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## STILL-LIFE WITH CARLA



By Lizzie Widdicombe

The other day, students in New York University’s visual-arts program received an e-mail advising them to be in their studios the following Monday afternoon. “They said that somebody famous was coming,” Robert Leonardi, a senior, recalled, “and that anything could happen.” A little after five on Monday, Leonardi, a sculptor, was at work in his fourth-floor studio, when the First Lady of France, Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, popped her head in. She was wearing a tight black top, black pants, and a long black jacket, and she was accompanied by about fifteen people—bodyguards, photographers, and deans from the art programs at N.Y.U. and the Sorbonne. Bruni-Sarkozy’s foundation is paying for an exchange between the two schools, and since she was in town, with her husband, on official business, she stopped by to see some student art. Bruni-Sarkozy is a musician—she recently released an album that includes the song “You Are My Drug” (“More lethal than heroin from Afghanistan and more dangerous than Colombian cocaine”)—but she is an art appreciator, too. Before the studio visits, she told an administrator, “All of my friends are artists.”

Nancy Barton, the chair of N.Y.U.’s art department, led the tour. The first stop was Leonardi’s studio. Barton, who was wearing plastic cat’s-eye glasses, seemed frazzled. “This is Carla Bruni-Sarkozy,” she said.

“I’m Robert,” Leonardi said. Bruni-Sarkozy smiled serenely. She examined the sculptures—wineglasses tied together with copper thread—and said, “Beautiful.”

“Do you want to say a bit about your work?” Barton asked.

“Well, my work is about domesticity,” Leonardi said. “Most of the objects are from my home.”

“I think it’s very Duchamp,” Yann Toma, a dean from the Sorbonne, said. “Do you like him?”

“I like him,” Leonardi said.

Bruni-Sarkozy proceeded, with her entourage, to the next studio, where a student was painting a fruit tree on canvas.

“This is Carla Bruni-Sarkozy,” Barton said, holding out one arm. “And this is . . . Oh, God. I forgot.”

“Sam,” said the student, whose name was Sam Parker. Parker said that he likes landscape painting—“foliage, trees.” Bruni-Sarkozy leaned in and noticed, with approval, that he was working from a film still rather than a photograph. “It gives a different feel,” Bruni-Sarkozy said, with a faint British accent. “It’s not flat.”

Next came a performance-art class. “Hello! Hi! Welcome, Madame,” the teacher said, as Bruni-Sarkozy, the photographers, the deans, and the bodyguards filed into the room. “We’re doing a performance. The artist has asked all of us to close our eyes.” The bodyguards seemed perplexed.

“Close your eyes!” Bruni-Sarkozy said in a loud whisper, and closed hers, folding

her arms in front of her. One by one, the members of her entourage closed their eyes. A few bodyguards kept theirs open, and peeped around nervously. After several minutes, someone rattled the door to the classroom. Everyone opened their eyes.

“*C’est qui ça?*” one of the bodyguards whispered testily, peering out a window in the door. A student named Christina Thomopoulos entered. She wore a flannel shirt and pink rain boots, and had six cameras hanging around her neck. “This is part of the performance,” she said. Then, for a long-seeming five minutes, she silently approached every person in the room, including the guards, and took a closeup picture while standing several inches from his or her face. (The piece was called “Livin da Lenzz!”) Bruni-Sarkozy smiled for the camera.

“Well, thank you!” the teacher said, and Thomopoulos sat down.

Next was a video presentation. Bruni-Sarkozy crouched down to watch, balancing an elbow on one bent knee, like Rodin’s “The Thinker.” She was offered a chair. “No, no,” she said. “It’s more agreeable to me. I’m stretching my back.” She watched a video called “French Poodle” (a poodle in a military uniform saluting the viewer) and then went downstairs for a reception next to an art installation (a taxidermied deer with a human face staring into a pair of headlights). Bruni-Sarkozy was handed a glass of champagne, and she made a toast. “I loved being here,” she said. “I wish my days were longer.” She went out to her motorcade, in the rain. The students and the administrators watched.

“She’s beautiful,” Irina Makarova, a painter, said. “We were just gape-mouthed.”

“It was like we were trying to talk, but no words were coming out,” another student, Eric Zhang, said.

“I was a little bit of a deer in the headlights,” Nancy Barton, the N.Y.U. chair, said. “I kept calling her Carla.”

Jason Martin, the video artist, said that he’d meant to play a different video, not “French Poodle,” but his computer had crashed and he’d panicked.

Toma, the Sorbonne dean, shrugged and said, “Art is like that.” ♦



*Lizzie Widdicombe is an editor of *The Talk of the Town*. [Read more »](#)*

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