# MESH AND GESTURE

## Painting doubt

Jérôme Boutterin has his doubts about painting. He is dubious about its ability to engage with and transmit the real, about its will to overcome its inherent inwardness, and to deal with the outside world. This dubiousness -or literally, two-mindedness (the Latin *dubitare* derives from double) - means the artist's every assertion is immediately challenged by a declaimer. This double-take on reality - the most if not the only coherent epistemological attitude available to the contemporary painter - plays itself out in formal termes in his painting, which typically confront and only partially fuse the two principal pictorial codes of contemporary abstraction: geometrism and gesturalism.

Painting nevertheless remains Jérôme Boutterin's medium of doubt. He repudiates the formalistic smugness which, he feels has become the retreat of much abstract painting today. As he puts it, "painting broke loose from our reality only to anchor itself in its own history and practice...". Yet for Boutterin; it still makes sense to envisage a type of "painting preoccupied with its form and its execution, in which this preoccupation rejoins our own positions with regard to reality." Here, the artist provides us with key to his practice: rather than visually representing our reality, his painting provides a sort of informal analogy to our relations to the world. In distilled pictorial form - his work is informed by the same quandaries, and riddled by the same doubts, and juggles with the same balances and imbalances as those which condition our inner experience of exterior reality.

## Closing in on the canvas

Instead of the navigating a course between pure gesture and pure geometry - the Scylla and Charybdis of contemporary painting - Boutterin successively braves them both in each work. Typically his paintings are done in two phases: he begins by "rationalising" the pictorial space by roughly covering the full surface of the canvas with a brightly coloured grid, made up of a hundred or so vertical stripes, crosshatched by sixty or so horizontal stripes of similar width, thus making this allover gridwork the matrix for his painterly inquiry. And because he lays down his stipes methodically, first using the edges of the canvas as a guide, and progressively closing in on the virginity of the canves at the center, the viewer is able to identify the structure's temporality: the last stripe is the one in the middle, covered by none of the others, whereas those along the edges and can only be seen beneath all those perpendicular to it. The grids themselves can be thought of as traps, set to capture the outburst of expressivity which the artist, with almost

insolent audacity, will subsequently loose on the canvas, partially covering it with broad smears and a maelstrom of colours, leaving the bristle marks of his brush visible on the rudimentary "figures" which emerge.

## Disciplinning the real.

Grids have always played a role in the history of painting, and the quest for the pure grid was one of the driving forces behind modern abstract painting (Mondrian and Ellsworth Kelly spring to mind). As Rosalind Krauss argues, the grid is one of the distinctive features of twentieth-century art. "*There are two ways in which the grid functions to declare the modernity of modern art. One is spatial; the other is temporal. In the spatial sense, the grid states the absolute anchoring of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is anti-natural, anti-mimetic, anti-real. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature... In the temporal dimensions, the grid is an emblem of modernity by being just that: the form that is ubiquitous in art of our century.*"

And not just art, one might add. Though grids are essentially human marks, orthogonals of the mind's rational mapping schemes, they are at odds with the unruly organics of the human life process. What we see, how we move is framed by grids, meshwork and the like which we have learned to abstract from our fields of vision: to see *properly* is not to notice them, though they hold both our gaze and our gestures captive.

## The onslaught of colour

No sooner is the "kinder, gentler" grid in Boutterin's workset out, than its very relative uniformity is subjected to a riotous onslaught of colour, as though the grid were an ideal plan, upon which the artsit then allowed organic reality to unfurl, the paths of paint polluting, or better *diluting* the framework, blending with it to form a new whole, at once ordered and fluid. An arrested chaos, like the life process itself.

## Informal mapping

Boutterin's most recent, largformat work is based on a similar confrontation between a background, loosely skeched out in soft pencil, and the paint which the artist subsequently applies in the foreground, which corrupts and smudges the pencil marks.

The studiously slipshod doodles extend to allparts of the paper surface, forming clusters in some places, spreading out in others- giving the impression of some sort of informal map over which the eye can wander, its trajectory inadvertently engendering a narrative.

The highly diluted, brightly coloured oils the artist applies on top follow similarly informal paths, both bleeding the pencils lines and holding them steadfastly in the background.

# The formal entrapment of event

Boutterin does each painting from start to finish in a single day, though the work surely begins ripening inside him well beforehand.

Like a spring subjected to ever-increasing pressure, the second phase of the operation builds up during the first. When the tension level is just right, the painter, heedless of details, assails the diligently grid-covered canvas with a violent flurry of brushstrokes. Far from attesting to some eleventh-hour certitude, this celerity is itself doubt-ridden, necessitated by the experience it seeks to register.

For the painter's task is to capture event though form, to snare the gesture in the meshwork, in order to modify one by the other and produce a new whole. The negative relationship between form and event was well expressed by the Situationist who characterised form itself as resistance to event. Between structure *and* event, form *and* movement, mesh *and* gesture, Jerome Boutterin remains dubious, refusing to subordinate either of these two opposing and yet inseparable terms of his compositions to the other, as if it were their adjunction alone which mattered-expressed by that three-letter copula *and*...

Stephen Wright, may 2000.
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