



“He was  
the King of  
Blue,  
and I was his  
Queen”

As a young woman, the artist Rotraut saw Yves Klein's paintings and knew: This was her future. An interview about her journey from a farm by the Baltic Sea to the art world of Paris and beyond

By ANNA KEMPER

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**I am not sure how to address you: Ms. Klein? Ms. Moquay? Or just simply Rotraut?**

On paper my name is Rotraut Klein-Moquay. But I only use Rotraut.

**Why did you decide not to use a last name?**

I have always found my first name very beautiful. My maiden name is Uecker, but since my brother Günther is also an artist, as well as older and much better known, I feel that the name is his. Klein is the name of my first husband, Yves, and the case is similar. As an artist I wanted to have a name that was mine only. For that reason I also do not use my current husband's name Moquay, and leave it to my children.

**Do you remember when you first saw Yves Klein's work?**

It was in Düsseldorf in 1957. I walked along the street and in the window of the Schmela gallery I saw one of Yves' blue monochromes.

**He was just becoming famous with those pictures at that time: canvasses completely covered in deep ultramarine blue paint.**

This blue felt magnetic, I was really transfixed by the color. The picture triggered a strong response inside me, as if it told me my future. And it did.

**At that time you were 18 years old and had just come from Mecklenburg to Düsseldorf. You grew up on the Wustrow peninsula in the Baltic Sea.**

We lived on a plot right above the cliff. We always saw the horizon, the sun rose above the salt lagoon and sank into the sea, at night we looked up at the enormous starry sky above.

**You were born in 1938, the youngest of three siblings.**

**Do you remember the war?**

Yes, the bombings, we were often in the shelter. My father was drafted at quite a late stage of the war. When the Russians came, my brother Günther, aged 15, was the only man in the house. In order to protect my mother, my sister, and me, he nailed wooden planks in front of the door and windows.

**Ten years later your brother was hammering nails into canvasses, creating his first relief-style nail pictures that made him into one of the best-known German artists.**

I think that was his way of dealing with the experiences. The war had a much greater impact on him than on me. There was a ship that sank in the bay of Lübeck in May 1945...

**The Cap Arcona, with almost 5,000 concentration camp prisoners on board, was mistaken for a troop carrier and sunk by British bombers.**

Hundreds of corpses were washed up on the beach; my brother and two other boys helped to bury them hastily. He was haunted by the fact that they could not be given a proper burial. Last summer he exhibited canvasses in Schwerin which he painted at the same beach, one for every dead person he had to bury. I found it very moving.

**What was it like when your father came home after the war?**

When he returned from a Russian POW camp, he was shockingly thin. He had no flesh left on the soles of his feet, they were bleeding. We started back from square one. My father leased the plot of land by the sea, where we all built our house together and built up a farm. It was a lot of hard work, and I was only able to go to school every other day.

**Which days did you prefer: at school or on the farm?**

Those on the farm. We had to walk seven kilometers to school, and the only shoes we had were made out of artificial leather; in winter my feet were so frozen they turned blue. Like all children I was basically keen to learn. But as soon as I took up my pencil at school with my left hand, the teacher hit my hand with her rod. There was no explanation. I thought, she probably does not like me, and withdrew within myself. I learned almost nothing during the first four years at school and could neither read nor write. But I loved working on the farm, with the animals.

**In 1949, you had to abandon the farm, because the Russians declared Wustrow a restricted military zone.**

We moved in with my grandparents in Gross Schwansee, near the border dividing East and West Germany. The piece of land we got was full of stones. We collected them at the edge of the field in small heaps. Do you know Andy Goldsworthy? He does Land Art, working only with natural materials. Many years later, he visited us in Phoenix, and we bought a stone sculpture from him, a kind of pyramid that reminds me of the stone piles of my childhood. Working in the field taught me a lot.

