

FIRST BLOOD

For S.E.

Prologue

Who, when reading a text such as this, has not regularly had the impression of losing the thread of what he thought to be following? The artist under discussion, several of whose works are already known to you, being what you had in mind when you opened the book in the first place, is gradually disappearing as the reader reaches further and further into what the author thought he was obliged to say about him. It is no longer the *same* artist they thought to share in a moment of complicity, seemingly about to be established between a well-meaning author and a consenting reader – since, amongst the considerable mass of publications consecrated to living artists at the present time, he has accepted to spend fifteen minutes of his undoubtedly precious time absorbed in this reading – which is however someone else’s reading: that of the person we were hoping would interpret the oeuvre, giving his *own* interpretation.

Writing and painting are engaged in a duel and Françoise Péetrovitch is not the unnamed artist I mention above. This struggle is played out between two protagonists, even if a third and more numerous competitor also takes part: the reader, the public... We never appreciate someone as much as when he is targeted in this particular test of strength, in this duel, where the goal is gain advantage over the adversary once and for all and break any kind of resistance. “Beauty is universal” (this expression from Kant¹, has been open to much misinterpretation, particularly as the word itself is today judged with great hostility, which is in itself a paradox as language, like a good number of other human activities, persists in its use even though how it is used is never criticised; except in the world of art...). Let’s move on. Beauty is universally pleasing because it constitutes the ideal of a certain craft, the fine arts, and once this theoretical ideal has been attained, each of us would find recognition in the plenitude of a universally shared feeling.

As the 18th century drew to a close, it was impossible to think otherwise even as we had already started to pour scorn on the idea of beauty – an atheistic gesture of one denying art in the same way as he

¹ Emmanuel Kant *Critique of Judgement (Kritik der Urteilskraft)* (1790)

denies the existence of God. It was only later that the two attitudes could be considered as separate. Thus Rimbaud's phrase "One evening I sat beauty in my lap. – And I found it bitter. – And I cursed it"² could take on value on its own – even if it is tainted with the attitude of a libertine. The real exclusion of beauty as an aim and intention in the world of art could only be formulated even later and with the condition that it be substituted with a different concept: An expression of harmony and agreement just as universally applicable as the idea beauty in ancient philosophy (*beautiful and good* in Greek moulding the words together: καλος καγαθός). Of all the different formulas elaborated during the last century only one is worth retaining as it resumes all the others: the "internal necessity" put forward by Kandinsky in *Concerning The Spiritual In Art*, published in 1911, harks back in all evidence to a lesson already heard in a milieu as much marked by Hegel's thought as those he frequented before becoming a painter and up until he settled in Murnau. Like Bonnard, Kandinsky had a legal education and he never gave up on elaborating different rules. These rules, even if he managed to lend them a particular tone, borrowed heavily from the ideas of his times, in which the art of antiquity (Classical art according to Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*) was elevated to the rank of a universal ideal.

Beauty is a state of eternal calm, a total harmony of content and presentation, between interior and exterior, a ideal of human activity – art – towards which, no artist can renounce the need to return. It is and always will be, the final destination. *L'Embarquement pour Cythère* by Watteau³ will always remain its symbolic expression and even the intervention of Eros is unable to distract us, so similar are our two goals. They have always been thus. Yet since the dawn of time, we have always known that art, just like Eros, has a destructive side as well as a creative one. And that is where this duel is played out, a fight that we have perhaps chosen to follow to its conclusion.

Birds

In 1927, Magritte produced a peculiar painting: *Jeune Fille Mangeant Un Oiseau*⁴, which François Pétrovitch one day decided to reproduce – the choice of this painting amongst his other works was perfectly

² Arthur Rimbaud, *Une saison en enfer*, Bruxelles, Alliance typographique, 1873, p. 1.

³ Antoine Watteau, *Pèlerinage à l'île de Cythère* (A Journey to Kythira), 1717, Louvre Museum, Painting section.

