

The Painter's Alphabet

Among the young generation of artists, there are some who reject those authoritarian figures which are conceptualism and technique. Damien Cabanes' gouaches on paper and polychrome volumes cannot be summed up as the demonstration of a grammar. They do not seek a construction. They don't apply an agenda. They are not ripe for explanations. In front of them, the more one is convinced by what one sees, the less one is sure of what one says. Hitherto, opprobrium was conveyed in a single word: *retinal*. It is a *retinal* painting, a statementless question, asked to what one sees. It works just for an instant, a way of appearing. Its truth lies in astonishment. Its whole stems from an anachronistic ambition: it wants to provoke a reaction, an adherence. Seeing and desiring end up meaning the same thing. We might remember the strange phrase in the Bible: "He looked at her and he saw her." The ambition of painting lies in this sudden opening. But Cabanes does not seek a frontal impact, merely a breathing space. The mistakes, the failures, the ruined canvases all prove the difficulty of such an objective. A breathing space signifies an impression of lightness or calmness. If this impression is so difficult to achieve, it is because it depends on a threshold or a tipping point. A polychrome plaster or a gouache by Cabanes opens into a silent, naked space. It is neither a piece of architecture nor a landscape, it is a place without geography, a stretch of air or an elsewhere.

Maybe one should suggest an equivalent, even approximative, to convey the scope of simplicity and ambition? Morandi's paintings, for example, first *metaphysical*, then more humble and tighter, always turn towards the light. With regard to the Italian, we remember critic Jean-Marc Gleize's pertinent borrowing of a title by poet Claude Royet-Journoud: *objects contain infinity*. The air is now infinity: we will be accused of indulgence with the metaphor. But painters have always wanted to represent the impossible with limited means. Moreover, the more these means are elementary, the more the painter manages to bridge their literalness. Cabanes and Morandi share a belief: in painting, the right position is that of the primitives. To admire them is to return to basics, at the foot of the ladder, and to return to painting in its inarticulacy, spelled out in its true terms. First and foremost it is to give depth and expanse to that which does not possess it. In the West, there is a sort of yardstick of this poor thing that is a painting: the Siennese Ambrogio Lorenzetti's landscape with a boat, a tempera on plaster and wood. One can imagine this craftsman biting his tongue, in his effort, his obstinate fervour. The painting of this innocence is salutary. It gives pride of place to a place of creation and invention, to a utopia. Cabanes' polychrome plasters and landscapes reveal similar places at similar moments: coloured outlines, a sensation of freshness contained in the very word: fresco. Plaster or lime welcomes this freshness, these distempers whose first quality is their immediacy, a surging up. A real painting testifies to what is original in the regard. All his life Malevich tried to preserve, like a compass, "the emotional character of folk art." Cabanes' architectural fragments belong to an archetypal, rural geography. His steles or stupas evoke the monumental with modesty. His coloured motifs recall the churches of Cappadocia and lamaseries of Tibet. If the building is unpretentious, it is because one can see man's hand in it, as in constructions in cob or mud brick. The colour is added on top, as a surface decoration or like those votive pigments that one throws on passing processions in India. It tints without obscuring. It is the mason's final gesture. It is there to attract and seduce. It seems fragile and temporary. Cabanes doesn't premeditate anything. He follows his hands. He believes they are more intelligent than his head. Though, reflection is for models, sketches, preliminary studies in clay. The latter dispel the fear of having to create. Never has the least project served to make the least construction. It is neither the same time, nor the same reign. One creates so that an outburst of intuition precedes thought, to immerse oneself

body and soul in what one is doing and to react like an animal, certainly not to verify the well-foundedness of one's skills.

One day it will be necessary to wake up from the nightmare of the systematic rationalisation of the arts. One day it will be necessary to lose the limits of this dessication. Knowledge is laughable when it can be reduced to the dogmas participating in the *artistically correct* of the moment. Today, an entire generation, preceded by Cabanes, is no longer satisfied with a typical painting lesson or a *ready-made* instruction manual. This generation, which is once more interested in painting from nature, moves faster than the terms – old-fashioned, reactionary – with which one seeks to reduce it. On the contrary, it is situated at the opposite extreme from nostalgia. There is a witticism some painters like to recite: “One doesn't return to painting, one arrives there...” This generation is not put off by stereotypical prejudices. It knows it is futile to want to pick up the heritage of the avant-garde where they had left off. It serves nothing to start from the point reached by a Matisse, a Malevich, a Mondrian, a Newman or a Pollock. It is equally useless to borrow the recipes of a Richter. As they have all shown, one must be capable of digging one's own path from the start. In any case, just as it is certain that the figurative painting of the 1980s could only come after abstraction (German neo-expressionism an heir of American expressionism, for example), the painters of the 1990s who work from nature are all the heirs of the avant-garde. Except, they no longer want to make use of its thought. On the contrary, they know that an instrumentalised theory of painting is a dead end. In a way, they are returning to a wasteland. They are trying to give it a truly wild quality that neither deliberate mental arithmetic nor the omnipresent model of the photographic image can provide. It is in this sense that they are a new breed of primitives, who are reinventing our regard on recent museums. To return to nature is to leave the intimidating force of a History premeditated by the museum before it has even taken place. Today, many young painters think that, to twist a phrase by Reverdy about poetry, “like fish, art rots from the head down.” They no longer want painting to be an exercise in authority, that is to say, works uniquely concerned by their self-legitimation. The open air represents neither an escape nor a margin – and certainly not a way to go underground – but the certainty of having to return to basics. What else is it than being willing to lose oneself, to risk oneself in a space without safety nets? Cabanes' polychrome plasters and gouaches are examples of a letting go or the abandon of used formulae. He hazards towards pure presence. He ventures there without revendicating such a space, as if he understands that there is nothing else to show than his freedom.

Frédéric Valabrègue, 1998.

Translated from French by Natasha Edwards.