

Something new in front of our eyes, continually *Stephan Balleux and the pictorial metamorphoses*

MURIEL ANDRIN: If you had to choose between the three following statements, which would come closest to describing how you feel and why?

1. *'It's nice that the good news is sounding today: sense is never principle or origin, it is product. It's not to be discovered, restored or re-employed, it's to be produced by new machineries. It does not belong to any height, it's not at any depth, but a surface effect, inseparable from the surface as it is from its own size.'*
(GILLES DELEUZE, *THE LOGIC OF SENSE*)
2. *'The clouds do not disappear, they transform into rain.'*
(BUDDHA)
3. *'What seems vague to us is the imprecision, that is, (they're) something different when compared with the object represented. But because these pictures were not created so that they could be compared to reality, they cannot be vague, nor precise, nor anything else.'*
(GERHARD RICHTER)

STEPHAN BALLEUX : I would choose the second statement, both because it seems the most generic, and because I have objections about the other two. What could pass for a quote from an almanac (and which is one as well) throws a light on one of my fascinations: the passage from one state to another, then to another, then to another... Every object perceived is only that at a moment of its existence, just as the one perceiving it is too. I feel close to the fact that this summarizes nicely the arrangement of the elements in my work (each of which is the result of transformation from one logic to another), and by extension, what I hope to get from existence: to continuously see new things from every part of my vision.

M.A. : You talk of your fascination with successive passages, or metamorphoses, from state to another; how do you imagine this in your work? Do these passages necessarily imply the preceding states being visible?

S.B. : In my work, I go through multiple stages before the final object, usually involving photography, virtual images, compositing and virtual collage. And what results appears as painting, drawing, watercolour, video, sculpture. It's a practice that has its foundations in my desire to go beyond a pictorial practice, with a sole interest in painting. It's also perfectly normal for me to use everything that passes within reach to produce images. Before access to the computer became democratic, I worked using analogue photography, then went through digital, then retouching images with Photoshop, which took me to compositing and 3D when I wanted to take on movement. So most of the work takes place in the initial stages, in order to arrive at the creation of an image which itself will be transformed into a painting or another medium. I think the work itself retains traces of the passages, exhibiting certain specific qualities and rejecting others and feeding itself as I go along...arriving at the final result, which is resolutely strange and complicated, is additive rather than synthetic, and which plays with the relationships of synesthesia while avoiding analogy. People working with these different media will be able to recognise the place and the way in which I borrow the qualities of these media. The whole is built around a pictorial pursuit.

M.A. : When I was talking about metamorphoses and traces, I was also talking about the transparency of the influences, not only from the media but also from works or artists...Is it

important, or even useful, for you to place yourself in a 'history' of art (in quotes, because in contemporary art everybody – almost everybody – is writing their own 'history')?

S.B. : My influences are visible from start to finish, and rather than speaking of influence I would speak of culture. That doesn't stop at contemporary culture: I'm very keen on art history, and that history still goes along with me. I feel invested with painting in the larger sense, and my real heroes died several centuries ago. Likewise, with respect to painting, I feel relations stretching over the centuries and I compare myself with them, it's even one of the things that drives me. I don't paint to be able to talk about something outside of painting; I use whatever comes within my reach to it to knead it around.

M.A. : What does it represent for you to find yourself 'compared', in a mirror, with a form of this History in the context of this exhibition?

S.B. : It's rather troubling to be compared with Richter, who is already part of art history. We'll see what that yields; it could be ridiculous, or not. For a long time his work was an absolute milestone for me. It's also exemplary in his questioning of the image and painting, as well as his multiple parallel paths of working. He's tackled all the pictorial questions. He's also an artist who symbolizes an era, and ours is a very different one, in any case for my generation. We talk of seventeenth-century art, now we talk of the art of the 1990s – a decade. What I'm putting across from him will be new pieces, which I don't have any distance from...and they weren't made for that confrontation. In fact, I'm curious to see it all, in the flesh, in the same room, in the same space, at the same time.

M.A. : With Richter, it seems to be far from the digital...however, it's the theme of the exhibition. Where is the digital in this artistic reflection? Is it the outcome, or simply a step?

S.B. : It's actually true, there is no digital with Richter: this is where he belongs to one era and we to another, one which really is different. You can truly feel that Richter doesn't have digital 'logic', with its own tools and specificities, and thus its own method of construction. Digital is how I personally was able to find an escape, even while at the bosom of painting, a way of forgetting Richter, and strangely to be able to re-think my pictorial practice, maybe through the need to take up an apprenticeship. Because there is nothing in common between pictorial and digital implementation, if it's not this necessity to think in visual terms. I think that digital is more a tool than an end in itself. I don't work on the digital, I use it in a natural way: all the tools are there and ask to be blended. I think I'm part of the first generation born with the computer, with computer games, the first design programmes, and 3D. As a child, I had design courses on computer where to be able to draw a line you had to encode the coordinates; after that everything else came very quickly up to the ability to create and manipulate any image. My generation is still a hybrid generation, between the analogue and the digital.

M.A. : What does 'a digital logic' mean? A way of doing, a practical process, or more a way of thinking of images?

S.B. : All three and one more: a 'culture'. A digital logic is thinking of the image by manipulation, it's thinking of the image as a sum of steps before its finality, it's a multitude of possibilities as to its appearance, with very little technical restriction: with time and familiarity, everything is possible. From *copy/paste* to the *green key*, the image in itself and its production are undergoing a revolution. It's the quintessence of the image created from all the pieces...there's not much room for the 'truth'.

