

The Frolicking of the Painting

Conversation with Antoine Duchenet

Antoine Duchenet – While preparing the interview, I reread this annotation about the gesture in your painting: "Your hand plays around, careful not to slip into the exploit or the quotation". This simple gesture, neither stubborn nor determined, is light-hearted. It is not afraid to be indecisive. A decisive indecisiveness, which combines your distrust of the history of painting and its heavy conscience, with all the interest you show in it despite your detachment. You revel in it as much as you take it off your hands. *Decisive*, because I still believe that this joyful scepticism, from one touch to another, *wavers* through your series towards this recurrent polarity that you call "the internal debate of the painting". Can you say a few words about the itinerary of this gesture, about its forms and its role in your paintings?

Jérôme Bouterin – The gesture in painting has consequences for colour and form. To take the path of nonchalance is to try to escape from reasons that are too obvious, from mechanisms or expectations. It is to give the gesture a latitude, a space of its own to try to open up other paths. To find a space for it, a free moment. There is nothing more difficult. Why is it so? Because the gesture is itself imbued with multiple atavisms: to make it beautiful, to make it true, to make it nervous, to make it like... to make it as it should be.

But the gesture also thinks, one could even say that it thinks in spite of itself. We think it is free, but it is not, so we have to develop strategies to give it scope. On the contrary, I feel that the gesture is highly educated, imbued with historical, stylistic, and political layers. Its role interests me precisely in the way it negotiates with its memories, in the way it takes back the field or the margin in relation to its stories, and even in the way it plays with them, because the gesture is a player. This is also one of its qualities. What interests me is its wavering between skill and clumsiness, between what is definitive and provisional. For my part, I work better in this murkier zone, more relaxed and uncertain.

First of all, I physically need the gesture, with the necessity to connect the body to the painting and the picture. It is always present, as a beginning or as an end. Rubens, Fragonard, Dufy, Masson, Hartung, Degottex, Gorki and many others are in my memory. I cannot get enough of these dancing gestures. They touch, as they say in fencing, they graze, prick, point and pierce. They are light but serious.

The ambiguity of the gesture may stem from its link with the notion of expression, understood as carrying an intrinsic authenticity. I lived in an era when it was blacklisted, a stigma of lyricism, of the signature, of self-expression and of the omnipotent author. So, I became attached to it, probably out of a desire to be precisely where it was uncomfortable.

The *Mailles* was the space for its sudden entrance. The *Monochromes* saw it scatter itself, voluntarily, in painting machines. The *BPPB* showed its launch and dispersal, while the more recent *NEP* have tried to bring it back to its prefigurative function. But all these series, these phases, can be perceived from one to the other as breaths, which is, by the way, essential to the gesture. They are only moments of compression and dispersion, or inhaling and exhaling. All these proposals often come from a duality, mesh and stains, traces and colour, masses and lines. What I call the internal debate of the painting, a discussion between its very components.

A. D. – The titles of your series build a first bridge between your painting and language. They are acronyms: *BPPB*, *NEP*; initials: *K*, *DD*, *PH*; or more common words such as *Monochromes*, *Jours*, *Mailles*... Is there a logic between them?

J. B. – No, there is no logic. The term "series" itself is a bit static and doesn't really suit me. Catherine Mosbach talks about "phases" and I find that interesting. As for their names, they are specific to each ensemble. Some are the initials of the materials of the painting, or of a term or a set of terms: *PH* for "Plomb Huile" [Lead and Oil], *K* for "Kevin", *HAW* for half of "Hawaii", *BPPB* for "Beaucoup de Peu, Peu de Beaucoup" [Much of Little, Little of Much], *DD* for "doigts dessins" [Finger Drawings], *NEP* for "Nouvelles Épuisées" [New Exhausted]. Finally, the rest are words: *Mailles* [Meshes], *Ghosts*, *Jours* [Days], *Monochromes*, and *BOU* – as in a third of Boutterin... As we can see, this does not make a closed system, but rather singular segments that follow one another, also under the sign of discontinuity or confrontation.

