

THE ENCHANTMENT OF THE MOTIF

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The young inhabit Françoise Pétrovitch's drawings and paintings like characters from film or theatre. They make up her universe. Without their presence, her art would be something other. They are young, very young, children, adolescents, and adults. Although the artist also paints flowers, landscapes and animals, it is nevertheless human faces and bodies that are predominant, alone or in pairs, rarely in larger groups. These are "morally similar" portraits, to quote Baudelaire from his *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*¹ (1863), in the sense that they portray the *manners* of an era and a certain age group—an age that is resolutely modern. Indeed, Pétrovitch's girls and boys are certainly familiar to us in that we can immediately recognize contemporary gestures, attitudes and expressions. This is an experience similar to walking through the rooms of a museum and passing through several centuries of painting, observing within the portraits the "fashions, morality and passions" of an era that unite them in the same way as a family bond. The artist is committed to this kind of informal kinship even though the faces she paints are quite distinct. Indeed, Pétrovitch is not a portraitist of individuality but of mood. Her figures are bathed in an almost amniotic environment that composes them as much as they compose it. Thus her characters form a family of brothers and sisters, both similar yet different, a homogeneous population that remains *Untitled*². Although her figures emerge from the present, they are without context. Their homogeneity however denotes a certain point of view, that of someone observing a world to which she does not belong: that of a voyeur, who has built her own world from her observations.

For many years, the artist practiced mainly drawing, which in her own words remains her "base". Blood-red lines standing out against the white background of the wall or paper, underlining the incongruity of a representation that at the time the artist associated with childhood (equally with the infancy of art). In terms of context, in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in France, figurative painting was subject to the law of silence with a few notable exceptions such as Figuration Libre (Free Figuration) or the Transavantgarde that each in its own very different style was able to emphatically lay claim to the freedom to represent whatever they desired.

With the later introduction into her practice of painting and sculpture, the artist's universe was transformed and enlarged, investing spaces that had been hitherto kept in reserve. She savors the fluid or aqueous character of the oils and ink as well as the prehensile and resistant qualities of the clay she models to create her ceramics and bronzes. Drawing is nevertheless always present: hybridized, alternating between clear, tenuous and stringy strokes that free themselves from any outline, taking possession of the space, blurring bodies at the same moment as they emerge. Lines activate the medium, whether it is pictorial or earthen.

Françoise Pétrovitch has not abandoned the red lines that often outline her figures, reveal details or create an allure. Lines beat out different rhythms: expressive, suggestive, delicate or flattened out by the thickness of a brushstroke, they sculpt concrete presences and bring forth gestures captured from life. Red, the color of vitality, irrigates her often-evanescent figures. It can be used to express or materialize violence among the muted tones of a light palette. A flat tint in red on a cheek or covering hands that hide the eyes captures a certain emotion. A bloody triangle on a black bird, in a strange way evokes an evisceration or a bloody pubis. In the *Nocturne* series, red contrasts with black to produce a sepulchral effect.

Succinct, nimble and sensitive, Pétrovitch's drawing, like that of all great caricaturists, is capable of creating a being from a single line. In her work however, beings and emotions surpass their outlines. The characters transcend their figures and blend with their environment, undefined and ethereal. Her figurative art is based around the figure and plays on its opposition to the background that carries it.

Close-ups predominate. Bodies, faces and busts saturate the space and overflow from it. As in cinema, the frame determines the composition: the artist varies the focal length yet often opts for the use of the zoom and close-up views. The frames thus create clean cuts in the bodies and faces they truncate. Two adolescent girls, pictured from behind, molded into their cut-off jeans depict an ensemble of attitudes—elbows folded or arms crossed to carry a piece of clothing. These are syntactic bodies with their own grammar and vocabulary. The

¹Translator's note: *The Painter of Modern Life*.

² Many of the artist's works remain *Untitled*.

artist's work however is not simply a question of translating from one language into another but more of penetrating a universe and impregnating herself with it through the fluidity of her oils and ink.

In her series *Étendu*—very large ink drawings on paper—the artist has adopted a long shot vision: life-sized bodies in unexpected positions float in a watery space saturated with ink. Sleeping, languishing or dead, they appear as apparitions. The title ³ adopts a literality which allows us to project ourselves onto these screens / surfaces: the realistic bodies drawn from photographs taken by the artist, contrast with their monochrome backgrounds. They are *Ophelia*: but while Ophelia chooses the fatal and concrete eternity of the river, these figures abandon themselves to an interior eternity of dreams.

The positions of the *Étendu*, some of which are contorted and mannerist, evoke ecstasy, intoxication, pleasure, orgasm or death. They bring to the surface famous bodies of painting, notably the female nudes of the 19th century: Courbet's *La Femme au perroquet* (1866), Gauguin's melancholic and languorous nudes such as *La Perte de la virginité* (1891), Ingres' nudes or even Cabanel's *La Naissance de Vénus* (1863) come to mind.

Pétrovitch draws on the vast image bank of collective memory, where masterpieces co-exist in all simplicity.

These ambiguous postures suggest the support (sofa, ground) that might have produced them, yet it is never depicted—reality is what is missing in these *Étendu*, split between two worlds: reality and the dream. They are accompanied by a bird: this universal symbol covers so many meanings that it surpasses all of them. Yet this bird is a recurring motif in Pétrovitch's work; it appears in many paintings, out of proportion, sometimes huge or perhaps in the form of a discreet filigree superimposed on a body. The artist is displaying a feeling, perhaps even sentimentality, that of her protagonists, which she captures without ambiguity. Indeed why try to hide these fires that cannot be put out, that flow through us, as sweet emotions?

