

INTERVIEW

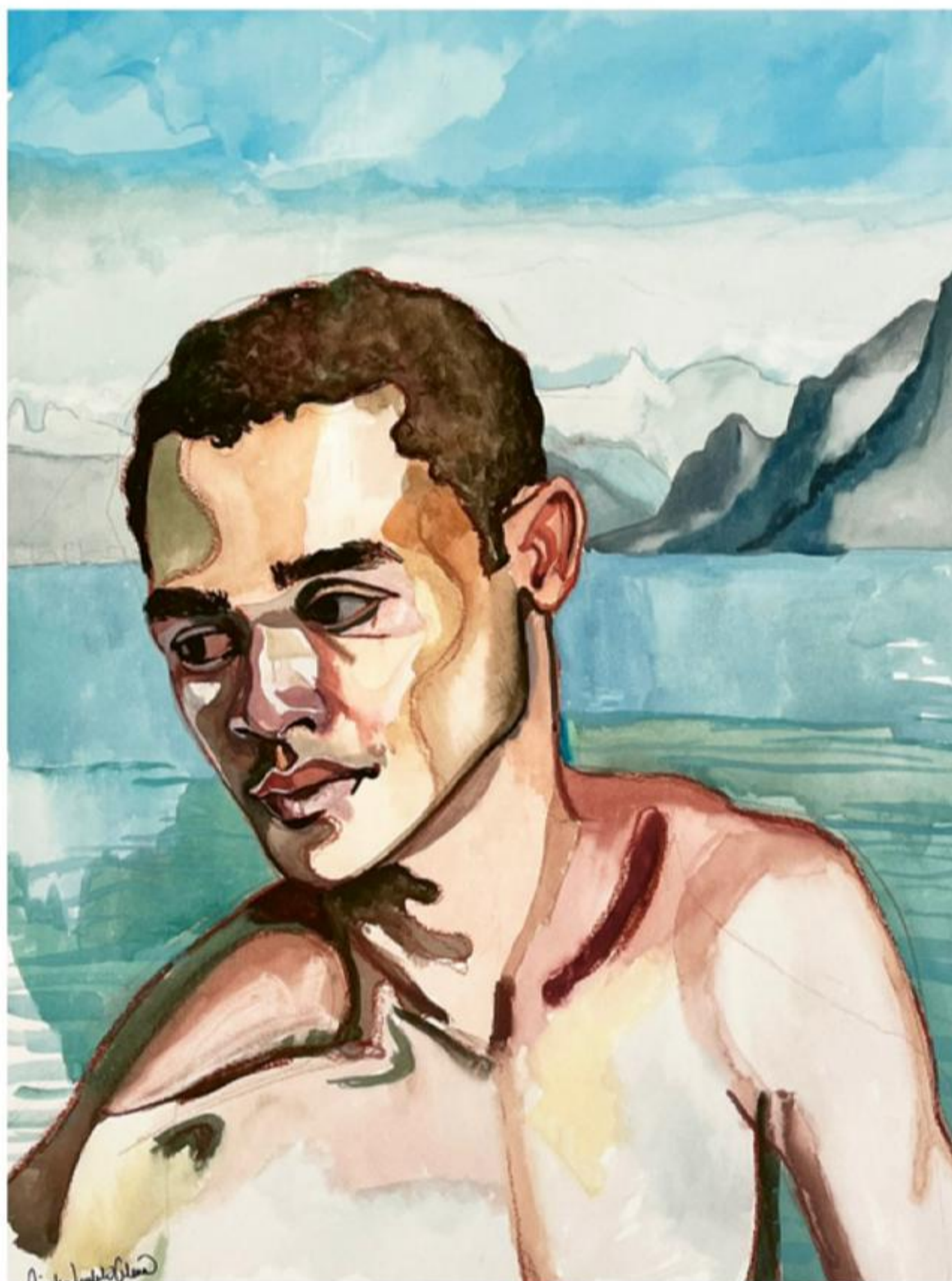
“I VIEW THE LAKE AS AN OBJECT OF CONTEMPLATION”

American painter Nicolas Lambelet Coleman has roots in Lausanne from his mother’s side. Here, he talks to us about his view of the Lake Geneva landscape and his own “Swissness”.