A. D. – Indeed, these sequences can also cause ruptures. One of them appears after the meshes with the presence of the body represented in the *K* series. This series reminds me of a storyboard, in which the produced image is a superimposition of planes. First the colour, spread out in bright washes, covers the entire surface of the painting. Then the drawing, in charcoal, which draws up rocky landscapes against which a thoughtful figure is lounging. The drawn part, set in the colour, does not blend well. It makes a stand. While the bright puddles at the base – which one would reflexively try to bring down into the drawing – fail to produce a fluid correspondence between the planes. The colour "slips", does not fill the expected areas, and even manages to overflow into a drawing that is in fact subsequent to it. This missed appointment between the planes is striking and produces a brutal shift. The character drawn on the canvas seems to be absorbed, or dejected, depending on the painting, by this extreme meeting of drawing and colour. He observes the horizon, and one wonders if it knocks him out, or puts him to sleep, despite the vigour of its colours. That's pretty much Kevin's pastoral, isn't it? What decisions led you to imagine this series? Is it a commentary on your own painting?

J. B. – There are several reasons for the *Ks*. The *Mailles* series was beginning to drift towards a simple formalism. Then, it was the beginning of an era marked by conflicts, wars, which destabilised me as an "abstract" painter, detached from this situation. The images of these conflicts reminded me of painted landscapes, irradiated in a way. I then reconnected with a history of painting, finally telling myself that all these superb pastorals seen in museums were perhaps tragic and totally untranquil landscapes. I wrote this at the time:

"I think things have gone wrong. There is a narrative, origin stories that are wrong. Maybe it's the tree that's in the wrong place, or the man who is too small, or the objects that are too big. The sky is also out of place, or it was simply not the right time. So, these paintings are hypotheses of paintings. To look for the error. In any case, I am convinced that there is something wrong, otherwise everything would be better. It wasn't a nap, it was a death, and it wasn't early morning, it was dusk. I should have understood it, but to understand it you have to paint it – I am painting it. So, there is, in the story of the beginning, a smell of the end. Apart from that, the idea is to have lost oneself in looking, in contemplating. It would have been better to arrange things more nicely. If I find what's wrong, everything will be better, I promise."

In answering you, I understand part of the relationship I establish between landscape and painting. I see landscape as painting, not as fixed pictures, but as a substance of painting arranged and therefore to be rearranged. This is what excited me about landscape, a dissatisfaction with a familiar, habitual state that seems perennial and immutable, and therefore the desire for possible rearrangements. And the character is undoubtedly a part of me, in this reciprocal absorption between landscape/painting/colour and body. And he then contemplates his own state.

A. D. – By the way, the use of colour undergoes a characteristic treatment depending on your series: an index in the *NEP* series, it inscribes the rest of a gesture; in the *Monochromes*, it is held and counts the

effects of the brush; in the *Mailles*, it is structured in a polychrome weft, framing, and preparing a daubed wandering. The use you make of it always seems rigorously targeted. Is colour only a parameter in the painting, a means of constructing and regulating it? Does it find its limits in the protocol, or on the contrary, its excess, its overflow? Beyond its function in the painting, can colour also be understood as a phenomenon?

J. B. – The first observation is that I want all the colours. I want them all to be available when I paint (which poses interesting problems of logistics or ergonomics: size of the "palettes", location, and arrangement of the tubes, to have maximum availability. There is also a problem with brushes, you need a lot of them to be able to switch quickly from one colour to another). I don't like to choose colours; I find intense pleasure in the boxes of crayons and the pile of tubes. Everything is possible and everything must remain possible.

Then, I am marked by the debate between drawing and colour, and I think that this has something to do with my use of colour. Drawing is commonly perceived as being on the side of writing, of what is "thought", while colour goes towards the sensitive, the unreasonable. So, I love to frolic in colour, in this popular place of "taste and colour" which becomes a disgust of colour for the clergy of contemporary art. This place of sensation, of the slightly easy retinal effects, of agreement or disagreement, in short, the illegitimate place of the subjective. I would therefore tend to invert their alleged roles, by bringing the drawing towards the uncontrollable, the thought that fails, and the colour towards a more overhanging role, at the origin of the painting. Colour is the beginning, precisely, with its uncontrollable quality and it says so. It is a beginning that escapes the notion of a project. The drawing, whether it comes out of the colour, mimics it, or returns to it, can close the painting.

My painting is daubing, educated, but still daubing. They only question the principle of the painting, this idea of the project, of something to be seen, which makes itself overflow. But having said that, how does one begin? And this is where the rules you mentioned come in.

From this point of view the *Mailles* are inaugural in the sense that, through colour, they raise the question of the meeting of choice and uncertainty. A first stage of non-choice is the weaving of all the colours that invades the canvas. Then this mesh is contaminated, soiled, decorated by traces of paint that bring about this uncertainty, these random decisions. Here, there are all the colours used more or less successively, the traces-stains being the bottoms of pots that come up against the mesh.

