

Emersion

Conversation with Catherine Mosbach

I originally trained as a Landscape artist. I have very rarely spoken about it and above all I have never known or wanted to know the possible connections between my paintings and landscaping, more precisely the art of Landscaping, that is, landscaping projects, which I also taught for a long time. This reference was probably of little importance to me until now. I felt I was fully engaged in the autonomy of painting. I wanted to have this exchange with Catherine Mosbach, a well-known landscape architect from my year group, to benefit from her view as a landscape "producer" and to try to clarify what could resonate between my painting and the making of landscapes.
– Jérôme Bouterin.

Catherine Mosbach – I think it is useful to see your work as a continuous thread. I have held on to this view, which tries to understand what moves, what persists or stops in the analogies between series. The chronological unfolding is interesting because we are really faced with movements, rhythms. It's a way of approaching your relationship to the world and expressing it like an open book without words, but with images: the interfaces between strokes, lines and accumulations, everything that translates forces and backgrounds. I see it as a genealogy in the generic sense of the term. Before becoming a landscape architect, I studied biology. Perhaps that is why I perceive these dynamics, which vary according to the series. When you look at them one after the other, without commentary, without any other interpretation or relation to the history of art, you grasp this ever-present vibration between the loose line, the accumulation, and the knots, that is, between something that unfolds and a kind of fusion with the colour that resonates between them. Then there are seasonalities: autumnal light and suddenly spring, something explodes like joy. I obviously see landscape rhythms, seasonal rhythms, tonal rhythms, moods...

Then you circle around it. Just like a person who draws projects and executes them. These attempts seem to me to translate and explore the sensations that emerge below the reasoning, from a background of the brain or your body. There are epiphanies, breaks, and lulls, then joyful convolutions. Between the convolutions there are fusions. It is calm, life is beautiful, the sun is out. Suddenly, there is a bolt of lightning, it explodes... It's in an alternating rhythm, more or less tense, depending on the series. But really, the tension, the debate, it's always there. You quarrel or you argue. Let's say you argue with yourself.

The first series, called *Mailles* [Meshes], shows a relationship between something that is very nervous and a calm, balanced background, which evolves like a vibrato between colours and lines, and constitutes, I would say, the social, societal background. It's in front of you and there's something in front of it that's trying to make contact, it is more or less successful depending on the edges, depending on the centre, and it is discussing it. The vibrations are very different, just before the transition to the *K* series. If you look at it from a distance, it's almost a pointillist painting. It's obviously landscape. In the *K* series we move on to something totally biological or physical: blood, veins, pulsating cells. The *K* series starts to land on planet Earth. We see the appearance of characters, who were not there before, or rather who were there simply in a biological way, as in, an interface between them. Drivers, nerves, brain cells reacting, as we land in an earthly universe, where suddenly there are people. There are effluxes, clouds... In the *K* series we clearly see a narrative, even if it is off-beat humour. We discover an interface between the identified human body and other suggested elements. We leave the lines/mass, lines/conglomerate opposition for a more contaminating relationship. With the *Jours* [Days] series, we think: he has touched the Holy Grail! This is happiness! It's 2005! We are almost in a traditional, academic, and identified series. Then we go back into the three-dimensional unconscious. The *Monochromes* are swirls, a mass, inertia that seeks itself, they are relationships between mass and dilution. In the series *BPPB* [an acronym in French meaning "much of little, little of much"], which is very invigorating, there is a change of rhythm, a change of category. The series starts from the same social, public background, opposed to the individual. We are in the line, in the narrative. The line is narrative,

whatever the shapes and the fusion of colours, almost a mineral fusion, a biological, quasi-mineral fusion, which fascinates me.

Jérôme Butterin – So finally I hear that, if there is a relationship to the landscape in my work, you place it in an organic movement of compression – I don't know exactly what you mean – of compression and diffusion. You talk about the knots...

C. M. – But also about the collective and the individual. The mesh in front of you, or behind you doesn't matter, because from time to time it knits together, comes loose with intertwining followed by loosening. I understand this as the search for the singular and the plural, for the individual and the collective and for your opposite: the other in the broadest sense of the word, whether you call it landscape, society, or something else... The singular tries to make contact, or detaches itself, takes up space, as it were. This is what I see everywhere, expressed differently.

