Indrisek, Scott. "In the studio with Camille Henrot, the French artist bringing 'visually tactile' bronzes to Basel's Old Town," *ArtBasel.com* (Spring 2019).

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Installation view, 'Days are Dogs', Carte Blanche à Camille Henrot, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2017-18. © ADAGP, Paris 2017.

Camille Henrot has a lot on her mind. During my recent visit to her New York studio – within spitting distance of the New Museum, where she staged a major survey in 2014 – she is putting the finishing touches to a series of sculptures destined for Art Basel's Parcours sector, which places large-scale public works across the city. She is also thinking intently about a dizzying array of topics: from parenting to abstract patterns, and the limp skin of St. Bartholomew, Michelangelo's self-portrait in the Sistine Chapel's *Last Judgment*. Despite the generous simplicity of many of her paintings and objects – often whimsical, occasionally perverse – Henrot arrives there through deep research and reading. She is the rare artist who can reference Roland Barthes one minute, and chuckle over a drawing of a luckless man being shat on by birds the next.

Henrot rose to prominence with her 2013 video *Grosse Fatigue*, which was much feted at that year's Venice Biennale. That piece – the fruits of a Smithsonian Fellowship – was the artist's attempt to make a film 'about human expectation and the ambition to grasp a totality,' she says. But Henrot's broader practice stretches far beyond this iconic work, with detours into *ikebana* (the Japanese art of floral arrangement), comical drawings modeled on the aesthetic of *New Yorker* cartoons, and a series of bronze sculptures that explored, in her words, 'melancholia, personal indulgence, and the ambitious projects born out of depression.' A 2017 exhibition (at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris) – whose oddball title, 'Days are Dogs,' gives a hint of Henrot's passion for wordplay – brought her work to an even wider audience.

Camille Henrot, *OCPD*, 2018.

Events from life occasionally sneak into her work, although Henrot is loath to have what she makes described as autobiographical. 'There's obviously a lot of my own experience in my work,' she tells me, 'but I only choose what I feel is a common material. It's about how the ego relates to the totality.' In that regard, the artist has also been mining reams of literature, which she says is another way to tease out 'how the personal and the global are connected.' A proud bibliophile, Henrot shares with me a partial reading list that has informed her recent creations; it includes both the anthology *Mother Reader*, edited by Moyra Davey, and Rabelais' 16th-century classic *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

A casual viewer, though, might be hard-pressed to guess how these influences have made their way into the three new sculptures on view at the 2019 edition of Art Basel in Basel. Henrot is not a didactic artist and her works, while often accessible and even entertaining, do not announce themselves clearly. The trio of bronzes – presented in Parcours by kamel mennour, Metro Pictures, and König Galerie – are located in the center of Basel, on Münsterplatz, whose rigid lines of planted trees reminded Henrot of a baroque garden. At first glance, her sculptures are almost entirely abstract forms: an arcing prong, a row of sinuous curves. 'They're visually tactile,' she says. But speaking with the artist makes it clear that these enigmatic structures actually contain multitudes, born out of months spent ruminating on what it means to experience and understand the world.

Take the most seemingly straightforward of the works on view, *Every Goodbye* (2019). On closer inspection, it resembles a row of three epic question marks, wobbling in space. One of those question marks has an appendage dangling from it: a curved object meant to evoke a baby's teether. Henrot was thinking about 'the pleasure to touch, to understand a shape.' Babies, she says, do this in a very direct way, by trying to chew on whatever has sparked their curiosity. 'As adults, we're not doing that anymore,' Henrot explains, 'but something of our body remembers that the way we used to understand a shape was by putting it in our mouth.'

Camille Henrot, *Inside Job*, 2019.

The sculpture's title also refers to the fraught relationships between children and their parents. Henrot theorizes that our fondness for sculpture might hark back to our earliest years, to 'the fear of being abandoned, of being left alone.' Admiring – or collecting – three-dimensional works might be a way of 'creating a presence to fill this gap, this emotional trauma of the loss of a loved object.' That is admittedly a lot of pressure to put on any single sculpture, but Henrot's bronzes are doing their best. 'In a way, I think of a sculpture as an object you can cuddle with, or would *like* to cuddle with,' she says. 'It has the potential of being an object of emotional protection, a substitute object.'

The other works in Parcours are even more resistant to easy analysis. Henrot conceived of *Inside Job* (2019) as both an 'architectural element' – like a doorway – and an allusion to the beak of a pelican feeding its offspring. The way the components of the piece lean on each other expresses an idea of 'the perversity of care,' says the artist, and this is a common theme throughout this series of sculptures and related drawings, collectively entitled *System of Attachment* (2019). Henrot says that she was also pondering the relationships we have with our domestic pets. 'The way dogs put their nose on your arm,' she muses, 'this combination of tenderness but also objectification … the dog treats you as a piece of furniture. There's a tenderness about doing this, too – treating another body as a piece of furniture – which comes with the idea of intimacy.'

The third Parcours sculpture, *OCPD* (2018) – named after obsessive-compulsive personality disorder – is the most lyrical of the trio, and the one that Henrot seems the most hesitant to pin down. Is it a purely abstract exercise, or is it somehow translating the experience of a disordered mind? The answer might be both, or neither. 'In a way this sculpture's title is about the neurosis of cataloguing and listing while the shape itself escape a precise definition,' Henrot says, before shifting the conversation to the theorist Henri Van Lier's reflections on how a single sentence can often contain diverse, or even contradictory, meanings. 'That's what I'm trying to do with the shape of the sculptures, [create] the possibility for them to be as open as possible,' she explains. 'The directions I'm giving are more like a *mood*; they're never literal.'