The *Ghosts* or the *Ks* are paintings whose colours are disturbed by the drawings, always this questioning and this pleasure of a working duality. The *Monochromes* are the mirror effect of the *Mailles*. There are many colours but only one per painting, which is broken down into a multitude of effects and variations. The colour maintains the drawing, which is in in full flight, and in a state of panic.

There is another mirror effect, I mean inversion, in the transition from *Monochromes* to *BPPB*. In the *BPPBs* the colours are compressed into a pile from which a line emerges, which goes in the opposite direction to the colour density by exhausting itself in the white. In that case the protocol was not to go back to the initial deposit to find colour, but to let the brush wipe and disappear.

Yes, colour is a variable. So much so that its power of variation can completely destroy a painting. If it yields to protocols, it can, by its power, topple them at any moment. Precisely because of its capacity to manifest itself, and therefore to displace our perceptions. I would add that the material that carries it is essential in my case, and especially the encounters it initiates between all its own variations, not precisely the mixtures, but rather all the possible vicinities.

A. D. – Your paintings seem to reveal without secrecy the rules that condition them, you don't hide it. I would say that this statement of the "conditions of the painting" finds its height in the *BPPBs* and the *BOUs*. From the outset, the painting reveals its cards. Given that it could also be discovered by a careful reading of the object, the method that allows you to engage the painting is not side-lined or relegated to the narrative of its construction. It is deliberately crushed onto the surface of the canvas, it begins in the painting with the indicative deposit of a certain quantity of raw paint: a palette of thick touches recorded in the first third for the *BOUs*; a massive, concentrated deposit, sometimes more spread out in the *BPPBs*. In short, the painting memorises this sequence: use/deploy, from the kick-off marked by the initial deposit. In spite of everything, this disciplined, "programmatic" reading of your effort is only relevant at the start, it grasps nothing but the framework that prepares the painting, but stops short of that. What happens after these rules? What necessity does all this discipline cover?

J. B. – But these rules are incredibly simple, primitive. I think they are more like methods applied to acts. They act mostly on the way the painting starts. They are obvious and I hope they are visible because they are part of the painting. Probably because I realize that the painting is a moment, a temporality. It is not stopped or fixed. I would even like it to come before me.

These rules do not hide the subject, if this word even has a meaning, they allow it. And the subject is the connection and the disconnection, how we join and how we disconnect, that's it. These are love stories. So there you have it! How something exists alone and not alone. It's also internal, you can love and unlove yourself, for yourself and within yourself. How we dispossess ourselves. To get to love with protocols on colour or gesture is a bit far-fetched, but it is not absurd. These are energies. In fact, this book makes me understand this. The *Reboot* is a mechanism, intended to be independent from any point of view. The paintings follow one another as they came. Through this corpus without interruption or commentary, they show without filter the circulations and confrontations that traverse them.

And I realize that I only paint the attractions and solitudes of things between themselves. But I'm not going to paint princes and princesses. I don't feel like it. I will paint the material of love. I'm going to paint what opens or closes, what attaches and detaches. That's just what it is. That's what moves me, and I paint to have emotions. In life I find them insufficient, I want more.

And I can say exactly the same thing with the history of painting. How one enters and leaves it, how one leaves the painting, how one loves what could have been another painting than the one that is being done (the *NEPs*), how one abandons a painting. My painting is totally sentimental. It is a painting from before the words of this story, it is informed by the painting, but it rolls up, it is anterior, it is before it begins, before it is built, a kind of construction site where everything is possible, we lay things out and they begin to stir. The rules and discipline exist to get to that moment.

A. D. – Coming back to these two terms, employ/deploy: in the *BOUs*, *BPPBs* or other series, do you ever try to bend the control?

J. B. – The rules we are talking about put control to the test. They are, so to speak, made for this. They carry within them the principle of their inefficiencies, or their possible limits and uncertainties. But to go further, this question can refer to the way in which a series will end. These procedures have allowed for gestures and their relationships, then they are exhausted, and this is the mirror effect I am talking about, because they often reverse themselves to produce a new series. Indeed, they work on opposite poles that run through my entire journey, heavy/fat, light/dry, congestion/dispersion, one/many.

I think my work can be seen as a musical cursor. Instead of moving from low to high pitch, it varies from mass/surface to trace/line. What I'm working on is the shift or the way to move between these two

states. I think I have a concern, if not a distrust, of the covering power of paint. This probably explains why the background is often left or produced as white.