J. B. – So it's not a question of territory or cartography, but rather of the relationship with matter, living matter itself, with its modes of reproduction. A phenomenon occurs and develops something in an organic way... a kind of budding...

C. M. – Of materials, waves, and frequencies, of rhythms and resonances. Yes, it grasps, it is seized, or it isn't. There is a grip or there is no grip, depending on the moment or within each painting. I try to understand how this dialectic evolves.

J. B. – I think that the dialectic you speak of is inherent in the rules I set myself for creating the paintings. The term "rule" is probably too strong, and I don't know if they precede or anticipate intuitions. For the *Mailles*, it was a question of confronting a global mesh-grid with incidents. The mesh is a way of establishing a background, without decision, with all the possibilities of colour. I cultivate a field and I don't ask myself any questions. I have to do the whole surface. Afterwards it is contaminated by...

C. M. – Resurgences... after ploughing, you occupy the plot.

J. B. – Occupy... I don't know. I certainly had the image of the field while making the mesh, if only by circling the canvas, patiently painting each line. What motivated me was internal to the painting and so I kept aside, apart from the image of the field, a possible relationship to the Landscape. I wanted to bring together two different vocabularies, the regularity of the mesh and the chance of what you call "resurgences".

C. M. – Or moods in the physical or psychological sense... For the landscape, you didn't want to be locked in. In the paintings, you go off on a tangent, you maintain a distance.

J. B. – Probably, but with the *Ghosts* or the *Ks* in 2002, the Landscape comes back very clearly, even in an archetypal way. What was less common was the way they were painted. These new series appeared as a reaction to what I felt was a systematic approach in the meshes, which tended to be less inhabited and risked being confined to a simple formalism.

C. M. – In any case, a system.

J. B. – Exactly. I broke the system in several places by bringing in the figure and the landscape. But I kept a duality produced by these lines on or under coloured backgrounds. I also think that this duality tries to purge something of a history with the landscape on several levels: mine, that of the history of painting with the pastorals, and finally that of a relationship to the mythological world, since there is often a character who's a little bit ridiculous, melancholic, with a big nose, who may or may not be sleeping, in a semblance of romantic twilight of the landscape.

C. M. – So you did invite him into your system without officially saying so... What was disruptive in the previous series of *Mailles*, is released and takes over in the *Ks*. Everything is on the first level, or below. Of course, there is a background, a scene even, but it is no longer the same dialogue, nor the same dialectic. The contours are figures that invite themselves and contain the colour, or do not contain it. And it is superimposed.

J. B. – I like that very much, "figures that invite themselves".

C. M. – Trees, temples, skies, figures... They invite themselves in a puzzle of colours. There is a colourful narrative produced by the emergences – the borders and the chromatics speak before the figures. It's almost before humanity: planets, particles, ions... and out of that, someone emerges, appears suddenly from this alliance. These colours are bright waves, reflections of photons, and in this kind of alloy something surfaces that is of a different nature. There is a figure that comes out of all these migrations, and, obviously, forms are suggested, almost accidentally... By chance, a figure invites itself into the dance. Someone has fun putting this chromatics together, and a character is nesting in a corner, often just by fragment, never whole. Then it's more or less "dark", which is what you mean when you talk about melancholy. But even when it's dark, it's not black. There is day and night. I don't know what melancholy means. I don't feel it like that, I feel it like... well, there's the sun and the night and it goes round. These are rhythms, circadian rhythms.

J. B. – The driving force behind the *K* series is the shift. A shift in the coloured layer which does not correspond to the plane of the drawing and therefore of the scene depicted. This produces strange and artificial lights on the scene. Then there is a third plane with a bolder paint that tries to readjust the planes between them. For me, this project had to be infinite in this succession of gaps and readjustments within the painting itself. The elements are not stable, especially the colour, which you speak of as movements.

C. M. – That's what interests me. And this state is very different between the *Ks* and the *Jours*. This rhythm is very short, like a biological phase, an awakening, like a fusion, not a confusion, a joyful phase and it's called *Jours* [Days].

J. B. – I did a whole series of coloured backgrounds to prepare the *Ks*, before applying a drawing onto these backgrounds, what you call "inviting the figures". Then I painted again in a very fragmentary way, like layers that were superimposed indefinitely with errors – the shifts I mentioned earlier. This superimposition reached a limit, and I went back to the raw background without any further indications, which produced the *Jours*... without figures.

