



Wiels, 2019.
Photo Andrea Anoni

THE BRUSSELS FACTOR

Dubbed “the new Berlin” by the New York Times and “an epicenter of contemporary art” by the Washington Post, Brussels has a vibrant art scene that has attracted quite some international attention in recent years - and rightly so. With curators, gallerists, and artists from all corners of the globe settling down in the coveted Belgian capital, we spoke to some of them to find out what it is exactly that made them choose Brussels.

Zoë Gray

Having moved to the city eight years ago, UK-born Zoë Gray has spent five of those as a curator at Wiels, a high-profile contemporary art center with an excellent international reputation located - in that typical Belgian way - in a former brewery. Wiels has played a major role in putting Brussels on the map as a breeding ground for contemporary art and in opening it to the international sphere, especially through its renowned residency program, which has brought more than 100 artists from across the world to the city over the years.

Interview by Sarah Schug
Photographer Mireille Roobaert

L'OFFICIEL ART: Why did you make the move to Brussels?

ZOË GRAY: I fell in love with the city. I like its lack of pretension, the flipside of which is a failure to promote itself. I enjoy that it doesn't shout out its secrets; you have to search for them. I appreciate its modesty, and its lack of snobbishness. And the fact you can live in this international capital city that is very human in scale, where people still have the time to meet and talk about ideas. Coming from London, where everyone has to work three jobs just to make ends meet, I really appreciate this different approach to time. Its multilingualism, this inherently European aspect, appeals to me as well and is something I enjoy at Wiels, where we work in three languages.

You've been here for quite some time - have you witnessed a lot of changes throughout the years?

Since I moved here, there have been different waves of people connected to the arts coming here. When I first arrived, there were a lot of international galleries opening up offshoots, many of which have since left, discovering that the fabled and impressive cluster of Belgian collectors was maybe not as easily seduced as they had hoped. There's a remarkable number of collectors, who are both very sought-after and very discerning; it takes a while to get to know them. Then there's been a bigger but slower wave of artists moving here, which I hope will continue despite the current limitations on travel and mobility.

What makes the Brussels art scene so attractive?

The Brussels art ecosystem is a really rich one: a mix of big institutions, artist-run spaces, the commercial scene, private foundations, collector-run spaces. The many art schools in Brussels, due to the typical Belgian multiplication of institutions and languages, offer such different worlds. Practically, there are also so many ways here of making things. There are still a lot of small artisans and specialist manufacturers. Combined with the palimpsest of languages and cultures in this relatively small city, it makes for a really interesting spot for artists. And all this is paired with the rich art history of this region, the position of Brussels as a transport



ZOË GRAY: "IN BRUSSELS, THERE IS THIS DESIRE TO MAKE THINGS HAPPEN AND A FUNDAMENTAL BELIEF IN THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ARTS!"



Risquons-Tout, exhibition view, photo by Philippe De Gobert.



Kati Heck, Schwarzes Brett I & II, 2020, cotton, 406 x 650 cm, courtesy of Tim Van Laere Gallery.

hub, and its relatively low living costs. It's difficult to make lots of money as an artist, unless you're one of the small handful on top of the pile, but here, you can live - and not in a tiny shoebox. A lot of people work part-time, mixing money jobs and passion jobs, and there is space to do that here.

With so many artists and galleries moving here, do you think it will reach a saturation point?

Compared to what's happening in Amsterdam, London, or Paris, where artists are being pushed out of the city, here there is still space. Brussels has this kind of porous, chaotic set-up; there are still so many unused buildings that can be used by artists. I think it will be a long time before it reaches a saturation point. And, perhaps most importantly, there is an openness of mind, people are willing to try things out, whether artists or amateurs (in the true sense of the word) being passionate about art and wanting to support it. That's also how Wiels came about: It was set in motion by

a group of art lovers who saw that this amazing building should be used for visual art. In Brussels, there is this desire to make things happen and a fundamental belief in the importance of the arts.

Is there anything Brussels' art scene lacks?

