

THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF JÉRÔME BOUTTERIN'S PAINTINGS

Almost all paintings are spatial in one way or another.

- Donald Judd, *Specific objects*, 1964.

The paintings of Jérôme Bouutterin exude a lightness that disconcerts the viewer. Fascinating, playfully proliferous and meandering rhizomes, incidentally diverging gestures and dapples, gossamer lineaments and compact surfaces. Paintings that apparently evolve in passing, that seemingly paint themselves. A lightness that for all its casualness – and here lies the moment of inherent perplexity – is nonetheless saturated with knowledge and (art) history, with tradition and the legacy of Modernism.

The issue at hand remains, as before, the dynamics of color between the figure and its ground – the pictorial sphere as the central painting imponderability. That moment in which the painted surface opens or closes itself, that moment in which the color becomes diaphanous or the eye binds within the surface. Time and time again, that specific painterly position that continually evades a definitive description is surveyed anew. The paintings of Jérôme Bouutterin have, not just has of late but rather throughout the last years, played, with new stringency and insistence, with one of the most exciting and fundamental questions of modernist painting ever: how does the sphere of painting permit you to describe and subsume when pictures have lost their classic spatiality in terms of reflection of reality?

For (and with) Donald Judd, things were clearly decided – at least provisionally. The Minimalist, has the innovator of the "specifics objects" that was consequent in the aspiration to leave spatial illusion behind, found but little painting has even noteworthy. The Iconoclasts, although intertwined within the tapestry of Modernist painting, were consequent in their desideration to drive the spatial from art, albeit only to finally abandon two-dimensional planarity in the next step. Judd called for the age of "real space" and the "three-dimensional object" that sought to be neither fish nor fowl, neither sculpture nor painting, but that should still unite within itself the best of both genera. However, this new (authentic, real) space postulated by these objects turned out to be no less illusionistic and sensual than – and just as deeply and multifariously oscillatory between perception and reality as – the space of painting.

That which resulted from these varied and sweeping positional changes between art and its space is, if nothing else, and apparently self-confident viewer that mediates in a totally new manner between art (be it an installation, object or even painting) and its diverse spatial possibilities. Thus, when we enquire after the specific spatiality innate to the work of Jérôme Bouutterin – the play in his paintings between surface and space, between figure and ground – this viewer, with his (or her) way to relating to images and their space, cannot be left out. On the contrary, the actively seeking eye of the viewer becomes the central authority if we desire to decipher this subtle inter-diverging painting that, for all its planarity and casualness, enables immensely sensual and complex color spaces to arise within Bouutterin's pictures.

The painter Jérôme Bouetterin is wary of painting but, nonetheless, in no way does he desire to leave it be. He alludes to the heroic abstraction, the spontaneous and immediate gesture, the potency of the infinite "overall" – and presents it all as a refraction, a simulation, a quest for meaning of an autonomous painting situated between abstraction and new found reality. The construction of the picture is delegated; it becomes a process that is first completed in the dialogue with the viewer.

The unrestrained momentum of his painting is bridled only with difficulty through the intelligence with which he dissects the foundations of his work. At the end of an examination into the potentialities of abstract painting that has persisted for both generations and decades, nothing is new or self-evident anymore. But the elements can be found, as in the case of Jérôme Bouetterin, with sovereign ease and almost in passing, assembled anew in a fresh, surprising entirety.

His paintings, the Mailles ("meshes") as well as the Monochromes, astound through the provocative simplicity of the condensation, which disingenuously mutates into confusingly sensual formulations. The systematic of the grid causes the tachist areas to become moments of vitiation: the supposed immediacy of gesture is duplicated as concentrated acts of composition. All that occurs within these paintings occurs thanks to a perfect equilibrium between chance and calculi.

Within the pictorial universe of Bouetterin, color exists primarily as pure, unmixed subsidence. At the moment of the application of color, when the paintbrush touches the canvas,

when the painting process has entered its decisive phase, every gesture that quantifies the dimensions of the picture is distinct: perhaps carmin red, Paris blue, ultra marine, Naples yellow or rubis red. In any case, clear and pure. Then, during the course of an only partially controllable painting process in which the picture is roughly structured upon his Mailles, the painting picks up speed : the lattice that gives both Bouetterin's paintings as well as Modernism as a whole its stability, this modernist "grid", is emphatically adulterated and has but little still to do with the elegance and purism of Modernism. And yet, it is exactly here that it is most apparent just how much the foundations and theorems of modern art enable Bouetterin's lightness to first flourish.