⁴ (*Young Girl Eating A Bird*) Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen.

reasoned as many of her later paintings drew inspiration from this oeuvre. The first version of this painting was exhibited at the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature⁵ in 2011, as part of the *Birds* exhibit. She recently produced updated and modified versions, with several faces and removing some of the primary violence of the first work. These paintings, which were first seen in her workshop at the beginning of 2014 (fig 1) represented early ideas for her *Lorsque la forêt s'éclaircit et retient ses animaux en elle*, a watercolour composition destined for print as the final work is in fact a panorama⁶ (fig 2). In this passage from one technique to another, we can recognise one of the characteristics of what we are going to call Françoise Pétrovitch's *painting*. For a long period of time, in line with conventional categorization, this painting was considered as drawing. The colour came from the use of watercolours; sometimes the drawing also led to an engraving – such as the extraordinarily beautiful *Garçon à la poupée* (2012)⁷, whose title alone hints at the virtues of transgression. All techniques are open to use, as all are readily available. If reproduction enables the artist to enlarge the format of a watercolour to more than the usual size of a painting, as is the case with *Lorsque la forêt...*, this technique becomes an integral part of the aesthetic construction of the work in the same way as an oeuvre conceived for engraving only really exists as a print. Similarly, in her work as a sculptor, ceramic and glass are the favoured materials. This choice is not through a desire to compete against or replace the traditional materials used in sculpture (wood, stone, bronze or lead) but simply because they enable her to add volume to her drawings – not simply a third dimension but also a direct chromatic intensity, resulting from the ingredients chosen to produce the material.

However, if Françoise Pétrovitch's art can be said to pay tribute to its epoch, that is to say it makes use of the possibilities of mechanical reproduction, its horizon is that of painting – and moreover painting which not only defies conventional frontiers, but also steps outside of temporal categories. If French painting seemed to be in difficulty at the beginning of the 21st century, the situation seems now to be improving and Françoise Pétrovitch is certainly one of the vectors of this improvement, perhaps even the most incisive – and she is of those, who without hesitation continue along their chosen paths,

⁵ The National Museum of Hunting and Natural History.

⁶ *Lorsque la forêt s'éclaircit et retient ses animaux en elle* (2014, 200 x 400cm) éditions Bernard Chaveau & Le Neant.

⁷ (Boy With Doll) Edition de la Chalcographie du Louvre, Réunion des Musées Nationaux.

surmount any obstacles along the way and push aside any resistance. The fight doesn't stop, when the first blood is drawn. In his film *Tristana*, (1970), Bunuel puts these words in the mouth of the character played by Fernando Rey: If honour has such a low price, he refuses to fight. I heard this expression for the first time, when I originally watched this film as an adolescent. It seems to me to apply to a large proportion of Françoise's work even if the title originated from her *Jeune Fille Mangeant Un Oiseau*, it happens that we discussed Bunuel's film together at the time I discovered the one-legged woman in *La Pirate* (Fig 3). I have no idea how much notice the artist took of the allusion to *Tristana* and Catherine Deneuve's severed leg. And of course we should naturally leave one part of the oeuvre's mystery in the hands of the artist. It is for this reason that I shall perhaps disappoint the reader by not advancing an interpretation or at least not advancing too far and allow Françoise Pétrovitch, as was the case with Magritte, who despised any attempt to psychoanalyse his painting, the space to create her disturbing scenes.

It is highly unusual to reproduce such a singular oeuvre⁸ and make it one's own, as if it were possible though assimilation (Copying, in the academic sense of the term), to absorb in turn the symbolic power of the object represented. A penis it is said – or perhaps a quite different operation is on display: the opposite of giving birth... Going in, not coming out. A living being but not an infant. Or perhaps: this being is concealing a tiny man and the young girl is simply a kinder figure than that of Kronos eating his infant gods, of which Goya created his vision and which remained in Magritte's memory, so difficult it was to escape. Kronos-Saturn, the repulsive figure of an all-powerful father, using and abusing his power over those in his dominion is suddenly transformed into a gracious and childlike being; and yet this pre-pubescent, feminine creature, still keeps her distance, for a short time longer, from the adult world and the age of reason. She can still allow herself this...