What's missing is a functioning museum of contemporary art, with its own collection. Wiels is not a museum and is not attempting to be one, but in the absence of such an institution, we curate certain exhibitions that fill the gaps of recent art history, such as our 2018 show of the artist and poet Sophie Podolski or our upcoming exhibition that will be a new take on a key aspect of Marcel Broodthaers' work. The main focus of our program, however, is on new ideas, offering a platform to the most innovative artists of today. Our exhibition this autumn is called Risquons-Tout (Risk It All) and explores the potential of transgression and unpredictability in an era when our lives are increasingly filtered into safe bubbles by

prediction algorithms. It features work by 38 artists based in Belgium and its neighboring countries, although hailing from all over the world. The curatorial team began working on it many months ago, but of course the Covid-19 pandemic has thrown the question of risk into sharp relief, not to mention bringing up many practical concerns about how to welcome visitors safely and comfortably.

How do you see Wiels' future?

My hope is that the audience of Wiels continues to be curious. Such a range of different people come here, from local artists to schoolchildren and international patrons of the arts. They can all coexist, and in this sense, the institution is like a microcosm of Brussels. I couldn't see Wiels existing in any other city, because of this combination of informality and artistic ambition.

Risquons-Tout, until January 10
Wiels, Avenue Van Volxem 354, 1190 Brussels
wiels.org

Mendes Wood DM

Brazilian gallery Mendes Wood DM was founded in 2010 in Sao Paulo, before branching out to New York in 2017. That same year, gallery owners Felipe Dmab, Matthew Wood, and Pedro Mendes made the choice to establish a base in Europe as well. Instead of going for the obvious like Paris or London, the decision was made in favor of Brussels, where the gallery resides in a stunning historic multi-story townhouse. "We like artists who make us think about the world and ourselves a little differently," is how partner Carolyn Drake Kandiyoti sums up their program.

Interview by Sarah Schug
Photographer Mireille Roobaert

L'OFFICIEL ART: What made you choose the Belgian capital?

CAROLYN DRAKE KANDIYOTI: We thought of different places, and at one point Brussels came up as a possibility. I was living in Amsterdam at the time, so it was easy to come and spend some time here to check out the scene. I already knew it a little bit, because Art Brussels has always been a big magnet. I immersed myself in the scene with collectors and artists to really get a feel for the city, and I felt very welcome. Feeling welcome combined with finding such an amazing building to show our artists made us decide to give it a shot. And we were proved right: Already the opening was incredible. Throughout that day, so many people showed up, coming from all over the region.

What are Brussels' strong points, compared to other cities?

The central location and close proximity to other urban centers is one of its biggest strengths. But that's not all. A major reason for opening up our third gallery space here is the slightly slower pace of the city. As a consequence, there is ultimately more scope to interact with art. It's not a big cosmopolitan city like Paris or London or NYC. There is less pressure over here, which is also due to something as practical as rents, which indeed are much lower here compared to other capital cities. In Paris for example, we'd probably have chosen a much smaller space. When you don't have to kill yourself to make your monthly rent, you have more time to think, be

inspired, and have a dialogue - you operate at a completely different tempo. We can actually spend time with people in the gallery. This attracts a lot of artists and collectors.

Some have already been talking about a hype. Do you feel that's justified?

Brussels has a very dynamic art scene. Many young artists make Brussels their home, and it has a history of wonderful collectors. But I don't think there's a hype about Brussels per se. It has always had a long history of art collecting and production, and galleries come and go. Brussels and Belgians have always been avant-garde when it comes to the arts. This is something I do not see changing any time soon.

CAROLYN DRAKE KANDIYOTI:
"BRUSSELS AND BELGIANS
HAVE ALWAYS BEEN AVANT-GARDE
WHEN IT COMES TO THE ARTS!"



Installation view, Solange Pessoa, *In the Sun and the Shade*, Mendes Wood DM, Brussels, 2020.
Photo credit: Kristien Daem. Courtesy of the artist and Mendes Wood DM São Paulo, Brussels, New York.

Did this famed reputation of the Belgian collector attract you?

Belgians are extremely engaged, and there is this history of collecting, but you can't just show up here and expect the entire show will be sold out to Belgians. It's been a really nice surprise to see how closely they follow the program, though. Some people we've never met before come to see every single show. Conversely, we feel it's important to support the local scene and to be a part of it. That's why we'll be participating in Art Brussels for the third time. We hope to show the artists we work with to a local audience and have those who are not familiar with it yet discover the gallery.

