

Conversation between Bernard Piffaretti and Matt Connors:
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Matt Connors:

My anxiety at asking the first question is feeling very familiar to me. It is very similar to the sort of angst I feel when I have to make the first mark on a painting.

This led me to think about what I imagine to be the first mark/stroke of *your* paintings, the central line, which divides the two halves of each work. To me, this mark of yours reads as a sort of question rather than a defining line or a statement, or even a figure in any kind of space.

As I am reading the texts about your work, the idea of questioning seems to be a real theme, and the title of your talk "**duplication is a question**" has been running around in my head like a mantra since I first read it. I also read that one of the first times you utilized the duplication around a central line, the title for the work included the word doubt (*Paradigme, peinture de doute*).

I feel so sympathetic to this idea of questioning and doubt as the generating work and ideas, rather than preventing them. Am I reading you correctly? Is this still an important concept for you and how has your relationship to working through doubt and questioning evolved?

Bernard Piffaretti:

You are quite right Matt. The central mark is in effect the generator that has allowed me to paint for more than 25 years, "the painting (tableau) of the painting". It is indeed more the clutch of my pictorial engagement than a will to work in and around the question of double with - as its tutelary figure - doubt.

I just returned from Madrid, where I saw René Daniëls' exhibition. Although our representational universes are quite different, I feel that we approach things with much the same state of mind. He also has a central figure in his paintings; a "staging" within the canvas; and an open similarity to areas of "reflection." In a more general sense I find that - as we advance in our lives - for both of us, the act of painting is approached in much the same way.

My central marking can be seen as the "guiding thread" (fil rouge) that links my paintings in a continuum. As in life, it is made of changes. A painting will already differ from its predecessors in format. In addition, the pictorial situations put in place create a sort of stylistic rupture. This has the effect of giving to be seen a "lightness" in the act of painting. As a result, all expressionist pathos is evacuated.

One could say that motifs change, but the motivation remains unchanged. Staying avowedly coherent in all these combinations. A grand constellation that has been unfolding since the mid 80's. The title of my latest exhibition, "Montage" (Galerie Frank Elbaz FIAC Art Fair 2011) sums up these points in my opinion. The gigantic montage puts the paint to work. If there are repetitions, they are never the same -- all is reenacted. This state of mind becomes an "art de vivre" (way of life). The paintings are phrases and acts all at the same time.

Matt Connors:

I've been reading about the concept and representation of *time* in (mostly non painting) conceptual art, and it made me realize that one of the most perplexing and really compelling things about your work, your action of doubling and "repeating", is that you are kind of undoing any sense/logic or progression of time that could arise, the very concept of doubling kind of implies that there is a first and *then* a second, and in your works all of these logics are dismantled, and for me at least, they cause a kind of perceptual slippage or instability, that I think produces a kind of uncanny-ness.

I think that when someone looks at an abstract painting, they subconsciously/mentally reconstruct the making/painting of the work from beginning to finish. Perhaps this is related to Abstraction's historical and popular connection to expression - it's direct connection to the body (and thus emotions) of the painter/maker.

This reconstruction is impossible in your work, and leaves the viewer in a (in my opinion) very productive state of confusion. Do you think about time at all in your work?

I know you said that you are attempting to evacuate all expression. Is this a means with which to do that? To totally disconnect the marks, the work in general, from any sense or sequence of their actual making, thus leaving them free to stand totally on their own, as kind of inscrutable objects, and therefore expressive in a totally different way?

Bernard Piffaretti:

You know, Matt, when I first started thinking about what my work might become, I had just read Bernard Lamblin's book, entitled *Peinture et Temps* [Painting and Time]. This thesis had just been published in the early 1980's. This text has probably not been translated into English. As you said, most texts deal with the question of time in relation to conceptual art, but in a way, I think that my painting is conceptual. Clearly, the question of time and duration is unavoidable in the history of painting and in the practice of this medium.

What you say about abstract expressionist painting, regarding its perception and its comprehension, is quite right. There is always something evident, if one knows how to look at it. It shows how it has been executed and what it is made of. The keen eye will be able to reproduce the different moments of its "construction."