**In what way?**

I could watch life. My father said, "Look, this seed will grow into a tree." I was delighted. My sister was more homely, Günther was already a student in Wismar, so I was outdoors with my father a lot. I worked on the farm until late at night. I was fascinated by the wonder of life and the greatness of nature. I was physically connected to it, I could feel the time of day and the weather. Working with my father prepared me for the time when I would live and work with Yves. For ex-

Rotraut Klein-Moquay,

78, was born in Mecklenburg, Germany. She is the sister of the artist Günther Uecker and the widow of the French artist Yves Klein, who died in 1962. Last year, Rotraut's works were exhibited in Jena and Munich. She lives with her second husband in Paris and in Phoenix, Arizona. We met with her in her son's flat in Berlin

ample, when I helped my father sharpen the scythe, I held the scythe while it lay on the stone, and he hit the sharp edge with a hammer. That was precision work; I found it meditative even though it was exhausting and took a long time. We did not speak while we worked, and I experienced the same with Yves: We did not need to talk to be in harmony.

**In 1955, when you were 17, you followed your brother to West Germany. Why?**

Günther had left the GDR in 1953 and was studying art in Düsseldorf. I also wanted to study painting, but in order to be accepted at a university in the GDR I would have been required to do three years of apprenticeship and to paint houses first. So Günther persuaded me to come and join him.

**You knew you would not see your parents for a long time.**

Yes. My father tried to hold me back, he even promised me an accordion, because he knew that he would not be able to keep the farm going on his own. And he did lose it eventually.

**When your brother took you to Düsseldorf, did you also want to study at the Arts Academy like him?**

I did, but of course I had no schooling. Things had not continued well with me and schools. I was bullied in the new school in Schwansee because I was unable to read and write properly. I was ashamed. I could do simple multiplications, but I was unable to repeat them at school. It was as if the blood drained from my brain whenever I was called forward. In the end, I came to hate reciting. Even today I read very slowly, and I find writing hard.

**Did you work as an artist in Düsseldorf regardless?**

I worked as a domestic help and in a factory, and I tried to do woodcuts on the side. Once I slipped with the knife and made a deep cut in my hand, blood everywhere, and then I thought, "Why do I need to cut into the wood in order to get a relief? I could just as well add something to the surface to create depth." So I began to experiment with a mixture of flour and water, which I applied to a canvas or a panel to get a spatial structure. That was a happy time, because I realized that this is what I want to be doing all my life. Finally I could express myself. I struggled with words, I was shy and more happy in the company of animals than with people.

**Not everybody took Yves Klein's monochromes seriously from the start. When you saw the pictures, did you immediately feel this was art?**

Yes. My brother was also working in monochrome at the time, and the immateriality evoked by the picture was familiar to me. At home, when the fields were in flower and the pollen was dancing through the air in the sunlight, I felt something similar – that there is something else behind the visible. An almost divine feeling. By the way, I had an experience in the field



that I still connect with Yves: It was a summer's day when I looked up at the deep blue sky, and I thought that everybody should find someone they love, and that somewhere in this infinite space of sky there should be the one for me.

**When Yves Klein was 18, he declared the blue sky above Nice to be his first monochrome and said that he signed it.**

Wonderful, isn't it? Later, after he died, I remembered the day in the field and I thought, "He was far away then, and now he is far away again, but we are connected." As if he were signing the sky once again, but from the other side.

**When did you meet him?**

That was in Nice in 1958. A friend of my brother's knew a French artist there, Arman, who was looking for a nanny. I had always wanted to travel and learn languages, so I accepted the job offer enthusiastically. Arman was not yet the famous object artist he was to become, but worked with his father in a furniture store. This is how I came to Nice.

**Had you ever been abroad before?**

No. Nice was like paradise for me. Once, Arman brought a basket full of fruit and vegetables I had never seen – oranges, bananas, lemons, avocados. When I looked outside my window, there was a palm tree. I found it incredible.

**And in that house you saw Yves for the first time?**

He was a friend of Arman, and once he came to visit, knocked on the door, but the family was not in. I did not even open the door for him. A little later, he was a guest at dinner. He lit up the room, and I was dazzled. He was ten years older than me, a very good-looking, athletic man. He wanted to take me out, and I said yes.