C. M. – But it's more recognised, inscribed, in the history of art, isn't it? And then the territory changes completely.

J. B. – Indeed, it could be said that it's an abstraction between geographical or atmospheric masses and in fact it's a territory that's already been travelled. Then this pictorial territory was constrained to a single colour. I removed the colours to go towards the colour. This produced the *Monochrome* series.

C. M. – And you've also removed the line. What remains are accumulations, fusions, dilations, respirations, vibrations in short. An ensemble pours out, it's very rhythmic, almost musical.

J. B. – I appreciate the term "pouring out", because I wanted to discharge all the paint effects and know how it could "set".

C. M. – Yes, that's right: paint effects.

J. B. – From the puddle to the stain, to the cloud, to the comma, to the smear...

C. M. – I noted: the monochrome alone is a swirl, a trace without contour, little by little the masses take shape until they become erotic.

J. B. – There are encounters of bodies, or rather, of bits of organs, in a sort of amniotic liquid and weirdly I think that this has a connection with the *Ks*, in the sense that we could imagine the character with the big nose disarticulating and floating in his own liquid... I only perceived this progression towards the end, from the desire to pour out this fragmented vocabulary of painting, of paint effects, to almost organic devices inside the painting, which seemed to produce these effects and even propel them onto the surface.

C. M. – You confirm my impression: the intuitive, impulsive character of these effusions, diffusions, diffractions expressed physically through gesture. The expression of an almost animal unconscious with its biological and chemical effusions.

J. B. – In the *Monochromes* there is indeed a porosity between an abstract language and the appearance of morphologies that express themselves... I would like, if you allow me, to talk about the relationship between landscape and painting in our history, and in history, and your mention of a painting...

C. M. – Yes, my father had purchased a painting¹ at an auction in the Rohan castle in Saverne, which represents a forest traversed by a character. This painting was in the dining room. For me, it is linked to the big family meals. It is my first, primitive, domestic relationship to painting. But I preferred, in spite of this magnificent commonality, the real contact with landscape, the transcription of the landscape by the landscape and not by a painting. If I go back to the relationship between landscape and painting, paintings convey what we understand of a given reality, poetically, hence my reading of your work with what I understand of this reality. Historically, it seems to me that landscape painting translates this relationship to the world more or less idyllically, more or less schematically, and all this translates the evolution of this relationship, and in your case, in our case, I understand that in this historical moment of explosion of knowledge, your work relays this profusion. A form, not of implosion, but of opening up on all scales. When I speak of the *Monochromes* and of this transcription, from within you, impulses and circulation of moods, transcription from the inside out, I am referring to this opening. This recording is an unfiltered experiment, an experiment at a given moment. Historically, I think that the relationship to the history of landscape in painting translates idyllic, ideal visions of the world, fixed or unchanging archetypes, always this fantasy of a perennial relationship which is also present in the practice of landscape.

J. B. – There is a stranger relationship between painting and landscape and landscape and painting, it seems that both have...

C. M. – Interfered...

J. B. – Yes, one was the subject of the other, and vice versa. Sometimes the paintings could have been, it's a hypothesis I'm putting out there, prototypes for spaces to be produced.

C. M. – A model...

J. B. – This is where you talk about idyllic situations.

¹ *Sous-bois avec deux personnages* [Woodland Scene with Two Figures], René Gourdon (1855–?).

C. M. – For some landscape artists, yes...

J. B. – So you stand by the idea that we are not or are no longer above the configurations, but that we are an integral part of them.

C. M. – We ourselves are configurations. Some landscape artists, gardeners, use these models as ideal figures, as obviously we prefer the weather to be nice.

J. B. – But why do you attach the term "ideal" to these things? There's nothing ideal about certain paintings. Why should it necessarily be the place of the ideal? There are catastrophic things. And I use another register: for example, the dizziness in front of a cliff, or the little man alone in front of the sea, who looks like the little man alone in the forest in the painting your father bought. It's a dizziness, it's anxiety... It's not pleasant at all, and I think that what made me go to landscapes were immense moments of solitude, in the forests, in the landscapes...