What has your experience been like so far? What has opened up to you by being here?

The experience has been overwhelmingly positive. It has opened up new dialogues and enabled many of our artists from Brazil and other parts of the world to come to Brussels for residencies and develop new projects, thus expanding our inquest into regional difference and individuation, which are central to the gallery's program. Being in Brussels has provided another context in which our artists are able to expand and develop their practices. For example, Brazilian artist Patricia Leite started working with stained glass following her time spent at the gallery in Brussels on the occasion of her solo exhibition in 2017.

Since you opened here, have you taken on any local artists?

Yes, Otobong Nkanga, who is from Nigeria but based here. She perfectly fits into our program. I had already been following her for years and had shown her at the Sao Paulo Biennale. As it's a growing program, a growing gallery, I'm constantly on the lookout. I like to say we're very Brazilian at heart but at the same time it's a global, international gallery, which is open to collaboration and dialogue, including between the different artists that we represent. We're all quite similar in many ways wherever we come from. The exhibition of Solange Pessoa expressed that really well, crossing between different forms and materials to show that in the end we're all made of the same stuff.

Do you think you are here to stay?

There are many upsides to being here, particularly the warmth, loyalty, and openness of the people we have met over the last three years. And the eclectic crowd is always so refreshing. We made a good start and are very happy with how it's going here, and are here to stay as long as the city will have us.

Marina Perez Simão, *Éveils Maritimes*
Mendes Wood DM,
13 Rue des Sablons, 1000 Brussels
October 10 - November 14
mendeswooddm.com



La Maison de Rendez-Vous

Inspired by a novella by Alain Robbe-Grillet about one night in Hong Kong told through changing perspectives by several characters, La Maison de Rendez-Vous is a fitting name for this fusional project, the creation of four independent galleries from across the world. It's nearly impossible to get all of them in one room, but we were lucky enough to catch both Isabella Ritter, co-founder of LambdaLambdaLambda in Pristina, and Chris Sharp from Lulu in Mexico City in their joint Brussels outpost in Saint-Gilles. They spoke with us in the name of the entire quartet, which is completed by Misako&Rosen in Tokyo and Park View/Paul Soto in Los Angeles.

Interview by Sarah Schug
Photographer Mireille Roobaert

L'OFFICIEL ART: Why did you choose Brussels for this adventure?

LA MAISON DE RENDEZ-VOUS: Brussels seemed to be the perfect spot for our project, because of the openness of the city, its positioning at the crossroads of Europe, and how well-informed the art audience is. It's very nice, on a daily basis, to deal with people who know about art, where it's part of the DNA. What certainly makes Brussels attractive for all of us is the fact that it's the last affordable capital in Europe - besides Vienna, maybe. But Vienna has a pretty conservative feel to it, whereas in Brussels, there is a sense of openness and relaxedness. Given its relationship to dance and performance, there is a certain openness to experimentation which you might not encounter in the more buttoned-up, established Western art capitals. Here, you can just

do a crazy project where an artist like Gabriel Kuri comes and plays drums. This kind of thing feels a lot less feasible in places like London or Paris or even Berlin. The stakes don't feel as high. It's this combination of factors that makes it really attractive.

Did reality meet your expectations?

Yes. The vibe is good and there was immediately a lot of curiosity. Like anywhere, we're working to be accepted and integrated and to be a part of the community. That doesn't happen overnight. The caliber of people who showed up here for our first opening, from institutions, collectors, museum directors - that's something you don't get in other countries. What is interesting here as well is that it's not just Brussels. There's a constant fluctuation of artists and people from the art world coming

from France, Germany, the Netherlands, for residencies, shows, research trips... It's not a city that is shut off.

Looking at the city's art scene, is there anything you feel it lacks?

What's missing is the kind of institutional scene that you find in Paris for example. There, people rely on institutions. It's the same with politics: When the government is strong, people rely on that structure. And because here it's a little bit of a mess, and no one knows who is in charge of what, people have to create their own dynamics and make things happen. It's the same in the art world. It makes for more of a DIY approach, which is kind of what we are doing here. It's a great thing. Despite the negative effects it might have on other aspects of life, for the arts it's a very generous situation.