Foule sentimentale

On a soif d'idéal

Attirée par les étoiles, les voiles

Que des choses pas commerciales

Foule sentimentale

Il faut voir comme on nous parle

*Comme on nous parle*⁴

(Alain Souchon)

Paintings, drawings and sculptures, proffered as the tracing of juvenile emotions—of a youth full of heart and blood. Even if in contemporary art we readily adopt popular culture, it is most often used as an ironic or critical lever, suppressing the literal meaning of its sentimental nature, even if this is its predominant feature. Pétrovitch doesn't give a hoot about these conventions; she actively seeks out this side of our psychic and social mirror, the side where appearances are merely a smokescreen. In this way she explores the clichés of popular contemporary and ancient imagery, as do many of today's artists and painters, but without fear of entering an emotional core or getting under any social skins. The animal hide to her *Donkeyskin*⁵, moving yet in such a simple way, offers itself up as a silent lesson on the unfathomable depth of appearances.

The artist however delves deeper into these appearances in her sculptures, the surfaces of which she makes shine and resonate. There are no nudes in Pétrovitch's work. She paints her bodies clothed. Clothing has always been a wonderful subject for painting, whether classical, modern or contemporary. Pétrovitch, for her part, paints bodies of fabric that fill the canvas: the clothing dictates the atmosphere. It pours forth and blends into the environment.

A young girl is sat wearing a pink t-shirt; our eyes are drawn into the relief created by the fabric and the pleats of the jeans, hanging onto details, her nail varnish and the palm tree on the t-shirt. Our gaze penetrates the depths of a ready-to-wear presence that eludes us and comes apart. With their bulges and motifs, the

³ Translator's note: *Stretched Out*.

⁴ Translator's note: *Oh sentimental masses / Thirsty for ideals / Drawn by stars and sails / Never by commercial matters / Oh sentimental masses / You should see how they speak to us / How they speak to us*

⁵ Translator's note: *Peau d'âne*.

bodies transform into landscapes. These clothing landscapes absorb their wearers and lend relief to the fleeting, the transitory and fashion. In doing this, Pétrovitch gently makes appearances implode, becoming transparent and fluid like the water of the dreams and tales, from which these appearances are created: we bear fiction both on and within ourselves.

If the artist herself delves into appearances, she leaves us on the edge of her translucent visions: “There is no truth in perceptible appearances. There is only truth in the perceptible, where it shows nothing of itself.”⁶ Pétrovitch reveals this discord of appearances by exploring it in depth and producing a vision of it that is both precise and evanescent: a vision that is above all *her own*. It is both diaphanous and tangible depending on the medium used, as it is also embodied in her telluric sculptures destined to inhabit woods and gardens.

All Pétrovitch’s paintings, the lighter canvases as well as the more somber *Nocturne*, create a particular atmosphere: in the former, it is crystalline, aqueous, as subjects and backgrounds intermingle, while in the latter, the dense atmosphere stems from the opposition of red and black. Figures emerge from a suffocating night, tarry like the blacks found in 19th century painting. The bone, glowing red on its dark background is a counterpart of Manet’s Asparagus depicted in daylight. There is nothing tragic about Pétrovitch’s *Nocturne*, they are more theatrical or grotesque in nature—in the same way as the expressionist tragedies—the fiery-red hair reminding us of Munch. We can also recognize Halloween costumes, an archaic Christian celebration that is very popular with young people.

Pétrovitch’s characters are not absorbed by an activity unlike those of Chardin or Greuze as described by Michael Fried, but rather by their dreams and thoughts. “I want to paint an inner conscience,” the artist explains. Their eyes are turned inwards: closed eyes (the title of an emblematic painting by Redon), vague, astonished or distraught. A boy is smoking; he has green hair and dark circles around his eyes, his hands are white, as white as the paper. A young, androgynous figure is also smoking; his hair is short against a red background, his eyes are circled with red and his knees are bent, forming an angular cocoon. Both of them are pulling on their cigarettes. This typical gesture of consuming disquiet is easily recognizable; its expression contaminates the entire surface, in the manner of the Symbolists, yet without the resonance, the reciprocal echo between the figure and the background, actually constituting any form of harmony or even the outpouring of a certain anguish, or of a scream.

Pétrovitch expresses a way, a manner of being: an oscillating presence / absence that she never attempts to elucidate; on the contrary she evokes it as a state to be lived or experienced. Her figures swing between two lives: “Since living another life implies first living in a different time. And boredom is the entry-point of this other time. It is the experience of unfilled time.”⁷ A child clutching a ball of black hair is a clown, whose dazed eyes, circled in green, stare at the ground. The artist accentuates her characters’ melancholic expressions, their feelings of prostration, which in turn or at the same time, combine the sentimental with the comical. Is youth or childhood not a disguise? That adults invent and fantasize over and that young people actually take on?

Very few of the faces look at the spectator. If they do, they give the impression that they don’t want to see us. You can’t really see me they seem to say as they dissolve into the background. They bring us back to the reality of appearances. So what do you see? What is a face? A girl with dark skin stares at us. Her two white retinas punctured by black almonds are transparent. The duality of her stare invites us to lose ourselves. The artist leaves us on the edge, on the frontier of definitive meaning. “The face is meaning, but meaning without context: the face has a meaning alone.”⁸

⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Les Bords de la fiction*, 2017, Paris, éditions du Seuil, p. 48.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 151

⁸ *Ibid.*