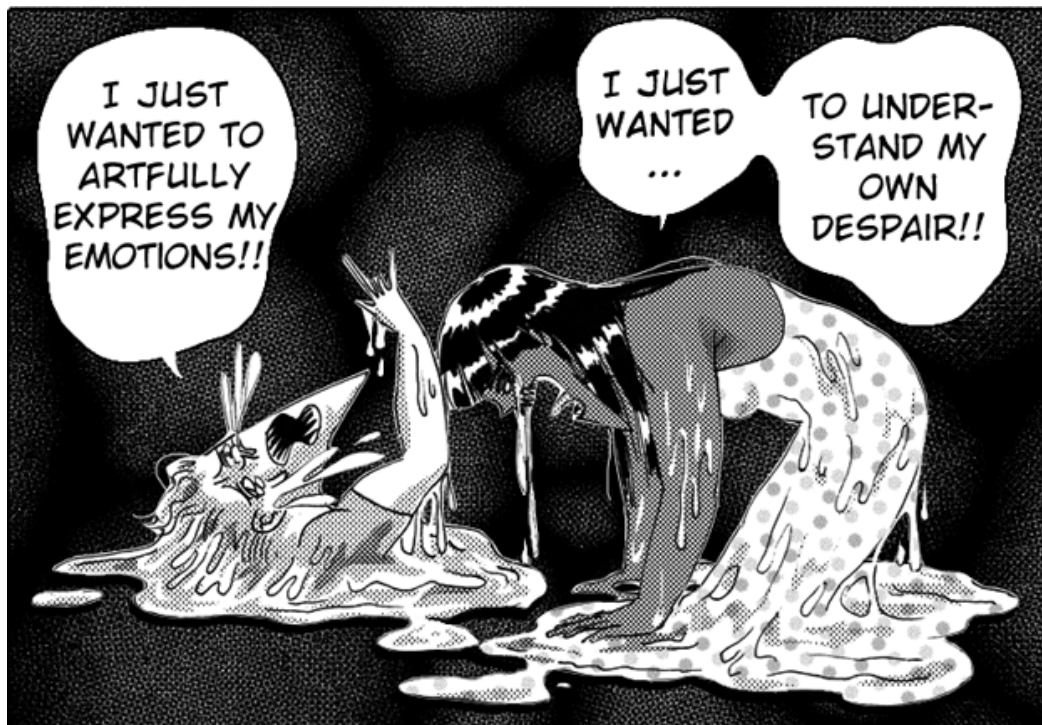
Like Kirk, how old is Kirk? Who knows?

I loved Jess.

Rory and him are so hot together.

So hot. Real chemistry.

Actual chemistry 'cause they were dating most of the time he was on. There's nothing like Gilmore Girls. You can't know what the show's like until you sit down and watch an entire episode. It has a unique recipe and it's more self-aware than people initially assume.



Let's talk practice. When you're drawing do you find your hand follows your brain? Or does sometimes your hand do surprising things? Like is it all deliberate?

Everything is very deliberate. In high school, our art teacher kept asking me to loosen up, but I've always been like, I don't want to say anal but...

You're tight.

And I'm getting tighter. In my first batch of comics, you can tell I was trying to draw with a loose hand. I didn't want my brain to consider anything other than the story and the words. But I like to put effort in draftsmanship, it's obvious by now.

Yeah, your more recent work's got this gloss.

Up until I was eighteen, it was my goal to figure out how to replicate the glossiness of a professional, published illustration. I've picked up where I left off.

Are you still making clothes? How did that start?

My first shirts were spray-painted and done within twenty minutes; they looked gross and cheap. I sold them to my friends at craft fairs for next to nothing. The idea was that graphic tees are a joke within themselves. And I was wearing them, even running a graphic tee business, so the joke was really on me. Clothes are a goofy support for a painting, so from the get-go, you know you won't be taken too seriously, and you can knock yourself out creatively speaking. I'm tired of selling clothes though. Fashion is fun, but retail is brutal.

Your characters aren't named, right?

Right, they're nameless. You can think of them as either interchangeable, or the same person throughout.

Like, we can talk gender?

My character designs are getting more unisex, with more slender silhouettes, which I'm compensating for with large sweaters and bald heads here and there. The comics reflect this uniformity. It's a world where on one hand, nobody comments on the way each other's body looks, yay! But on the other, there is no diversity, and the collective consciousness is dogmatic and binary. The one threat to this are visceral emotions; that's where the glimmer of hope is. I remember feeling less crazy when I first read all this Judith Butler stuff in school. I was basically being taught that everybody is in a constant state of performance, trying hard to maintain appearances at all times. I let out a sigh of relief: oh, it's not just me.