ISABELLA RITTER AND CHRIS SHARP:
"IF WE OPENED LA MAISON IN MEXICO,
PEOPLE WOULD FEEL THREATENED.
IT WOULDN'T WORK. THERE IS
SOMETHING INCREDIBLY OPEN AND
WELCOMING ABOUT BRUSSELS!"



Installation views, Nora Turato, let's never be like that, La Maison de Rendez-Vous, Brussels organized by LambdaLambdaLambda, 2020.
Photo credit: Isabelle Arthuis. Courtesy of the artist and LambdaLambdaLambda, Prishtina / La Maison de Rendez-Vous, Brussels.



Can you tell me more about your program here? Do you tailor it to Brussels, in a way?

For our exhibitions here, we always take the context into consideration and think about what would make sense in Brussels. The inaugural show was a group exhibition we organized together, drawing on our respective programs. Since then, we take turns, and we'll also be doing another collaborative group show in October. There are our individual projects, but also this umbrella, La Maison, and it will be interesting to see what it can become on its own. Maybe one day La Maison will eat all of us up. We are all linked through our curatorial programs. Maybe you could call it experimental - it's definitely not very market-driven. It's all very much about exhibition-making. Most importantly, we want to be part of the scene. It's not only about making shows from time to time. We want to contribute something.

It's not exactly common for four galleries to start a project together...

It's the future. It's already going in that direction. Younger galleries in particular are open to that. Older galleries were very closed and competitive, but the culture is changing. Today, most people understand that it's beneficial to work together instead of working against each other. There have been a few other precedents such as Roberta in Los Angeles, which was shared by five galleries. One thing that makes this project really worth it is that we share the expenses. We pay for our own productions but everything else, such as rent, paint, our assistant, or the gallery weekend, is shared. It makes it more feasible. The possibilities multiply for each of us; the benefits are numerous. And there's this little community that we built - we're constantly in contact, discussing our respective programs and things in general.

Let me guess, you have a WhatsApp group?

We do! We talk almost daily. This job can get very solitary sometimes. And if you're going through a rough time as a gallery and you're all by yourself, that's tough. It's great. This is one of the most immediate and palpable benefits of this collaboration. The others are a bit harder to gauge. We meet collectors, curators, and artists, who discover what we do, and maybe institutional shows will come of that.

Does the pandemic complicate an international endeavor like La Maison?

The travel restrictions have had a negative effect of course, meaning not all of us can come to Brussels anymore for the openings. But our collaborative approach makes up for that. It also helps that Isabella and one joint staff member are working from Brussels permanently. It doesn't change that this is a concept for the future, maybe even more so. Considering recent reports on a possible crash of the art market, joining forces seems more important than ever.

Now that you know the city a little better, what makes Brussels stand out?

The biggest difference here is that people don't seem so stuck on everyone's role. They're not territorial and it doesn't matter who has been here for longer. This struck us the most, how relaxed people are about that. In other places, if you enter a setup, there would be closed doors everywhere. They'd be afraid of what this is. If we opened La Maison in Mexico, people would feel threatened. It wouldn't work. There is something incredibly open and welcoming about Brussels.

Victoria Colmegna and Rinella Alfonso,
Park View/Paul Soto
La Maison de Rendez-Vous,
Avenue Jef Lambeaux 23, 1060 Brussels
November 18 - January 9
lamaisonderendezvous.com

Gabriel Kuri

Conceptual sculptor Gabriel Kuri often works with found and repurposed materials whose function, physical properties, and social and economic reverberations he explores. Born in Mexico, he returned to his native country after his studies at London's prestigious Goldsmiths university, before moving to Brussels in 2003. He's been living and working there ever since, apart from a three-year stint in Los Angeles. Kuri is represented by Sadie Coles HQ in London, Esther Schipper in Berlin, kurimanzutto in Mexico City, and Franco Noero in Turin.

Interview by Sarah Schug
Photographer Mireille Roobaert

L'OFFICIEL ART: How did you get the idea to move to Brussels?

