

Jérôme Boutterin: Painting Between the Gap

Jason Stopa

Jérôme Boutterin often produces paintings that look unresolved. This is because he deliberately leaves something undiscovered or provisional. A closer look hints at something more. There is an element of chance that interrupts otherwise unified fields, leaving the paintings in a precarious balance. The viewer is offered an opportunity to disassemble and reassemble the painting in endless numerations. These are generous paintings. But they are not for the uninitiated. Boutterin is a connoisseur. He is clever. He combs over history. The artist is trying to find the gap between painting movements. He approaches painting as a project that exhibits its strategies and performs painterly touch. Each series in this monograph argues for a way of being in the world, with the artist responding to changing conditions.

Underpinning the *École de Paris*, in its first and second waves, was the promise of innovation and the search for originality. It is for these reasons, among others, that it was also the subject of scrutiny in the post-war period. Its conventions – stretchers, fabric and paint – had to be reconsidered. This was done famously by the BMPT group and *Support/Surface*. A second critique was leveled by the postmodernists, who were critical of subjectivity altogether, preferring signs for painting. Jerome Boutterin's 20 years of painting lies in the wake of French history.

Boutterin's paintings recognize that the aftermath of that history has left doubt. The great modernists always understood doubt, not as a tendency to exploit, but as a formal problem to overcome. Matisse's *Pink Nude* (1935) went through 22 iterations before he felt it was finished. That Boutterin would hedge his practice on doubt, leaning into skepticism, is a testament to the artist's capacity to keep asking generative questions.

A handful of such questions are immediately evident in this publication: What is the difference between painting a mark and drawing a mark? Where does intention lie in the work? Is abstraction a legitimate response to crisis? While these questions linger in a pluralistic, post-ism world; they are also the questions of any serious painter.

Boutterin began his career as a landscape artist, distrusting the overbearing posture of painters. His influences are varied: Arshile Gorky, Raoul Dufy, and Jean-Honoré Fragonard. An expressionistic impulse runs through Gorky and Dufy. Yet, he is not a true expressionist, driven by emotional impulses alone. Nor is he attracted to postmodernist irony or pastiche. The artist is afraid of elegance, perhaps because one cannot trust the look of sophistication to be anything other than the look of sophistication alone.

His methods are rather transparent. He delivers a matter of fact application of paint. The white ground of the painting is always evident. Paint is material. He's not interested in overly aestheticizing paint's materiality. The aesthetics of expression don't always signify an obvious expression, but they point in the direction of it. Intentions and actions are two different things. Abstraction, a project that once addressed the existential fallout of WWII, still has room to respond to the myriad problems of the twenty-first century.

I was first introduced to Boutterin's paintings in a series titled *Mailles* [Meshes]. These mesh-like works are fascinating for their elusiveness. They are the genesis of everything that was to follow for the next 20 years. In these works, the ground is as a level, pure white, no accidents. *Ref 61* (p. 30) is a particularly curious work. The artist paints a multi-colour grid. Precision is not an issue the artist is concerned with. The grid is imperfect, half-hazard and applied in a thin manner. This part of the work feels quick. You get the sense that the artist is just filling in space. A closer read reveals more. Boutterin paints loosely brushed gestures in red, green and blue on top of the grid. These marks are sparsely arranged, some feel like gestures, others like the trace of a form. This part feels slow and considered, but ascribing

significance to one or the other is difficult here. The mesh paintings collapse figure-ground relationships. The two are interchangeable planes. They aren't optical paintings, they don't subscribe to some severe language introduced in minimalism, nor are they gestural abstractions. Their identity is somewhere in-between. And it appears that this very in-betweenness is what the artist is after.

Yves Alain-Bois writes from a similarly nuanced point of view. He argues that to consider only the formal elements of a painting (line, colour, texture, value, etc.) as its defining content is to merely traffic in a modernist reading of artwork. At the same time, he argues that to pursue only a theoretical or social reading of painting, at the expense of the formal, is to deny its material reality. Rather, it is the nexus of these approaches wherein the meaning of the work lies¹.

Boutterin found his mature style in the 1990s. One can see a relationship to Guillaume Lebel, Stephane Calais, Joanne Greenbaum, and Gunther Forg, an international group of painters emerging around that period. This loose group is concerned with the reactivation of a modernity, without heroics or pathos, in an effort to revisit fertile ground. Each artist shares a relationship to the gesture. It is clear that there is unfinished business in twentieth-century painting.

The late 90s were an awkward time. Abstract painting was not front and centre. It was the age of anti-aesthetics, slacker aesthetics, identity politics and the aftermath of the Cold War. It was also a period of multiculturalism. Many curators favored photography, installation and neo-conceptual trends that reflected issues of representation. Provocation was in vogue. Art history tends to focus on the Young British Artists and the infamous *Sensation* show in Brooklyn. It was this very period under which abstraction was increasingly seen as "neutral" territory. This ill-conceived notion persists to this day. Boutterin began to have doubts about abstraction.