Born to university professors, Nicolas Lambelet Coleman studied political science and visual arts. Driven by his passion for the arts – which came from his grandmother, a Vaud native who emigrated to the United States to pursue a career as a dress maker and textile artist – he chose to devote himself entirely to painting. Miami, London, Paris, Lausanne – the North Carolina-born painter has attracted audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. In his collection of watercolours, *Clear Blue*, he depicts his summers spent by the water, exhibiting an atmosphere that is both peaceful and joyous.

Water is omnipresent in your work. What does it symbolise for you?

I think of water in different ways, and I think that’s reflected in my paintings. This multiplicity allows me to project myself to the places that have shaped my life. In *Diving into Oregonian Waters*, a self-portrait on the shore of a small lake in the United States featuring a harmony of blue and green ripples on the surface, I see water as a space for relaxation. It’s almost an



Self-portrait *Le Vaudois* by Nicolas Lambelet Coleman.

invitation to swim. In the self-portrait *Le Vaudois*, I depict Lake Geneva as a smooth surface, and I’m sitting away from it. Water becomes an object of contemplation, its immensity almost intimidating.

I also wanted to pay tribute to the wide range of tones that the lake offers us, depending on its movement and the amount of sunlight. In *La Vaudoise*, a portrait of my mother, I portray the lake in much brighter shades.

You have mentioned Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso as two of your main influences. Are there any Swiss painters who inspire you?

Definitely! Ferdinand Hodler is one of my favourite painters. Several of his works at the Cantonal Museum of Fine Arts in Lausanne are breathtakingly beautiful. A great figure of the avant-garde movement, Alice Bailly (*her former painting studio in Lausanne is now home to a foundation named after her – ed.*) has also been a source of inspiration for me. In terms of contemporary painters, I'd also mention the Lausanne native Nicolas Party (*see his interview in Lausanner 08*).

Ferdinand Hodler was very inspired by the Swiss landscape and its lakes, which he clearly loved for their grandiose yet welcoming quality. Is this also the impression you get from the landscape seen from Lausanne?

Yes, I think that the Swiss landscapes painted by Hodler convey an impression of divinity and of the power of the terrain over man. This symbolism quite

clearly reflects the way in which the Swiss view the nature that surrounds them. In North Carolina, where I spent most of my life, the landscape is often perceived as a thing that humans are meant to tame and dominate. In Switzerland, nature is the backdrop against which humans try to carve out a place for themselves, but their presence is secondary.

You are very proud of your plural identity. How would you describe your feeling of belonging to Lausanne?

I was born in the United States, to an African-American father and a Swiss mother. Personally, I developed a strong bond with my mother's home region as we still have family there and we visit regularly. But my sense of belonging often comes up against a more subtle reality when I'm in Switzerland. I feel at home in Lausanne. I know my way around, and I can communicate well enough in French. However, I feel there's a divide between the way I see myself as Swiss and the way the Swiss see me, i.e.,

as an outsider not native to the region. I'm not saying that with any bitterness. I accept my "Swissness" for what it is, in other words, one part of my identity, but not the only one.

Your painting *The Patriot* is very much about Swiss identity. In it, you painted yourself enjoying a fondue with white wine. Do you agree that it's a bit cliché?

Yes, the painting is almost a satire. I depict myself to reflect the image that everyone has of Switzerland, at least those who only know the stereotypical façade. Eating a fondue and sipping white wine, wearing a striped shirt, might be the most trivial way of claiming to be Swiss, so much so that anyone can do it. By using this blatant cliché, I'm sort of acknowledging that my Swiss identity is only partial. But it's also a nod to a culinary tradition that my mother introduced me to at a very young age and that I've always loved.

NICOLAS' TOP SPOTS

 **Foreign Agent art gallery**
Avenue d'Ouchy 64,
Lausanne

"I was lucky enough to exhibit my work there between November 2023 and January 2024. Apart from that, I appreciate their rich and varied programme, not only very deeply rooted in Lausanne but also open to the rest of the world."

 **Cantonal Museum of Fine Arts (MCBA)**
Place de la Gare 16,
Lausanne

"I admit, I only visited it recently, but the collection is fantastic. You can find works by local artists that are absolutely amazing."

 **Le Deck Restaurant**
Route de la Corniche 4,
Puidoux

"It has one of the most spectacular panoramic views I know of. It's got everything: Lake Geneva, the Alps, Lavaux vineyards. On top of that, it's a great place to have a drink or go to eat."