GABRIEL KURI: When my career started to take off internationally, my wife and I thought it'd be a good idea to have a base in Europe. I had already visited Belgium a couple of times, and it had always been a place that attracted me. It seemed like a place where it would be possible to reinvent myself - and today I'm still here. I live with a certain lightness on my feet here, which I quite like. I think Brussels is a place that allows you to live on your own terms. It doesn't have a monolithic culture that strongly imposes a certain behavior. And people are quite gentle; they're always willing to speak your language, for example. There's a certain chaos that I like as well.

When you arrived in Brussels, Wiels didn't even exist yet. Has a lot changed?

Yes, definitely. It's much more international now. The area that has evolved the most is the commercial gallery scene. The increase of good quality galleries over the last 10 years is quite amazing. But of course, even before that, Brussels had everything it needed already. It has its place in art history and a lot of cultural baggage, which allowed the art scene to develop in an interesting and complex way. It's not a place like Miami where there's next to nothing, but then rich people arrive and open their foundations and Art Basel comes, and then some kind of strange art scene emerges, but only one month a year, during the fair, and it may not even be remembered 10 years from now.

Do you see the changes as a positive thing?

I live here in Saint-Gilles, five minutes away from my studio. The other day I had a flyer in my mailbox about the gentrification of the neighborhood. Yes, there have been changes, but do we have to call it gentrification? Is there anything wrong with a gallery or a very nice cheese shop opening in your street? It's not comparable to London, where there has been speculation and aggressive foreign investment. What's happening in Brussels is gentle and visible and I think a lot of it is coming from the citizens themselves. It's changing, growing, getting more lively, certain things fall into place, and that's all positive. People are curious about Brussels now. Some don't

GABRIEL KURI:
"BRUSSELS HAS ITS PLACE
IN ART HISTORY AND A LOT
OF CULTURAL BAGGAGE, WHICH
ALLOWED THE ART SCENE TO
DEVELOP IN AN INTERESTING
AND COMPLEX WAY!"



Kuri's studio in Brussels' Saint-Gilles neighborhood.

understand its charm, because it's not that evident. It's not a city with a lot of tourist appeal. The Belgian modesty keeps everything very low-key.

Why did you choose Brussels over London, for example?

London will always remain a vital part of me, but that doesn't mean I'm up for paying the huge human cost it takes to survive in a place like that. It's not just that the cost of living is cheaper here. I also don't like this rat race, which creates a certain culture and patterns and attitudes shaping the aspirations and behaviors of people. I remember, a year or two after I graduated from Goldsmiths, there was this feeling around that just surviving was already an accomplishment. I thought there had to be more than that. Living in London is very, very tough. And it's only become tougher, which is why a lot of artists have left and never returned. And that's a pity.

Do you feel like moving here has unlocked a lot of possibilities for you?

I've been living in Brussels for a long time now, but I'm perceived as an international artist, not a Belgian one. Moving here has definitely unlocked possibilities for me here in Europe, but I also ask myself if I'm not missing out on certain things by not being in Mexico. For example, when the Latin American Committee of the Tate goes to Mexico to do studio visits, I'm not there. But it does make more sense for me to be here: When I finish a piece, and I'm excited about it, I can call Sadie or Esther and the morning after a transporter will come and the next evening the work will already be at the gallery. It would take so much longer from Mexico and be much more costly. Plus, I can just take the train and go to meetings and be back the next day. Brussels is perfect for moving around Europe.

