

Talk

What is your relationship to instantaneity?

I think that when you confront yourself to figurative painting, it is to try to produce continuous instantaneity, something that is “fresh frozen”; to represent, to rebuild a certain logic of the visible. What interests me above all is to render a moment in the world of appearances in all its richness and complexity, to render its density. The subject, the object I represent, are just an extra touch, a means of seduction, often picked for personal reasons, because you have to paint something.

Only painting can render the event that is the world. Literature, photography, music need a thread, a disruptive element, a timeline, an event. To render the sheen of reality, what happens when nothing is happening, what I'd call the non-event, the water we goldfish swim in, there is no better medium than painting.

I'd add that a painting is seen and judged at once: like any real object, the appeal of an image is immediate. I like the speed, but also the cruelty of it.

When you say you pick a subject for personal reasons, but that it is also a means of seduction, do you mean that you're seducing yourself ? Or is it the viewer who needs the subject in order to be seduced?

You need both. To seduce yourself, because you have to feel like creating an image. My technique is time-consuming: to find motivation and meet the challenge I need stakes, secrets, exhibitions, contradictions, before I can end up with a single image. I'm not interested in series: to me, that's like botching fourteen paintings instead of getting one right. I love Georges Braque when he says that a painting is finished when the idea is obliterated. I would love to make all my paintings look “easy” out of courtesy.

I think of the viewer as well. A work of art is also an object of desire. I have pet viewers I want to please: they are very important points of reference for me. This may come off like a cliché, but to me, digging into the autobiographical without saying anything about it is the simplest way of achieving the kind of archetypal image people can identify themselves with. That's what I look for in other painters. When I love a painting, it's like a landmark in my life, a beautiful gift handed down to me. Whether it is Edouard Vuillard or Michael Borremans, it always comes back to: “This is how I see the world”, or better still “Here it is”. You feel less alone.

In today's cultural massification, you have to be in tune with the zeitgeist. I pay a lot of attention to what goes on in literature, movies, theater, contemporary art; I keep trying to find what's missing and what painting can bring.

The hitch is that there are actually very few eager art lovers: lots of people don't go beyond the subject, the image, or else they pounce on the tiniest scrap of wall label because they're so anxious when they're confronted with art.

I love the idea of continuous instantaneity. And in a way I agree with the fact that painting achieves this better than photography. But I'd like to understand why. Do you think this has something to do with the texture, the materiality of painting?

I must admit that the question of the capacity of painting to capture the event of appearances is one I ask myself constantly. I have no answer: I just try to offer physical evidence of it. In my opinion, it isn't by chance that the history of Western painting is intimately linked to the religion most concerned by the question of incarnation.

Concretely, a painting is pictorial mud, shit smeared on canvas in a coherent way to represent an object. It's living matter: colors evolve, oils oxidize. It's organic matter. It can be tasted with the eyes. A painting is also the result of a protracted battle with the angel, and bears the traces of the long, silent hours you spend in front of it. All of this is contained in the searing instantaneity of the painting. This might seem very literal but I believe that technique is love.

I've spent a lot of time studying the techniques of painting. I was extremely frustrated by the bogus mystique my teachers maintained around their knowledge. I find it depressing that so many artists develop a narrow personal style just because they have technical shortcomings. I have worked, and of course I still work hard to develop my own technique and I find real pleasure in progressing, but it isn't an end in itself — I don't make hyperrealist, demonstrative paintings or pop-art glazes. It's a way of defending what I stand for. Chardin was a champion in that respect. There's nothing duller than an apple, and yet through painting, he saw it and he shows it to us better than anyone. And yes, an apple contains freshness, crunchiness, acidity, a certain density, rough irregularities, a shape that will always belong to this particular apple: all of which comes through in his way of painting it. Could even the best photographer keep so many traces of his attention and intentions in his photograph? Could he put in more subconscious? More body? More sensuality? More randomness and therefore more life?

When you choose rather commonplace subjects, is that your way of telling viewers it's not what they should be looking at?

Now, that's funny. You show something, you devote a lot of time and energy to it, and then you're told your intention was to highlight what doesn't exist! On the contrary, I'm not looking for something that goes beyond what I show. Everything is interesting, because everything does exist. To quote Wittgenstein, "*Aesthetically, the miracle is that the world exists. That what exists does exist.*" The commonplace, that's what you should look at; anyway that's what I'm interested in. A cliché subject, for instance a naked lady, a still life, a farm animal, a kiss, that's super-interesting: the challenge is to reactivate that cliché so that it's still relevant to us today, at the risk of bordering on kitsch, I'm well aware of it.

The hatred of reality is everywhere. Photoshopping reality because it disgusts you. Self-financing financialization. A terrible censorship of death, illness, suffering. Far-flung holidays to compensate utterly uninteresting jobs. A distinct boho-anarchist tendency to disengage from collective life. Entire uninhabitable swathes of the world — the RER B train line connecting Paris to the suburbs, peri-urban areas — where everyone circulates in complete collective denial... Screens. Everywhere. My TV-generation has obviously seen more than it has ever experienced. But I don't want to sound moralistic about it. I'm hooked on hands-free units, Apple and Facebook too.

