

Jerome Boutterin's paintings

Joe Fyfe

The twenty-five years that I have known Jerome Boutterin, I remember three painters that we have discussed at length, though there have been many more. It's a strikingly individualistic bunch: within the canon, but outside of most theoretical discussions. The artists are Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, Gustave Moreau and Howard Hodgkin. If one could find a commonality among the works of these three, it would be in their immediacy and the presence of notable facture. And it points towards Boutterin's nonconformism as well.

Coming to his most recent show at Galerie Richard in Paris, Boutterin's paintings are comprised, as usual, simply and almost generically, of gestures of oil paint applied with a brush on prepared white canvas grounds. He appears to have continued to reject the current revival of the layering of revisions, riotous color, dynamic compositions, seductive skill and various novelties. In his address of the painting, Boutterin's point of view is not so much additive as subtractive. He explores its parameters through decisions as to what need not be considered. The works are products, in part, of negations. This attitude, that he has held throughout his working life, contrasts constraint with an equally powerful impulse towards wanton expressivity. The works appear made on the run, they have a fugitive appearance but it is not quite real; many are preceded by preparatory drawings.

There remains a push and pull between what seems like free invention and what feels like strict regulation. His works have been informed by an engaged personal history with painting culture as mentioned above, while they also might seem, to the conventional viewer, undernourished, like he stopped too soon. Barer here than in the past series, the painted areas never cover more than 10-20% of the of white canvas. Their impatient, even distracted, appearance of variously thick and thin, off-hand marks are familiar to anyone who has seen other abstract paintings, and to everyone that knows the scrawls that are everywhere, from the street to the personal notepad. The simple factuality of the common art materials that he uses nullifies any exoticism, eccentricity or specialness. Working in a genre that might still be called expressionist painting, his signatory marks are surprisingly impersonal, detached, as if he is at pains to avoid sentiment or flourish. When he does make a rhetorical mark, it seems more the product of a spasm than of a decision.

All the works here vary in size from 162 x 130 cm. through in-between sizes and down to 61 x 50 cm. There are accumulations of thick oil paint that overlap or are bunched up or adjacent to one another and dry drags of brushstrokes that appear to be pulled from the thick patches and venture out onto the surrounding whiteness, tracking vertically, horizontally or at an angle, crude delineations of squares, shaky loops, bumpy oblongs and bow-like triangles. Boutterin's color choices are from a limited selection but from across the spectrum. There are purples, greens, reds and yellows that might become intermixed at points of accumulation but are otherwise straight from the tube. (the paint, incidentally, is the same brand that the painter Eugene Leroy, another extremely individualistic artist, used). Often a single color will dominate. *VIT 250810* (73 x 60 cm) for example, consists of a central clump of steel gray up and down marks that betrays a bit of scraped away yellow underpainting and an extension of characteristic dry black paint that travels linearly to the border then reverses itself and heads back to the heavily brushed steel gray middle section.

When one compares Boutterin's painting history with the abstractions of Gerhard Richter concurrently on exhibition in Paris at the Foundation Louis Vuitton, it is striking that Richter's intermediate abstract paintings, before the completely squeegeed surfaces, contain a very broad inventory of painting tropes, from underlying illusionistic aerial perspective blurring derived from photographs to surface gestural brushstrokes, dry indexical impressions and surface slathering. One cannot help but see Richter as involved in a high-flown parodistic critique of painting, a kind of decimation of the inherent expressive properties of the painting, while Boutterin, in his comparatively severe self-limitations, is in fact inclined towards preservation. He still wants to put it to the test.

One of the most curious aspects here is the way that Boutterin so often uses the edges of the support as a boundary, like a firewall or a push back from the edge of a swimming pool, so that the improvisational painterliness as it appears here is seemingly brought to earth, entrapped, as it were, by the canvas edge, a characteristic of some previous series of Boutterin's works. Interestingly, this penchant appears across the history of the easel painting. I was in the Palace Pitti not long ago and thought of Jerome when I saw a Botticelli "Madonna with Christ child and St. John the Baptist" where the Madonna figure crouches beneath to top edge of the canvas. All three figures postures seem dictated by the proportional limits of the support.

When one reaches back across his working history it becomes clear that there are preoccupations and stylistic shifts that re-occur. Much of this recent series harkens back to the Dd series from 2016, with its accumulations of meaty areas of mixed colors surrounded by loose streaks of dryly brushed paint. This dry, dragging painting mark, first put to use in my knowledge in Francis Bacon's work and since referred to as "drawing with paint" appears again in Boutterin's chronology, including the series with the titles Sy. that points to his denial of painterly "cuisine". His attitude is more about what he doesn't want to do. In this way, I understand Boutterin's work as informed both phenomenologically and anthropologically. In the former, he communicates his consciousness of the direct experience of his body in front of the canvas, his combination of quirks, what his wrist and eye respond to emotionally in that moment, and of the materials of making caught, captured in the process of an incomplete transformation. In the latter, it is the immanence of mark-making with colors. I also thought of these paintings very recently in an article in the New York times where it was discovered that Neanderthals drew¹. In either case, there is a belief apparent here that true life is to be found in painting, in its history, in the broadest sense.

In either case, there is a belief apparent here that true life is to be found in painting, in its history, in the broadest sense.

Published on the occasion of the exhibition *VITAL.E.S.*, Galerie Richard, Paris, 2025.

¹ "Archaeologists, led by Francesco d'Errico at the University of Bordeaux in France, analyzed 16 other fragments found across Neanderthal sites in Crimea and mainland Ukraine, dating as far back as 100,000 years ago. The study, detailed in Science Advances, highlighted three items that showed clear evidence of having been intentionally shaped and used for drawing. One remarkable discovery was a two-inch yellow "crayon" from roughly 42,000 years ago, which microscopic analysis showed had been repeatedly sharpened, indicating that it was likely a valued tool. The implement had clearly been modified through grinding and scraping.

Dr. d'Errico argued that the crayon must be attributed to Neanderthals rather than modern humans: It was found in a site known to have been occupied by Neanderthals, and preceded the era when Homo sapiens were widely accepted to have arrived in that area. Researchers called the artifact a crayon, he said, based on its function and specific wear patterns, which strongly confirmed its use for marking a surface, possibly skin or rock. Tiny signs of friction and applied pressure, not just the object's shape alone, suggested it had been used as an artistic tool.

"Further proof that Neanderthals engaged in the symbolic use of colorants," said Dr. Zilhão, who has frequently collaborated with Dr. d'Errico."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/03/science/archaeology-neanderthals-genetics.html>