We have perhaps spoken more of René Magritte than Françoise Pétrovitch but what was true for the first in the creation of the model is at least partially true for the second in her reinterpretation; We

⁸ A singular work yet also a well known one; even so, part of the difficulty also lay in the work being rarely displayed and difficult to study. Magritte was passionate about modern means of mechanical reproduction, especially those used in advertising – which he had been involved in himself – yet he never reproduced this painting.

may even have used one to comment on the other, on the work of the painter by that of the *paintress* in the same way as she uses the feminine gender for *La Pirate...* Amongst the assembly of boys and girls who inhabit her recent paintings, a kind of ambiguous Arcadia has begun to take shape. It is a world at the limits of consciousness and the living world, always haunted by a subtle ambience of deviance. When speaking of the voyage of Ulysses, it is said that the hero is confronted with worlds that are in the image of man but only in appearance (Sometimes in the form of a caricature such as that of the Cyclops yet more often beautiful and seductive such as we imagine those of Circe or Calypso). Pétrovitch's world is one where anthropophagy is common and reversals and inversions are numerous – and fertile, because they create the image, from *the imaginary*. The children or adolescents from the cycle *La forêt s'éclaircit*, make me think of lotus-eaters absorbed in the narcotic dreams procured by the Lotus they ingest; inverted and unproductive manducation, creating only oblivion – In the Hells, the first stage of death, delivered by the Lethe to those who approach its banks.

Lieux-dits⁹

Françoise Pétrovitch didn't stop at the banks, and at least once made the crossing. Video, which she sometimes uses as a medium took on a rather strange aspect in a project (*Echo*, 2013) she created last year: A reflection in water, which imposes symmetry where we were expecting simple animation (Fig 4). The spectator is confronted with an image in the form of a double band: One half is the projection of the film itself, the other is its inverted reflection – the piece is intended to be projected above a pool of still water. What is shown above is also seen in the world below; though the two halves are not quite identical.

The use of doubles is also quite common in Pétrovitch's static images and each one creates a series of echoes as we have seen with the adolescents with birds. This all takes place as if it were necessary to anchor ones memories at regular intervals in order to fix an image in the mind, which in the same way as a dream is ready to be set in motion once again. That's what drawing is for. This is where its

⁹ Translators note: Lieu-dit is a term in French denoting a small geographical area bearing a traditional name.

singular immediacy and necessity are rooted. We draw in the same way as we write – and sometimes the inverse. Henri Michaux went beyond any limits in his practice; It is then hardly surprising that this strange art – that of Françoise Pétrovitch – resembles a pursuit of knowledge, an alchemist's quest, a *Connaissances par les gouffres*¹⁰ beyond which the identity of he, who is prepared to take the risk of adventuring along the path of imagination and to use his capacity to make things *appear*, is perhaps hidden.

Fixing images before they escape. Other artists might have produced landscapes; such an activity may well also have tempted Françoise at one time or another. Yet in her work, we are continually confronted with beings, beings in movement, often not having reached the age of reason, existing on the edges of the mind, where the lines between biological kingdoms are still blurred and the different branches may blend with each other. Animals take the form of humans; their children are transformed into beasts. These children are neither agitated nor calm; they are simply feral – it is as if they establish their own space, one that has followed the artist since childhood. And we won't be getting into Leonardo's dream¹¹ here.