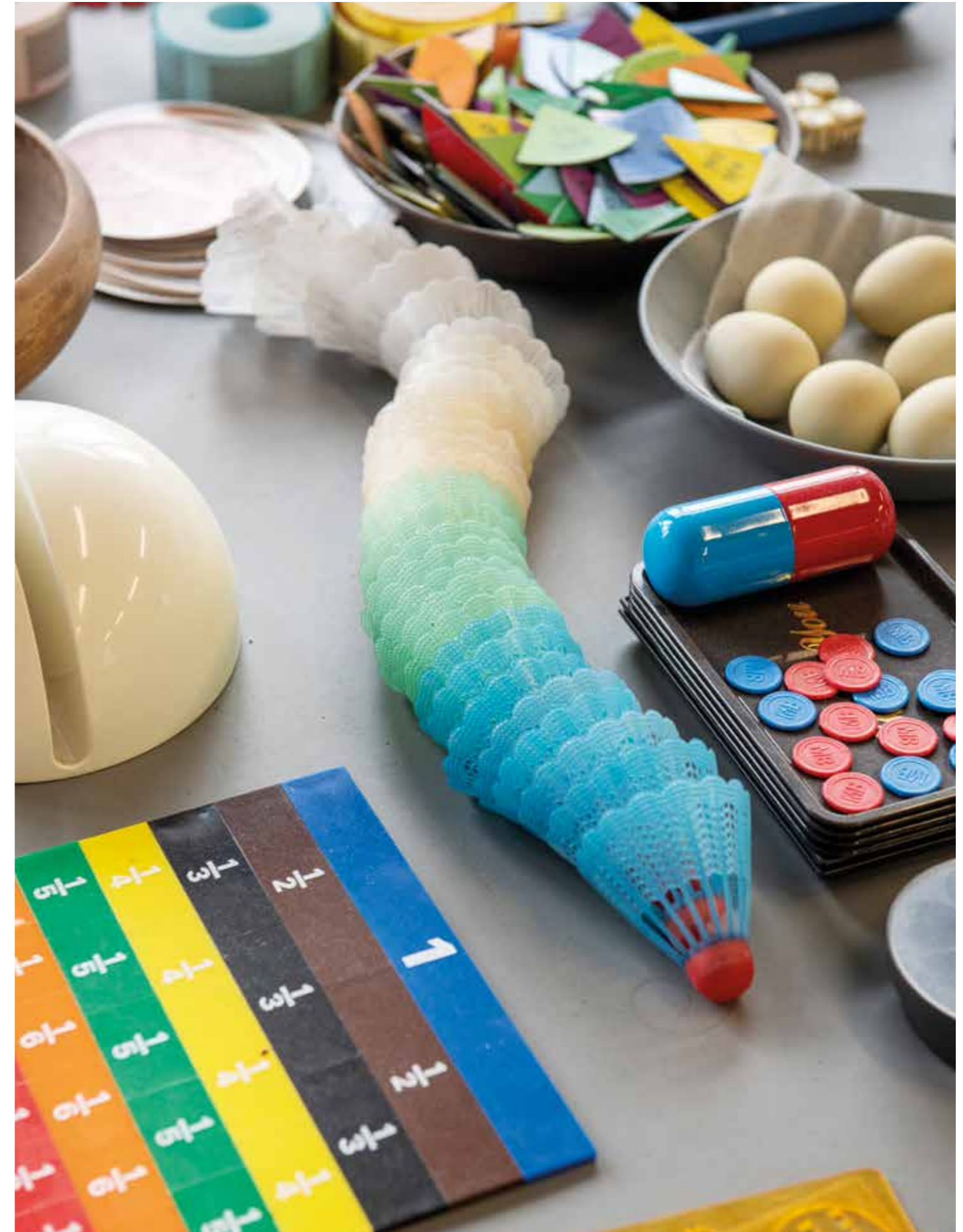
You left for Los Angeles for a couple of years. How does it compare, and what made you come back?

I wanted a change of air and I've always liked LA. After three years, I'd had enough. I find it more real here, more truthful. It's not as

utilitarian and a little more human. The art scene in LA is very different. The biggest difference is probably all the high-end art schools there. The main figures of the scene, its leading voices, have all been teachers, such as Baldessari for example. This is the only thing Brussels lacks. People will hate me for saying that, but it's not a place that attracts foreign artists of a certain stature to teach, for quite obvious reasons: The pay here is very low in comparison.

Is your practice influenced by your surroundings?

Of course. I noticed that in Brussels, the material vein of my work has developed more strongly. I'm a little bit on the margin of the flow of information, and then I pay more attention to material. Brussels is quite a rich city when it comes to that, and the regulations aren't that harsh. You can easily stumble on a construction site where many different materials are exposed... All that, it talks to me. I'm a maker and form and material is a very important part of my discourse.



Kuri's studio in Brussels' Saint-Gilles neighborhood.