This linearity of time seems to you, quite correctly, to be perturbed when you stand in front of my paintings. Indeed, the repetition causes this linearity to stutter. There's a kind of standstill. It becomes impossible (for the viewer when she/he is facing the painting, and even for me after a few months) to know with any certainty which side presided over the other. Moreover, as soon as I conceive a pictorial situation, I know it will be reproduced on the other side of the painting. It almost becomes, from that very moment, the memory of its own duplication. So, as you perfectly understood, all expression is frozen. It is thus the passing to the other side of the central mark that will disconnect this original moment— another important question — in relation to the concept of time. Indeed it is this mark that delineates this process, but this same process makes us unstable and consequently more astute observers.

My painting is built around a great paradox: To deny in order to better assert. My painting thinks and puts its thinking on display. It will unfold and thus deny its essential issues and underlying basis: chronology, origin, ending, incompleteness, series, montage, reproduction, etc... These are archetypal figures in painting.

In this case, the question of repetition, of reproduction, will not consist of mechanical reproduction, by using photography or silk-screening, as so many other painters have done or do.

Multiples or the truth claim of photography are not in play here. One must "paint" all the more strongly. Paradoxically, it is through ordinary reproduction, step by step, of the various periods of the painting's first half (what you alluded to before with the linear reading of expressionist painting) that the image of the painting will emerge by a "double" negation.

If one looks carefully at what time has deployed as pictorial possibilities, very quickly, fundamental issues with regard to reproduction set themselves up as stereotypes (*poncifs*). It makes sense, since the stereotype is the archetype of imagination as Baudelaire said. De-composition, re-composition of these pictorial situations will make up paintings in the end. Little by little, these paintings will give shape to other paintings.

The paintings are indeed images of themselves. They transform iconic images into codes to deconstruct this mechanism.

Bernard Piffaretti:

In order to clarify the "expression" of my territory, I will depict for you, Matt, what surrounds it.

The "Panorama" – which is the title of Gerhard Richter's current exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris – declares among other things that if painting looks to and depends on photography, it is because of a belief that gives it the power to represent its subjects faithfully. This makes a great classical painter of Richter.

As for Andy Warhol, he didn't beat around the bush. It is indeed through the reproducibility (by means of silk-screen) of his celebrity subjects as mass products, that he questioned the process of the pictorial creation with his powerful credo, telling us he is a machine. A royal road making him "The artist".

Processes relating to photography and its potential for multiplication will be used as criticism of the artist's "creative" act and subjectivity which vouch for his authenticity. Robert Rauschenberg certainly won't be the one to disagree with me on this point; he put a photograph amidst his pictorial gestures in *Factum I* and in *Factum II*.

The pixel of reproduced images would even become the great Roy Lichtenstein's signature. Sigmar Polke would make it his own, obviously for different reasons. But for both of them, the image is "central" in the painting. The pixel of a printed image becomes a veritable motif in itself. Neither Albert Oehlen, nor Christopher Wool will disagree with me on this "point." At a time, these two had rather similar paintings, made of digital printing with additions of pictorial gestures. Albert Oehlen quickly went back to the classic couple of expressionist gestures enhanced with pasted ironic images or photographs.

Christopher Wool, more radical, and in my opinion more interesting, has been trying to "exhaust" himself for almost ten years. He is confronting endless reproduction. This reproduction inscribes almost identical motifs in order to vary and change their expression. Using photographic halftones, screen-printing will revamp the expression of images in the end.

As for Wade Guyton, he would make a monochrome painting out of the inking of a digital print. This brief list of highlights of the last half century could have gone all the way back to cubist collages and even to Seurat. I am detailing them for you, Matt, to stress that I fit between the lines, in counterpoint, in negative (no pun intended) of this "photographic" tradition. My paintings don't need to call forth this "enemy sibling" to take shape. It is the memorized shape of painting which will reproduce the pictorial practice as a painting.