M.A. : What would this ‘truth’ be? A relationship with the real? Going past Baudrillard’s famous simulacrum – more than the representation of something that doesn’t exist – and coming back to a representation of reality? Or is it more the idea of an emotion experienced?

S.B. : When I speak of ‘truth’ in quotation marks it’s more to talk of the real: the real, that’s the object in itself, physical and chemical. All the rest is nothing but the relationship with the real, that’s what interests me. Not to plot out what these objects are, but to dig into certain ways of approaching them (when I say ‘object’, it’s in the larger sense, everything that is not an image, reproduction or an interpretation). I’ve never carried on very far with my study of Baudrillard, but the art of painting stirs up a lot of questions about presence, reality, truth, reproduction, sentiments, and these are questions that have been out there since the ancient Greeks...It’s in this sense that painting is a real melting pot, one that it’s good to stick your hands in, a real can of worms in which everyone’s trying to find their own way. My project is to work on the painting itself, and to bring out certain of its qualities in order to render them ‘palpable’ for the viewer. I take the painting literally as a living being and it’s this aspect that I want to develop: there are numerous ways to study a living being, from mycology to drawings by botanists, or the study of its environment...As painting is also an idea and a certain way of approaching and constructing the real through vision and other senses, this goes through a study of the different ways of approaching this famous ‘real’.

M.A. : We discussed your influences and your clear relationship with specific artistic forms and artists. But there is also the influence of the images themselves. Like in previous stages of your career, your current work is heavily influenced by images distinctive of our western culture, may that be in terms of cinema, photography, art works (similar to the “homage” you paid to Nan Goldin in the group show “Storage – Extra Features”). Why this use? What is your relationship with these images? And why do you use black and white?

S.B. : I started working with that type of images because I wanted to bring out the pictorial issue, put my finger on its existence, an existence detached from concepts and rhetoric. My initial question was “how do I render painting obviously organic, how do I make it acquire its own and peculiar existence?” I used black and white images because strangely enough, black and white proved to generate more questions on reality than colour. Being a projection of reality, black and white allows possibly more freedom of interpretation. It allows more than what the eye sees. Black and white photography and film are also part of the History of image. Black and white are the colours of the past and of History, the “what has already been” so dear to Barthes. This perspective adds to my point since I want a physical relationship to be established with what I paint. At first, I used images taken from film history books in order to emphasize the connections these two art forms have between them, and to get closer to the structure of genre painting. Cinema presents complete reconstructions of events, just like painting is an accumulation of signs that make sense only at the end of the process, as opposed to the snapshot. At first there is no confusion. It’s different from what we see daily but at the same time it remains very familiar. Through the use of pre-existing images and their move towards other places the gaze turns towards image processing and what difference it conveys.

M.A. : In your last body of work you make use of documentary images taken from archives. Why do you move away from cultural representations and start focusing on the real?

S.B. : Archival documentary images are for me cultural representations as much as the ones I used previously. Mixing those two types of images in this project supports also the fact that fiction and reality can be very close and that we can move from one to the other without noticing. In information media, the viewer is conscious of the fact he is watching a reconstruction of the event: everything goes through the riddle of language and subjectivity. More so, the images I have chosen are the product of propaganda or of outdated sociological

representations. They are strongly connected to events that have already taken place but most importantly they transmit a clear ideology emphasized by time, which, re-introduced within a pictorial practice allows me to create a new History. Painting and History merge into one. I redefine a personal History of Painting and bring also into play a common heritage.

M.A. : Agnès Varda said, “The artistic process is to accept that the mind and impressions evolve towards something”. Do you have the impression that painting, sculpture, and digital allow you to create this ‘something’, from your reflections and impressions (I’d also say ‘sensations’)?

S.B. : My reflections and impressions are nothing outside of a practice. Painting or digital are the means that permit me to show what I see, and the result would be different if there were only one medium being used. It’s this multitude that makes my project ‘present’. And of course, what’s important to me is that other people feel what’s going through me. The ideal would be to forget that one is facing a painting, sculpture or 3D video to look at this ‘something’. It’s why each medium is used in a hybrid way: digital is coupled to the analogue of painting, painting to that of the image, whether digital or photographic if not cinematographic (the image in its larger sense), sculpture is a painting in the round or in relief. It’s important for me to not allow room for what’s called the intrinsic.

That said, I don’t really understand what Agnès Varda means by that...is she talking about an artistic vision of one’s own process, or the public’s position towards the work of art? To accept that the thing produced is perceived differently by others? To accept that the artist him-or herself hasn’t completely mastered the craft, and to let it be all right like that, if not healthy?

M.A. : I think that Varda was talking about accepting oneself as an artist, accepting that an individual is part of the artistic process from the moment that what he thinks and what he lives on a daily basis – various situations, impressions, sensations – are used for the creation of an art work. In your opinion, are the sculpture, the portrait and the works you are showing in this exhibition the representation of your thoughts? Are they your sensations? Your impressions? In other words, are they part of your flesh rather than a product of the virtual?

S.B. : I think that what I’m busy developing through painting is really a direct relationship with my sensations and a personal vision of things that contains elements from my subjectivity, from references, from high and low culture. This pictorial pursuit is a kind of filter through which I put everything. It’s an attempt to give form to something intimate, visceral, impalpable, indescribable. Personally, I don’t make any distinction between the virtual and the real in my daily life...I think these two states are constantly connected and their contact is what brings forth a certain sublime quality.