**Photos from that period show a beautiful dark-haired girl. Were you conscious of your beauty?**

No, I had always been much more intrigued by how one looks on the inside. Once, when I was a child, my

mother put me in front of a mirror and said, "Look, that's you." I could not relate to the person in the mirror at all. I'd had a completely different sense of what I was and could not understand that my entire inner world should be confined to that body. I was really disappointed. And that has never really changed. For me, it has always been important what I feel and what I think. Not how I look.

**How did you communicate with Yves Klein, in German or French?**

We did not talk much. We went out – and then to his flat. One of his pictures was drying there, and he put lovely music on. I was so shy, and of course had no experience with men. But I stayed overnight. We were hardly ever apart during the following three months. Until he had to go to Gelsenkirchen.

**At that time, Yves Klein had just had his first big exhibitions. His biggest commission so far was to decorate the foyer of the newly built opera house in Gelsenkirchen, Germany, using huge blue sponge-relief murals.**

Before he left, he told me that he felt he wouldn't live very long. And then he breathed in all those poisonous fumes in Gelsenkirchen...

**For the reliefs, he dipped hundreds of natural sponges into synthetic resin – a substance that emits poisonous fumes, as we now know.**

Work on the reliefs went on for a long time, and I saw him dip the sponges into the resin with his bare hands.

**You were there too?**

Yves had written to me that he needed me. Once, he saved my life while we were there: We stood on the balcony of the foyer, which had not yet been secured with a railing. We were talking to someone and suddenly I took a step back beyond the floor. Yves must have noticed it in the eyes of the person he was talking to, since he turned in a flash and caught my hands at the last moment.

**That must have been a lightning-quick reaction.**

He was a judoka, wearer of a 4th Dan black belt, which he had obtained in Japan. He loved the discipline in Judo, the repetition of motion sequences to reach the point of perfection. He also worked like that, for example with the models he used to press the blue color onto the canvas with their naked bodies. He created choreographies beforehand and made them practice the movements.

**You were present during these performances, which were also done with an audience. Were you not jealous?**

No. It had no sexual component. I often helped him with the preparations, mixed the color, like I used to help my father in the old days. Yves also supported me as an artist, for example when he put me in contact with the New Vision Centre Gallery in London, where I could exhibit my work. At that time, in 1959, I made my first galaxy paintings: I applied a mix of flour and water intuitively on a canvas, let it dry and covered it with black paint. Then I sanded down the black paint on the protruding points, so that the tips of the white substance appeared like stars against darkness.

**Were you both able to make a living as artists?**

Barely, in the beginning. For example, Yves earned nothing from the Gelsenkirchen project because one of the reliefs came down and he had to buy all of that material again. It got better in 1961. I remember that around Christmas in 1960, we went to have dinner at the artist restaurant La Coupole in Paris because Yves could put it on account there.

**That year, one of his most famous works was created, the *Leap into the Void*. On the photograph, he appears to jump out of a window with outstretched arms, as if he could fly.**

He jumped out of the window at least 13 or 14 times for that photo. We caught him at the bottom on a judo mat. He wanted it to look as if he were floating upwards.

**The photo is accompanied with a poem dedicated to you that is entitled *Come with me into the Void*. What did it mean?**

The void was an important subject for him. A few years earlier he had created the exhibition *Le vide* in a Paris gallery. He had cleared it out completely and painted it white to exhibit the void. Three thousand people came to the performance. For him, the void represented his quest for the immaterial, the divine.

**The year 1961 was the beginning of a successful phase. There was an Yves Klein retrospective in Krefeld, Germany, and you traveled to New York...**

Yves had a show of his blue monochromes at Leo Castelli's gallery there. We stayed at the Chelsea Hotel. Once, we ran into Mark Rothko at an opening. Yves admired him very much and approached him, but Rothko turned around and walked away.

**Do you know why?**



The couple in 1960: During Klein's performances, women's bodies created blue imprints

No, but Yves had shown his blue monochromes, and Rothko had not yet done his black paintings at the time. Maybe he had the idea in his mind already and felt that someone had been there before him. Another time, we met Franz Kline. I really wanted to meet him, because Yves had once told me that I painted like him. Yves introduced us and we danced. He danced clumsily, like a little bear.