The increasingly condensing scaffolding of the color denies that traditional purity and stringency: the serially inter-crossing lines contaminate one another in that they, during the painting process, accumulate all that which is painted atop and below them. A self-generating painting that connotes in equal measure the statics and process, the structure and creation, and that begets color-saturated excrescences as its intersection point-apparently spontaneous gestures, the expression of an immediate inscription of the painter in his picture. That which emerges is a picture puzzle of gesture and structuralism from the École de Paris and New-York School. However, due to the extent with which the purism is defiled and the grid is blurred, the gesture, the "tache" of the informal, loses spontaneity. Bouetterin himself speaks of "conscious improvisation" or indirect (that is, controlled) reaction to the facts of the underlying grid system. The picture is the result of superimpositions and coincidences of quasi-spontaneous reaction of the introduced (color) agents. Bouetterin has

developed a system of painting in which automatism and metaphysics comingle with reflection and structure.

A de-familiarization and maculation of the painting and its chromaticity that evolves further with each new color tone placed upon the still wet base coating. Color is painted over, partially or wholly concealed, remains translucent, intermixes, transcends edges, forms streaks, becomes denser and reopens again. A fascinating, painterly process during which the picture gains both density and potency. The « monochromes », spissated and color heavy but nonetheless virtually monochromatic, particularly and trenchantly demonstrate this central concept of Boutterin's work. His paintings, which have never tended towards the formal monochromic, nonetheless advance to their coloristic fringe. These paintings scintillate with a minimally nuanced palette that, at the edges of determinability, rodomontades vigorously. The « monochromes » avail themselves indeed to only one single unadulterated color, but what they depict is anything but a homogeneous, monochromatic surface: The apparently intact composition reveals itself as a labyrinthine inter-related reticulation of fragmentary abbreviations – a *horror vacui* of painting, a bulging depository ready to burst – in which the individual gestures are lost within the overall. In a calculated and simultaneously in itself intoxicating process, gesture is set upon gesture, and the juxtaposition of the seemingly directionless experimentation of disparate brushwork, rocaille and lines, surfaces and hachure, metamorphoses into a prodigiously dynamic celebration of the putatively pure color and contaminates – or, better, its mutability in application and handling. The color discloses all its factitious sensuality, confidently inflecting its palette of possibilities.

The monochrome is altogether the success story of the past century: Since the Russian avant-garde formulated the monochrome as the extreme and synchronously ultimate consequence of abstraction, reference-free, abstract color has become an integral aspect of the art discourse of the 20th century. The question regarding the end and consequences of that concept of abstraction which, rooted in the 19th century, turned away from realistic representation and towards an ideational pictorial conception, was initially confronted with Kazimir Malevich's Black Square (1915) or Alexander Rodchenko's monochrome triptych (1921).

It is a question that has been subsequently confronted again and again with amazing insistence, only to promptly be posed anew.

In the context of Boutterin's painting, the Color Field paintings of the American art of the forties and fifties are of lesser interest – not the Black Paintings of Ad Reinhardt, the Monochromes of Yves Klein, or the monochrome polyptychs of Ellsworth Kelly. They must all be taken equally into account, for they, in conjunction with the initial quotes regarding Minimal Art, deliver the theoretical and formal foundations of the uninterrupted presence of the monochrome that has continued up into our present – and, in that case, perhaps not all that post-modern – day: For, as Yve-Alain Bois observed shortly before the end of the 20th century, « Nothing in Modernism proclaims autonomy more programmatically than the monochrome painting »*. An insightful postulation, in view of the « monochromes » of Jérôme Boutterin, which still manifests itself up to our immediate present: Even after the persistently established end of Modernism (and painting in particularly), the monochrome, in a myriad of materials and

painterly variations, is a highly enlightening aspect of contemporary art production, both now at the beginning of the 21st century as it was at the end of the 20th century.

Monochrome as the quintessence of Modernism or, hence, its pictorial essence. The fascinating question that remains, therefore, is how do they behave, how do the two critical parameters in the Modernist discourse – the viewer and the (pictorial) space – respond to the complex, inter-meandering subsidences of Boutterin? The rich, self-assured gestures and lines, surfaces and blotches, collide unchecked against each other and unfurl a painterly vehemence that activates the viewer in a sui generis manner: precarious picture puzzles of retraction and abundance, of lightness and complexity, that celebrate one thing above all; They remain fragments, parts of a whole that proudly presents its fragility. The wholeness, unity, idea, even possibility of an authorial overall is consistently negated.

Jérôme Boutterin's painting is just like its era, Modern: Discontinuous, fragmentary and discursive. The realities, visual worlds, compositions that constitute it are incomplete without the viewer. The pictorial space of the paintings that open to the viewer within the reality of the Modern shift back anew into the picture, taking the viewer along as an equal counterpart.

Here, the active, dynamic viewer of Judd and Minimal Art are an aspect of the picture: the viewer defragments the composition and, from the painting components, constructs a coherently whole image that is always couched within the picture – without ever having been formulated. The painter takes a sovereign step back and leaves the completion of the

picture to the reading of the viewer, who can freely navigate the picture. From the plethora of possibilities and choices, from the ultimately un-assessable surplus supply found in this painterly depository, a new, previously unseen painting emerges with each glance, with each reading.

*Yves-Alain Bois, "Descriptions, situations, échos", dans *Richard Serra*, Zeichnungen, Bern 1990, p.33.

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