A. D. – In your latest paintings, the *NEPs*, your gesture is more linear. It outlines the composition in a few strokes, traces figures, marks out areas... It glides over the white primer of the paintings with a semblance of nervousness, hardly deviating from the strict outline. A more defined geometry appears with it. This begins with the *BLs* and *DCs*. What stages, since the *BOUs*, have led to the emergence of these new series?

J. B. – In the latter, the *BOUs*, what escaped from the coloured masses became complex and multiple. A whole part of the painting disintegrated into lines, like a sketch of what could be the next part of the painting. Was it to be done the next day, during a future work session? Or even a wiping of the brushes on the unfinished painting after work? In short, a kind of sloppiness, to be covered up later. It reminded me of the "project" of the painting, like its purity, which would be purged of its densities. The *NEPs* then imposed themselves.

This feeling of "before the painting" interests me as "moments" of possibilities, just indicated, just annotated, like diagrams. The structure of the forms, the arrangement of the surfaces you mention, an approximate nesting of surfaces with errors and additions, can refer to a modern, formalist, and geometric game in gestation, in reflection. This desire to reduce the painting – or rather the painting as substance – to indications of coloured surfaces "to come" dates back some time. But I didn't find, or rather I didn't allow myself, to produce these indications, scribbles, hatchings, which indicate that here it will be yellow and next to it purple or orange.

And this is where the *BLs* and *DCs* started. Like enlarged sketches, they made it possible to produce the *NEPs* by trusting only the line and (as you say) its simplest linear expression.

A. D. – I think of your notebooks lying open on the tables in your studio. They are generously filled with sketches. Sketches of paintings whose scale varies from that of a stamp to a postcard. Is there a connivance between the drawings and the painting, during its construction? Does the drawing have a methodological role?

J. B. – I think that the drawings are there to make people want more because my drawings are sketches of paintings. They are not drawings in their own right, because they represent the painting or rather its project. They are presented as little vignettes and start with the frame, a vague parallelogram, and I draw inside. So I want to make paintings. That's why they are often marked with "yes! great!", "do it!" After that, you have to be careful because I could be satisfied with this doll's house with imaginary paintings... they are only triggers that do not solve everything, far from it.

I think they fall into the category of what you call preparatory sketches, but they can also be "programmatic", in the sense that they would summarise, in the form of diagrams, the rules of the game and the possible bifurcations of these rules. I must say that I sometimes need these reminders, like a return to the path: where was I? They can also be there to build up a memory of solutions, admittedly imperfect, but implicitly present when producing the painting. At this point, I can indeed use the drawings to see or understand other possibilities in the painting.

A. D. – I have this assumption that your paintings synthesise what your drawings open up, explore and develop. I suspect this complementary relationship...

J. B. – Yes, completely, but the movement is in both directions, the painting can explore, and the drawing can synthesise these experiences.

A. D. – In fact, your use of brushes in the *NEPs* is a kind of lightening of the painting. It is limited to simple traces on the blank canvas. The painting then borders on the schematic, in a synthesis that formulates in broad strokes the potentiality of another painting by briefly outlining its lines of force. My hypothesis would be that I believe that in addition to a next painting formulated by this incompleteness of the *NEP*, there would also be an earlier painting, a painting that would rather be a failure, an overflow or a gesture about to collapse, and that would lead the brush at the end of its course to exhaust its remains. Thus, the *NEP* would exist from the remains of a previous debacle with the paint (hence the exhaustion). What do you think? Is there any tangible evidence of this other painting preceding the *NEP*?

J. B. – Yes, exactly, about the potentiality, probably several potentialities, the schemes are not infallible, especially when quickly executed... The term "debacle" is superb. In geography it is the breaking up of the ice that is carried by rivers. It seems to me that debacle is present in the *BOUs*, and even in the *BPPBs*: how to leave the picture, how not to finish it and be satisfied with it, or, in the *NEPs*, how to simply foresee it. So, a sort of aftermath of the debacle, washed out, a bit crystalline, if I may use your metaphor of the breaking of the ice.

The other preceding paintings are also those of museums, those of a joyful modernity where forms were bearers of utopias, children's games of curved or linear surfaces. I am not saying this in a disappointed way, because the *NEPs* are also projects, a recycling of painting projects. They are made with brushes that are too small and worn out, which are thus transformed into half-dried felt-tips forgotten in our kits... But when we feel like painting, we take what we have at hand, right?

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