I'm trying to understand why scenes I know are totally commonplace, for instance your watercolors of parties, interest me as scenes and not just as paintings. I realize painting can be appreciated as painting, but what intrigues me about your work is figuring out what painting brings to an image, as opposed to photography. Especially since in watercolors, there isn't that much matter, "mud" or "shit"...

When I paint, I produce an image. The photograph I work from is like a sketch. I don't start painting before I'm convinced by my composition. I use Photoshop to paste, change the lighting, replace a head, etc. I'm not very proficient at it, so the image might be a mess, but painting smoothes that out. When I ask people to pose for me, I take a lot of pictures. I often use many slightly different ones. I also do extreme close-ups to collect indications on materials. I very seldom resort to snapshots to capture a Cartier-Bresson-style "decisive moment". This relationship to photography has been changing thanks to Photoshop.

I work with watercolors in a peculiar way. I look for maximum density and presence, while maintaining transparency. It isn't oily mud but there can easily be a dozen transparent layers on each section of the paper. That's also why I use small formats (15 × 20 cm). I love parties but I feel terribly guilty when I'm not working: it's as though I were dying more quickly. That's how I got the idea of doing watercolors of them. I take lots of pictures while I'm enjoying myself, a bit randomly. Then I rework them a lot. The outcome is a bit like a drunken gaze, which is actually a painter's gaze. There is no hierarchy between things: a bottle of beer is as important as a face, everything is more or less at the same level. Off-center frames intensify this impression of uncertainty. To convey a state of mind, an emotional color, a way of seeing with the brain, the heart, the sex, the body, the hand-made is better.

I like your idea of taking lots of pictures, then pasting and assembling them to achieve a more representative scene. Of course, a well trained philosopher will wonder if it's possible to approach the essence through multiple accidents. Philosophy has already answered that question: it's impossible. In the philosophy of science, we speak of the problem of induction: seeking the universal based on particular instances. But no matter how many instances confirm it – at least, that's Hume's point of view – we can never actually know if the sun will rise again tomorrow. Yet with each instance, we can feel we are drawing closer to the essence. The multiplication of instants is more satisfying than a single instance.

Philosophy is interesting because it is one more proof that thought can be achieved through aesthetics. Of course, I love Hume. The subtext of the inductive method is the principle that there is a given order in nature which science or philosophy can understand, anticipate, explore. I think there is no natural order, but rather random chaos. I love when Hamlet says "*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*" I've never understood why rationalists didn't spend one euro a day to play lotto, picking a random combination of six numbers out of forty-nine, even though they think there is logic and meaning to the world. Is the world anything but an infinite number of random combinations? Basically, the world is a super-lotto, isn't it? No essence, no back-world, no nature, nothing hidden behind the screen, just what exists: that's already a lot. The Golden Age (the 17th century) produced meaningfully so many genius painters all over Europe when it was a period of tremendous doubt in the history of thought: the ideas of God and Man were under suspicion, but the concept of Nature hadn't been invented yet. They didn't look beyond the realm of the relative; they were seeking an art of living rather than an ethics. This taste for reality, there's nothing better, since there's nothing but reality. Painting every day fosters that state of mind: I leave the studio with a huge appetite for appearances, and that makes me very happy.

This leads me to ask you about style: what do you think of it? Is it an emerging quality, something to look for? Is it a commercial trademark? Is it something you use? Or on the contrary, something you try to avoid?

I don't try to avoid it. I just think it's not very interesting. To me, style is something subconscious. To pick a subject, to work on it in a certain way, I allow myself to be carried along by desire, therefore by the outside world. Though as time goes by, I have a more definite idea of what I want, or rather of what I don't want.

And then, there's what I'm able to. I have favorite colors, favorite brushes, a favorite type of canvas frame, I don't like to paint oversize nature, I'm very painstaking and I don't paint in thick coats: does that make up a style, in the end?

The artist's singularity really interests me: when you see a tiny detail of a Titian, you know it's a Titian. But I don't think Titian ever asked himself that kind of question; that's why it works.

Whether I'm cooking, writing, making love, sleeping, doing layouts, I feel it's the same as painting. The same flaws keep popping up, so what's the use of thinking about it too much? I do hope to evolve, to be influenced, unsettled, in other words, to live! I feel a bit lonely in that respect. Today, many painters have a personal style: they demonstrate, use formulas, a restricted imagery, in short they have such a specific style you could make an artistic filter out of it for Photoshop. There are some things I like, but I don't understand. Maybe it's a commercial issue: collectors need to be reassured. It's something you learn very quickly in art school: to be obsessive, to stand out by sticking to a subject, like a totem. Art dealers also push you to "delve deeper", when what they actually mean is to repeat yourself. The romantic stance took a terrible toll on painting: you had to express yourself before expressing anything. Even though I find him very interesting, a Francis Bacon retrospective can be awfully repetitive.

Is that why your paintings are so "unvarnished"? Could you say something about the caustic nature of your images?

Unvarnished? I don't know. I like my paintings to be concrete, flat, anti-mysterious. No imagery or pictorial effects. I like colors to be nuanced and subtle, matter to be unobtrusive and homogenous. And I do like my paintings to draw blood.