The painter is in her own world when she seems to repeat herself. In reality, just like the rest of us, she never bathes twice in the same river; yet her path has often led her close to the same half-glimpsed clearing, a landscape cloaked in mist. Perhaps it is for this reason that in the painter's drawings, the backgrounds are often held in reserve. There is no pretence of depth, just the whiteness of the paper or perhaps the canvas. The apparition of a landscape, something quite recent, stems from the possibility of enlarging the image. This is how it first appeared; size dictates that there should be a background.

Isn't it odd? Although the forest is seen as a place to hide, the perfect place to lose oneself, it has in fact just revealed something to us – precisely at the spot, where it begins to thin out. Over a long period of

¹⁰ Translators note: *Connaissances par les gouffres* – Henri Michaux, 1961 (Knowledge from the Abyss)

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci*, 1910 (Leonardo da Vinci, A Memory of His Childhood)

time, I had a reoccurring dream of a wood with a dilapidated, half burnt out tower. I very rarely entered this tower. It was steeped in finality, and the shadows cast by the thick foliage only added to my anxiety, its reality as a background of the imagined.

This is not an interpretation.

Paint, repaint, epilogue

Amongst the jargon used by restorers – those technicians of the paintbrush, who are often more skilled in their craft than the original painters, forever restraining themselves from adding a touch too much with their brushes – we find a curious term the *repeint*¹². This term is used to describe the intervention by their predecessors on a painting having suffered the vicissitudes of time. The earlier imperfections that these repaints covered always reappear with time and the evolution of the pigments used. It is a way of emphasizing the fact that there has been a repair, something that has had to be filled in or mended.

The only true - provisory - definition of contemporary art is perhaps finally a technical one: it is not just art produced in the present, but more simply art that has just been produced – when the paint is still wet or the paper has just come out from under the printers plate or the glass cools down to take on a solid form. The period following this instant the work gradually evolves – the slow alteration in colour in Renaissance painting, due to sensitive pigments for example. Materials that have been fixed by heat are much more stable. It is easy to suspect Françoise Pétrovitch, who has so often used diluted watercolours – severely affected by light as well as the paper they are painted on – of having such a predilection for glass and ceramics for this very reason. If she could, I'm sure she would create paintings with it where she wouldn't be restricted to volume, but would invent a technique, which like Jean Crotti's *Gemmaux*¹³, which would attempt to challenge both the surface of the painting and the depth of the relief. The fascination the artist shows for new techniques, their invention and continual development – which makes it possible for art to have a *history* – will perhaps push her to find a formula for this philosopher's stone.

¹² Translators note: a repaint.

¹³ Translators note: technique developed by Jean Crotti in the 30s involving layers of coloured glass.

In the meantime, the artist, *this pirate woman* is not afraid of critics. The first time she exhibited a series of purely oil paintings at the expense of any other technique¹⁴, she welcomed the visitors with two snowmen, which are among the most iconoclastic works I know (Fig 5). Rather than taunting collectors in this way, she could have just given them a gentle waft of sulphur from the young girl with the slightly too dark eyes, her long hair flowing into drops of blood... (Fig 6, *Fille aux cheveux gouttes*). But no, they were childlike figures, but those trying to form children. Of those cotemporary artists who work with a brush, few would have attempted something similar: perhaps the risk of disappointment would be too great. There is no doubt that Françoise Pétrovitch did not just learn from Alberola, she is also part of the Martin Klippenberger family, whose work *Die Mütter von Josef Beuys* (1984), was discovered in Düsseldorf some time ago; an oeuvre I consider as one of the most incongruous and freest works that has ever existed. One could wear oneself out enumerating the layers of irony it contains... One might imagine it was conceived with one thing in mind (and in a burst of laughter): to incarnate *The Gay Science*.¹⁵

François Michaud, 9 May 2014.

Translation: Chris Atkinson

¹⁴ Semoise Gallery, March-May 2013. In parallel with this exhibition, the gallery also exposed a new series of her drawings at the Art Paris salon.

¹⁵ Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, Friedrich Nietzsche, 1882.