Bernard Piffaretti:

For the Los Angeles exhibition at Cherry and Martin, the title "Report" imposed itself, as usual, very naturally. In French, the word means to redo the same figure in another place. But it also means to postpone a project to a later time. The large grey painting with its unpainted right half started with writing this word. It was supposed to be part of what I would usually call my "metapaintings" in my pictorial production. These paintings present a word (doubled!) whose meaning underscores one of the foundations of my work. At the moment of creation, this "title" was sort of floating. Consequently, I followed up on this first part by adding other pictorial situations that I felt were necessary. These lead me to obliterate the word bit by bit – a blotting out that made it almost entirely disappear. That's the moment when the painting attained its pictorial significance. The visual intricacy as well as my deficient memory made it impossible for me to retrace step by step what had led to the first montage. This "report" – since that is the meaning of the word "report" in your mother tongue –, the recounting of the sequence of the painting's construction, was then stopped. It is through this dearth, this accepted lack, that the title of the exhibition makes full sense. The reproduction is postponed until later. It's the observer who will be the one doing the reporting for him/herself, live during the show.

On top of the paintings, this report on my painting will be underlined also by showing what I call: "by-products" (*produits dérivés*).

These figures – including the "*dessins après tableaux*" ["drawings after paintings"] since 1992, the "*petits tableaux*" ["small paintings"] in 1995, the "*poncifs*" ["pouncing" or "stereotype" in English (TN)] in 2001 and the "*tableaux en négatif*" ["negative paintings"] in 2010 – have regularly related in a yearly session what has been going on in the 6 to 8 previous months.

The "drawings after paintings" show the image of a particular painting. They are made out of time compared to the usual use of drawing as preparatory work.

The "small paintings" reuse a bit of unused canvas that was used for one of the year's paintings. They only feature the central mark in black as a drawing sign.

A "*poncif*" – a halftone digital image of a painting – underscores that the pictorial situations that have been used all belong to the general history of painting. It is in fact no coincidence that the French word "*poncif*" [stereotype] derives from the reproduction technique [pouncing] used in the 16th century to duplicate a pattern. Of course this comes back to my position on the reproduction of images in "the age of mechanical reproduction".

Finally, the "negative paintings" – fragments of non-existing paintings – bring into focus by means of its circular form the element which generates the paintings: the central mark. The slight displacements or movements with respect to this axis, point out the missing part of the report. I am now anxious to see all this "live" in the gallery and, of course, in the *Los Angeles Times*...

Matt Connors :

I'm just back from Los Angeles, where I had the chance to see the exhibition DESTROY THE PICTURE; PAINTING THE VOID, which looks at paintings from the period between 1949 - 1962 when artists were acting out their psychological, existential, intellectual angst and questioning physically, LITERALLY, onto the actual material of painting. Creating very graphic works with a kind of one to one physical (and thus pictorial) relationship with this idea of destruction and the void.

It strikes me that when you come along with your own strategies of doubling - you are essentially engaging with a similar ATTACK onto the picture plane, de and re - construction, albeit via a more conceptual, cerebral activity, wherein the rupture happens mostly within the viewer's (troubled/ slowed-down/complicated) reception of the work and its composition. As we said earlier in this conversation, you are creating a real destabilization, however by *interrupting* a possible viewer's idea of structure, time and construction of meaning and expression. This "stutter" that you spoke of before (i really love this idea), seemed to me when viewing this exhibition in Los Angeles, to have real ancestors in these more physical iterations of artists (actually) grappling with the PAINTING/ picture plane. Do you feel a relationship to this work at all?

Bernard Piffaretti:

With a little luck I might get to the exhibition at MOCA in Los Angeles. Without going into the details, I can say that my "attack" on painting in relation to this generation of artists is, as you say, more cerebral and more conceptual. At the same time it's true for Fontana, in particular, that his ideas and his painting revolve around his *concetto spaziale*. He himself emphasized what he was doing when he said—I'm quoting from memory here—"I make a hole in the canvas and I escape symbolically, but also materially, from the prison of the flat surface."