These works in his *K* series appear as a rupture in the artist's oeuvre, stemming from a concern that abstraction can only produce formal results. This was on the heels of the Iraq war. It was the only time he made quasi-figurative work. Boutterin began painting a man sleeping in an abstracted, pastoral landscape. Initially, I did not know what to make of these works. Is the man indifferent? Resting? Waiting? Alienated? Disillusioned? Can sleep be an act of resistance to war? Like many of Boutterin's paintings, it is all of these things. They are essentially romantic in nature. Some 100 years ago, almost to the day, Cezanne and Matisse were painting bathers in Arcadia against the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution. In Greek mythology, Arcadia represents a lost Eden, an idyllic, magical world full of centaurs, nymphs, spirits, gods and goddesses. The languid, sensual scenes of bathing, dancing, drinking, and sleeping in those early-twentieth-century paintings were not frivolous. Rather, it was a response to a changing environment. Those modernist paintings were about the body. So are these. Boutterin is painting a body, the interiority of painting, and his own corporeal body at the same time. These are not heroic, painterly gestures pointing toward liberation. Rather, these gestures are awkward and searching, much like the figure.

Another gap appears with the *Monochromes*. In the series *Jours* [Days], the figure disappears and only the coloured backgrounds remain, which will be unified in a single colour with the *Monochromes*. It is an incredibly formative moment in the artist's trajectory. He begins on a white ground using saturated colour. Each work contains several ways of making a mark. The artist reveals all of the tools in his toolkit: gestures, daubing, lines, blocky patchwork, curvilinear marks, transparency and opacity, the appearance of wetness contrasted by the appearance of dry brush. These dualities populate the paintings creating an immersive field; resembling almost nothing like classical monochromatic painting from Robert Ryman or Marcia Hafif. Rather, these monochromes delight in idiosyncratic mark making.

¹ McNamara A., Butler R. (1995), "All About Yve: An Interview with Yve-Alain Bois", *Eyeline* (27): 16–21.

Looking through the different series in this book, we sense that the artist revisits past historical styles, not to tread old ground, but to question the rules of a movement and invent new ones. Rules are governed by language, and by interrogating that language, the artist arrives on his own terms.

After the *Monochromes* paintings, Boutterin began a series titled *BPPB*, the initials for the French equivalent of "much of little, little of much". Gone are the myriad senses of touch. Here the artist inverts the monochrome. Instead of a single colour that pervades the surface, several colours are massed together and compressed into a spot, resembling a snapshot of a palette. These paintings have the effect of wet mascara, blotting and saturating an area with form. A gesture emerges around the form to criss cross the surface until it is a dry, brushy mark. Here, too, painting and drawing have a complex relationship. The gestures, which read as drawing, finish the painted areas. Or perhaps it's the other way around. Boutterin leads the viewer into a confounding labyrinth as to issues of intention. The results are alluring.

In his *BOU* series the artist reintroduces techniques explicitly used by the Nabi group of artists. The Nabi painted interiors and domestic scenes with ebullient patterns. Boutterin uses hot, saturated colour in a patchy manner, masterfully flirting with the decorative. The marks in the top half of paintings are butted up against one another. As the painting's composition descends, it unravels like carpet into sketchy, thread-like marks. These works are not without a sense of humour. The paintings are intentionally left half-finished. Bou refers to the paintings feeling like a fragment of a work. It is also the first half of the artist's name.

Drawing has consistently been an important aspect of the artist's oeuvre. In the artist's latest series *NEP*, it is abundantly evident. He began this series some 2–3 years ago. These oil paintings have the look of sharpie markers that have been bled dry. Works like *NEP 210215* (p. 210) contain multi-colour directional lines and marks that overlap, intersect and swirl around one another, but never create solid form. There is an architectural quality to the work, the movement is contained, as Boutterin outlines the edge of the canvas with mark-making. The marks are semi-transparent, the lack of solid form creates an airy dimension to the work, and the composition is structured, yet permeable. The *NEP* series place audiences in a complex relationship between painting and drawing, they ask us to consider them as one and the same.

The artworld is slowly catching on that abstract painting internalised the language of post- structuralism. It's a gateway for painting to become performative. Writers like David Joselit and Isabelle Graw, among other prominent voices, have championed this perspective. In 2016, The Met Breuer installed *Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible*. Audiences were left with varied takes on completeness over a period of centuries. This is good news for Boutterin.

He is interested in the gap of language; the space between action and thinking, between intention and incident. The artist's twenty-year project leans into this space, and through it, reintroduces a phenomenological reading of painting, capturing the body's movement and the look of expression. Why should audiences pay attention to this publication? The answer lies in the fact that Boutterin has rigorously sought after painting's material nature and its conceptual schema. Not an easy feat. He's done this all while evading a signature brand, which often results in a staid formalism. The artist is far too adventurous for that.