

Before Language

Interview with Jérôme Boutterin by Cao Dan

Cao Dan: In your exhibition at the Ningbo museum, you spoke about a language that does not exist. Would painting for you be this expression that is above language?

Jérôme Boutterin: Yes, an expression before language. I spoke about language, because I am looking for something similar to an energy before one's speech or statement. I think that it's a moment of desire and of frustration at the same time. Therefore, there is somewhat of a restraint in their gesture, where their actions are not yet complete.

CD: Are you an abstract painter?

JB: I am an abstract painter, but my so-called abstraction does not oppose reality. It's not metaphysical. I prefer that people smile when they see my work. If I remain abstract, it is my way of being concerned about the elements of painting, just like the grammar of a language, which I see as a foundation. When I think of the history of Chinese painting, I also see a link to writing and syntax, which echoes abstract painting in France.

CD: If you could choose your teachers, who would they be? Dr. Martin Engler in his beautiful text of your exhibition's catalogue in Stadel museum speaks about mentorship including Yves Klein and Ellsworth Kelly. What would your genealogy be?

JB: My teachers are numerous, ranging from the eighteenth century artists like Fragonard, with his particular attention to the manner in which we place the paint. And also Watteau, after that, closer to us in time are artists like Gasiorowski and Guston, they were brave to go into unknown places. I think these people that I admire are the ones who are willing to fight and put themselves in danger in their work. That is to say, they are free. This, is what I hope for myself. My forefathers would be them.

CD: You also spoke to me about these painters who touch and feel the canvas-board. Could you please elaborate?

JB: 'Touch' is a term which is regularly used for painters, however, I think it becomes a beautiful expression for how one comes in contact with the canvas. It's like a thought that takes up its place on it. I think this is fundamental for me, to try to re-establish this with a story, and to take it over, to find afresh a new way, where the body would be involved with the placement of things. Restraint, for example, one senses that there are artists that hold back, who have a kind of modesty. Corot, for example, I like Corot's paintings a lot, they are incredibly subtle. He inverts things, the foreground is lighter than the background—it's almost nothing. I think that in traditional Chinese paintings, there are magnificent examples of this restraint.

CD: Let's talk about the relationship with time in your work. In 2011, in Valence at a conference, you brought up the authority that the artist gives himself with respect to time, of the necessity there is to accept a path, a way that one did not expect. Is this for you, the expression of your liberty as an artist ?

JB: I think that one finds adjustments to one's own constraints. There are people who have taught me, there are pieces of artworks that I have seen, and I paint with phantoms. I do not know if I am free. I dance with them—it's a fact. What I wanted to say in Valence, is that, for example, with respect to the recent paintings that I showed in Ningbo, this ensemble that I call "A lot of little, little of a lot," is already contained in a canvas done fifteen years ago and abandoned after that. In fact, I think that one needs to give oneself the go ahead to do. Authorisation, is a curious term but I cannot find a better alternative. One allows oneself a divergence. One negotiates with time because there comes a moment, when one has the means to continue these paintings. The creations that I will do in ten or fifteen years, some of them are already in my studio but these are, today, perhaps a failure for me.

CD: In this same conference, you spoke of your work belonging to different 'families', could you please explain?

JB: In fact, I have the impression of functioning more by family than by series. This is because, by series one would want to say that there exists a variation, painting after painting. I hope that each of my paintings is independent and autonomous, and that they do not need one another. However, there is a family, that at a given

moment, holds them together, it's a kind of pre-occupation that is common to them. There is an intuition that has been processed and that becomes a conviction. There are paintings that start and go on to the end of the process, and then bounce back in another family, that often become the inverted family. For example, in the monochromes and the "a lot of a little and a little of a lot", I have the impression, first of a notion of expansion, followed by an effect of compression. I think that these paintings are going towards the same direction, but I use different methods and different systems.

CD: Can one say that you evolve in a persistent dialogue between order and disorder?

JB: Without doubt, I'm trying to be less anxious about disorder, and let disorder be as autonomous as order. One should not dichotomise the two and should be open to disorder.

CD: It is also interesting to see how you at a certain time abandoned the design, because as you say, "the backgrounds themselves are self sufficient".

JB: It always raises questions and doubts to place something before the background, that is to say, to install a subject. My subject is produced by the background. There is not a motif and there is not a background, there is a permanent back and forth between what produces the motif and the place where it comes from.

CD: Your work will soon be displayed in China. How do you think it will resonate with the Chinese audience?

JB: I am very happy because people talk about this resonance with me often and this exhibition will be the occasion to be in this reality, and to measure the resonance. I have only been to Beijing once and I have a remote vision in this regard at the moment. I do not speak the Chinese language, and so I am going to read the resonance on the faces, see if the visitors stay in front of my paintings, if they smile and if the paintings speak to them. One can sense this very quickly in exhibitions, when the people develop a feeling for a painting. This resonance is also made with my attention to the history of Chinese paintings and about the exhibition, the fact that it is not seen all the time. There is a temporality that I wish to understand. This painting travels inside itself also, like cinema with long scenes. The motifs move following the movement, and contemporary Chinese painting seems to me also to have this relationship with movement.

CD: Is that why you wish to travel in the mountains of China?

JB: It's at first a myth. Compared to the western mountains, the Chinese mountains have something inverted. In the mist, we are above the sky.

Cao Dan is the executive publisher of LEAP magazine and The Art Newspaper China. She has organized numerous art events, exhibitions and forums, and is the co-founder of "The Art Newspaper China Asia Prize" that has taken place in 2014 and 2015, and of the LEAP Pavilion exhibition series.