C. M. – It's not anxiety, it's an immersion. It's an inner dimension taken by storm by the outside. In your case, on the contrary, it's an emersion. A movement from the inside to the outside. It is not solitude; it is dilution or dissolution. With emersion, your inner circuits come out of your envelope, export themselves, express themselves and print themselves. In the *BPPBs*, the chromatic fusion, those kinds of fireballs, bring about another world every time. The beginning of this series is crystal clear. The unfolding, the artistic writing, since it is a drawing, is engulfed in a conglomerate that takes shape and the taking of shape is a knot of energy, a previous state that takes shape. These are effects of concentration, chrysalis and butterfly, which then become more complicated by becoming more nervous, almost a tearing apart. The nucleus, the matrix...

J. B. – Diffracts, yes. I'm often asked about terms that might characterise my state of being when I'm creating paintings and I don't know how to answer. There are no feelings, only a state of tension, like being on the lookout for what is happening or what the rule I set for myself will produce. The *BPPBs* function as a mirror of the *Monochromes*. They invert the proposition: a single colour dispersed in as many effects becomes all the colours, aggregated, collected, which are scattered in a line. Then there is, as you say, this separation of the coloured mass into several masses.

C. M. – It's not surprising that people ask this question. I ask myself the same question, since I'm talking to you about seasons and moods, not in the psychological sense but in the physiological, liquid sense... In the *BPPBs* it's very mineral, but what comes out of it is not mineral. They are waves. All our relationships, human or not, are made of waves and frequencies. We are extremely receptive to them. Your whole work speaks of this, differently and at various stages of maturity, maturity in the sense of a given moment in a cycle. They are moments of taking form or landing. They are emersions in the sense of a transcription between the real on which you have no hold from the inside of you to the outside of you, an emergence... With the *BOU* series the debate becomes polarised, intensifies with polarities, always present in your works.

J. B. – In the *BOU* series, the accumulation of paint expands and occupies the upper half of the painting, producing a landscape-surface. An inverted landscape for some who see the ground in it. So, yes, a polarity, but lines emerge from this surface, and I imagine an abandonment in the sense of a letting go of the painting with the last traces of brushes wiped on the canvas. But I can also see the possible scene buried in the painted material that occupies the top of the painting. By "scene" I mean the set of forms that these scattered lines may suggest.

C. M. – You're always in a confrontation, even a dialectic of line/accumulation, line/mass... And that's one hundred percent Landscape. For me, the work of the landscape artist is all about the outline, it's a

kind of script, a translation that authorises the resurgence of masses, that is, of everything that may emerge... that is underlying.

J. B. – So the drawing is generated, even informed, from a mass, from masses. Yes, in the *BPPBs* for sure, but what interests me is also the freedom that these lines, these drawings take. I would even say a detachment that can be seen in the last paintings of the series. Questions about attachment and detachment. It is this ability for detachment between forms that I am working on.

C. M. – Drawing works both ways. I actually feel that way in my practice. Behind the outline, there is a goal to be reached, to give visibility to the masses in the process of being produced. It is only a revelation of possibilities. There are very few people on the lookout, to use that beautiful term you said during our discussions.

J. B. – Mindful of what may or may not happen. In other words, that could take the risk of waiting for what the drawing might reveal.

C. M. – It is clearly the outline that produces the narrative. The masses evolve at their own pace, whether micro or macro. The outlines are a matter of a "self", of a "singular" that exposes itself to the "multiple", for the time being, we don't know about tomorrow.

J. B. – What produced the *BOU* series was a mistake on a painting: the coloured conglomerate of the *BPPBs* was re-accumulated at the top of the surface. I said earlier that a scene emerged from that background. A meeting of forms suggested by the traces could be perceived, and they are in action, they tell something...

C. M. – What you just said appears from the beginning with the *Mailles*. These chromatic clusters, these conglomerates, they are morphogens and if you get into them, if you walk around them, they are interfaces. And when I look at the last paintings, I noted "focused". This notion of mass comes before.

J. B. – The recent paintings, the *NEPs*, are intentions of paintings, they are not there yet and that is enough for me. Intentions can be multiple on the same surface. Yes, the painting, the mass, is not there yet, it is just indicated as a possibility. It is gone.

C. M. – It is before.