

With or without brush

The art of painting will forever remain an enigma. Taking the painter's easel as a reference, it turns out that after six centuries of painting, painters continue as before. Yet in the past hundred years the art of painting has often been treated roughly and innumerable have been the attempts to cast a slur on its reputation.

Painting has survived all of them. It has vanquished its critics and turns out to be inexhaustible when practised by someone who dares to challenge it — a challenge that is inspired by love or by an intimate knowledge of it. Stephan Balleux belongs to the latter category. Balleux understands that every painting is inevitably an illusion and wants to contribute his fair share to this illusion. He therefore explores the art of painting with all possible means available today: ancestral techniques in which the art of painting is anchored, but also the most modern and sophisticated technologies that may serve in his enquiry and aid the creative process.

Balleux departs from the art of painting or even from the view of painting in the media always to return to the same art of painting, taking various detours. For him, these are nothing but different stages, i.e. snapshots in time, none of which is definite. This mode of proceeding not only serves the creative process, but also refers to the cogwheels of space-time and their inexorable action, which becomes obvious in Balleux' paintings since vanitas motifs have started to appear. These provide the artist the opportunity to avoid all kinds of traps and ward off ill fortune. As his oeuvre grows, the indefatigable Balleux presents a sort of synthesis of the future. Contradictions are irrelevant in this respect—they are part and parcel of the process. According to Balleux, painting is not only anchored in shapes, colours and lines: what is in first instance essential is the twodimensionality of the image, which must be a translation of the illusion of the three-dimensional effect the subject perceives. In this respect the artist also refers to the various genres of painting: from portrait to vanitas scene, i.e. from the depiction of living beings to objects, no matter to what extent these are (un)real. And then there are his preferred moments in the history of art: the seventeenth century and the structural analyses of the twentieth century. With regard to the future, Balleux does not exclude, anything. The artist himself has a predilection for matter and the pictorial gesture, but is also charmed by virtuosity, more in particular by the accomplishments of the golden age of Northern painting, a virtuosity that underlies innumerable contemporary art works. The series of references cited here is not exhaustive, but gives an idea of the historical field that is concentrated in the contemporary work that is part of this historical field.

Precisely the modern technologies—media, photography, video, digital techniques—and their endless possibilities to register and transmit images, make contemporary art so interesting. It is particularly daring to retrace this rich and wonderful adventure with the brush in an age that is so in love with anything new, all the more so because in Balleux' work we notice a philosophical approach that does not neglect reality and makes us sense something of the rivalry between art on the one hand and the world or the universe on the other, a rivalry that has to do with the urge to be a creation that partakes fully of the aura of mystery. What could be called a pictorial tour de force, actually belongs to the realm of thinking: it is not an ostentatious show of dexterity. These so called tours de force are in fact fiction, just like the entire oeuvre. They are an integral part of the artistic process and are meaningless outside the context of the work. By choosing explicitly for matter and gesture, Stephan Balleux also emphatically chooses to explore two elements that are of paramount importance, not only with regard to painting. Matter is the origin of all things—even of that which is invisible. Through the gesture the creative act takes place, symbolically or otherwise, in the art of painting and in everything. Matter and gesture are also two of the elements through which the particular character of art is expressed and which have been studied extensively in the twentieth century. The transition to the virtual reality and digital manipulation — is painting not a form of manipulation in every respect, manipulation of our glance, of the image, of that which seems to belong to reality — does not exclude neither one, nor the other.

In the course of the last quarter century, many attempts have been made to integrate painting into something that is outside its own scope. These attempts have never led to convincing results. Yet Balleux continues to work inside the domain of painting. In this respect, he differs from other artists

who use modern technologies. These advanced technologies and the use he makes of them, allow him to explore the depths, the intimate realm of painting itself.

One of the most important aspects of Balleux' method is that he links the experience of the past with a future oriented experience of the present. He leaves the brush alone to address the realm of virtuality, only to return to the brush, in the confusion of a perception that is put to the test by doubt and ambiguity. For Balleux the reconstruction and exploration of the art of painting with digital techniques, is a novel, virtual mode of painting. As such, he does not deny painting-he creates, on the contrary, possibilities that were up till now out of reach of painting. While during the renaissance perspective proved a way to escape flatness, a way to evoke the visible or an imaginary world, today 3D techniques create a multitude of possibilities to explore space and movement. These possibilities are more numerous and more complex than could even be imagined within the framework of perspectival lines (a system put severely to the test by modernism), experimental film or video art. Through 3D techniques Balleux penetrates the art of painting and develops a creative process of which he records the various stages on DVD or in a painting. All of these stages are equally meaningful and all are complementary in the whole of the mental and pictorial process.

Balleux situates his work in a continuum by addressing existing images and thereby demonstrates that nothing is definite, that everything is merely appearance, that the world, everything which constitutes the world is inexorably beautiful and meaningful, unexpected and enigmatic, that everything will endlessly be questioned. Balleux' work is an ode to life with which he tries to ward off our transient fate.

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