There is a cruelty to existence I want to integrate in my work. The avoidance of tragedy seems to me to spring from the same symptom as the avoidance of reality. Often, if you look closely, life is merciless. What you call "unvarnished" might be anti-romanticism, a taste for the human measure, a form of classicism.

A painting with a difficult subject like Agonie is also the opportunity of treating pleasurably, almost immorally, the subject of the recumbent effigy, the sensuality of the hospital bed-sheet, the sheen of the pipes. Everything is interesting and alive because it exists.

Do you ask yourself the same type of questions as the old masters? For instance, when you painted "Au Portable" ["On the cell phone"], were you thinking of paintings of women reading letters? Are you treating the theme of absorption?

Of course I am interested by the phenomenon of absorption, as defined by the art critic Michael Fried: painting a figure focused on something else than being seen, for instance in Fantin-Latour's "The Reader". Absorption is still relevant to our lives: we're all glued to our smartphone screens!

According to the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, being slumped in front of TV is a new form of meditation: the point is to empty your head. Painting as generously as possible a rich world where a figure is focused on a tiny 10 cm screen, isn't that a great subject? I am a firm believer in voluntary intoxication, I consume huge quantities of art, information, history, life, for pleasure but also with the secret hope that it will somehow seep into my painting. When I start a picture, I have a conscious idea of what I want to put into it, but I often end up surprising myself with an obvious reference I hadn't been aware of. Originality might be working in so many references you can't untangle the threads.

I don't understand why you would want to resort to intoxication. Is it a way of finding something arbitrary, or of replacing irrecoverable innocence? A way of saying: since we are no longer innocent, it's better to "go fishing" so much that the different influences cancel each other out?

I had the tremendous privilege of visiting all the European museums in excellent conditions when I worked with the art critic Hector Obalk. I never learned as much as I did with him in front of paintings in museums. That's when the problem of intoxication comes up. You need to be able to lose yourself in work and desire without over-analyzing; to be present to the painting whose presence you are conjuring. It is completely pointless to try to regain any kind of innocence, since according to ethologists there is no such thing to start with. Being pure and innocent, what could that be, unless you're a feral child drooling all over yourself ? I don't think it's very interesting either to play on signs, parody, references, art-world inside jokes just to show how clever you are. Painting is an ancient medium: when I paint, I experience duration, I think of what will become outdated. Being simple is complicated. Intoxicating yourself is trying to have so many different interpretive frameworks that in the end, you can't draw any conclusions. You just try to produce something that sounds right by confronting yourself with the least rational thing in the world: the world.

It would also be interesting to explore the relationship between painting and contemporary art. What is the place of painting in art? What is its role, if it has one? I feel that it stands apart, that it doesn't engage much with the discourses that concern other artists (which doesn't mean that painters don't speak with artists). That painting only engages with painting and, once in a while, reality.

I find contemporary art vibrant, fascinating, beautiful, powerful. I don't understand how and why it isn't more popular. Art galleries are, beside pretty footpassengers, one of the few sources of free enjoyment in large cities. I must admit I prefer works of art that play on sensuality rather than amorphous ontological research. For the latter, it's simpler and more stimulating to read Wittgenstein.

I am keenly aware of the ideological subtext of artworks; I like to see what the artist is about behind the conceptual varnish. But the paintings I prefer position themselves below the discursive level, at odds with the cliché of the contemporary artist who strives to "makes sense".

I think painting stands apart because after the modernist upheaval of the 20th century, which changed what it meant to be an artist and the very definition of Art, it has a different relationship to innovation. A different relationship to time, memory, heritage. When you harness yourself to conventions, you're measuring up to something that is bigger than you.

It is an uphill battle, but maybe not avant-garde.

Painting, like making love, telling stories by the fireside, hunting, picking berries in the forest, connects you with something very ancient, something that goes beyond you. There is a different relationship to innovation.

I love what Radiguet says: "*All lovers, even the most mediocre, imagine they are innovating.*"

To come back to the 20th century, there are tons of painters who pursued this different relationship to innovation. Zorn, Schad, Dix, Spillaert, Ensor, Valloton, Derain, Balthus, Giacometti, Hopper, Wyeth, Bacon, Freud, Aillaud, Arikha, Hucleux... Among the living: Hockney, Peyton, Katz, Rego, Szafran, Estes, Boisrond, Pearlstein, Cognée, Fischl, Tuymans, Rauch, Weischer, Ghenie... They took advantage and are still taking advantage of the new freedom, techniques, subjects and ways of seeing the world, while playing the game of painting to the hilt. That's how I see the role of painting today. As a medium, it is ontologically upstream from the image, the flow.

I love the idea that we can be less naïve, have more cumulative experience, in short that we are older than our ancestors. The purpose of all those artworks, books, images, movies, isn't entertainment or escaping reality: on the contrary, they make us more sensitive, more open, more eager, stronger, more united to confront what we share even with the dead or the unborn. You have to experience it all. I reject neither tradition nor continuity.

Klaus Speidel & Thomas Lévy-Lasne (2012)

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