**Yves and you married in January 1962. Your wedding was also a performance, wasn't it?**

Yves wanted a royal wedding: He was the King of Blue and I was his Queen. I wore a beautiful white dress, with a long white train, and a small crown on my head. He had found it the day before at an antiques shop and painted it blue. Yves wore the uniform of the religious order of Saint Sebastian, of which he was a Knight. Afterwards we celebrated at La Coupole with a big buffet – and blue drinks.

**Six months later your husband died. He was only 34 years old.**

He had had heart problems for a while, but he did not tell me about them because I was pregnant and he did not want me to worry. I think the poisonous fumes destroyed his inner organs, but this will probably never be known for certain. He had two small heart attacks in mid-May, and the doctor had told him to rest. Four days before he died we received a condolence letter from Miró to me. Franz Kline had died, and Miró had mixed up Klein and Kline. Yves carried the letter with him all the time; he was worried it might be a bad omen. On the 6th of June, Yves said he was not feeling well and that I should call a doctor. I went to make the call in the corridor, and when I came back into his room a few minutes later, he was dead. In the time after his death, I often thought about the poem *Come with me into the Void*. Whether I should follow him. But I was pregnant, so that was not an option.

**Was there anything to comfort you during that time?**

The thought that he continued to live in the immaterial. In the first night after his death, I had a physical sense of his embrace – he was not yet gone. And it stayed that way. I have the feeling that he is there when I need him.

**Do you sometimes talk to him?**

Yes, in my thoughts I do.

**Your son was born two months after your husband's death.**

His birth pulled me out of my state of shock. I realized that my life went on. I had a lot to do, exhibitions had been scheduled, and the sharks came to snap up Yves' work. There was a collector from Chicago who came once and asked if he could see Yves' works. Then he put down stacks of 500 franc notes in bundles. He probably thought I'd be impressed, and said, "I want that, and that, and that." And I said, "No, these are

not for sale," and took him to the door. I felt very proud afterwards.

**People saw an opportunity to get a bargain?**

I was only 24, of course, and maybe they took me to be naïve. But I could see very well who wanted to bamboozle me and who didn't.

**In 2012, a work by Yves Klein sold at auction for 36 million dollars.**

I think he has not even reached his right price level. His work is like a tree with many branches, immensely versatile, and he was an important starting point and inspiration for many artists.

**Did you ever think you could love another man like you loved him?**

I longed to have another child with a father who was there. And so it happened.

**When did you meet your second husband, Daniel Moquay?**

Five years later. I was a little depressed, and a friend took me to a night club to get me out and about. Just as I was telling him that I would probably never again meet a man with whom I wanted to spend my life, Daniel came down the stairs and I said, "That's him." It was like a vision. Strange, isn't it?

**Did you talk to him?**

He and my friend knew each other. We danced, later we went to my flat with a few friends. Daniel was 24 then, five years younger than me. I was sure all the time: that's him. He was wondering why I looked at him so strangely. A year later we were married. And so I found out what it is like to have a child when the father is there.

**You have three children together.**

Daniel is also a father to my first son. He called him daddy right away.

**Together with your husband, you run the Yves Klein Archive in Paris, and you manage the estate of your first husband.**

Daniel really immersed himself in Yves' work. He always jokes that there are three in our marriage.

**You encountered death very early. Are you afraid of it?**

I do not believe in death. The body perishes, but at the moment of death it is unimportant and empty, because the spiritual has left it. The value of the immaterial is much bigger, and I believe that it stays present in the universe. I also never felt that we were lost in this huge cosmos like tiny irrelevant dustmotes. I think we are and will always remain part of this great entity. That is comforting.

**Do you sometimes come across Yves Klein's blue in your everyday life?**

I always think about Yves when I see something blue. Strangely enough I keep finding little blue things, scraps of paper; once, I found a blue heart. I take them with me. For me they are small signs of greeting from him that tell me he is still around.