With Yves Klein, to put it briefly, the first monochromes were the very image of the pure color concept. In his "attacks" on the picture, armed with his "flamethrower brush", and his anthropometries, armed with his women (brushes), he was right there in the "action" and the "performance" of the early 1960s.

It's maybe through these two artists, who destroy the "image" of "traditional" painting—who paint the void, to borrow the title of the exhibition—that we could establish a few connecting strands with the basis of my own approach.

But generally speaking I feel I'm at a remove from the concerns the MOCA show is pointing to. We mustn't forget the post-traumatic climate of the postwar period. Emblematically Fautrier's *Remains* and *Hostages* become abstract representations of the human figure and of nothingness.

I'm not a hostage to my painting process. And the "postponing" leading up to the appearance of my pictures has nothing to do with the remains of painting. The dual structure of the picture is a kind of tool where form and function merge. True, the central strip interrupts the usual way of reading a picture. It signals a starting-over. This stammering, as you point out, is active. If there's destruction, it's destruction of the picture as a state of contemplation. The restraint of this gesture

means we're dealing with a (soft) revolution in the picture.

But of course the more physical "attack" on the picture by these artists of the 50s/60s also ties in with the output of some artists of my own or a younger generation. Take Steven Parrino, for example, where there's a calculated violence applied to certain myths, from the Russian Suprematists through Stella, and including images from the subculture. But also there's the utilization of monochrome painting via a crumpled canvas not lined up with its stretcher. In a way Parrino's reacting against flat painting in a stance that ossifies a certain formalism coupled with a flagrant detachment. For him monochrome's no longer the end or the beginning of painting. That's not the issue any more. It seems to me that for him this monochrome is also a tool, the way the central strip is for me. In both cases I'd say that "stances become form."

With the younger generation, someone like Davide Balula – who, like me, shows at Galerie Frank Elbaz in Paris—uses the outcome of a kind of experiment to offer us a modified picture "surface". His "river paintings" and buried canvases record "accidental images" springing from the chaos produced by natural phenomena. With his burnt surfaces Balula exhibits a state falling just short of nothing. All these acts speak about the disorder of our world. It's also, I think, a certain way of painting the void or, at the very least, a presence/absence of the creative act.

The history of the canvas, the painting, damaged by natural phenomena could be seen as running from Edvard Munch to Simon Hantaï, and including the Support-Surfaces artists.

The ultimately important point that I can foreground out of all these "figures of disorder", however closely or distantly related to my own concerns, would be the recurrences of stances and acts. These things underpin our history in general, but also our history of art in particular. Seen in that light these reprises, these second-times-round, obviously have something to say in my work.

Matt Connors:

I have been constantly coming back to the work of the French poet Raymond Roussel when thinking about your work. Specifically his means of composition wherein he set the task for himself to begin and end certain works with phrases that were homophonous, i.e. sentences that when pronounced aloud would sound identical but when written are constructed of completely different words (and thus have similarly different meanings). He would then set the task for himself to compose some kind of story or narrative that would connect these two sentences, and the resulting compositions were often quite unusual, creating completely unexpected imagery, and structure.

I think in all of Roussel's work there's a play with doubling, similarity and difference, monotony and repetition, that in his hands become incredibly rich tools for creating almost accidental images and even meaning.

For me, in Roussel's work, similar to poetry, the act of reading the actual text has a side-effect of creating a floating impression or meaning that exists somehow outside of or above the actual physical words, and this resonates for me with the way that I encounter your work.

I feel like I'm kind of babbling here, but I guess I'm wondering if Roussel is a figure you have looked at or thought about, and if his strategies self imposed limitations (not unlike the later french literary group, OULIPO) seem to you to have any bearing on yours.

Bernard Piffaretti:

It's funny you should ask me that question, Matt, about Raymond Roussel and his "form" of writing. Only a couple of weeks ago I reread *Impressions of Africa*. The first time was in 1982-83. What's for certain is that his writing process creates disjunctions whose open-endedness finishes up by making sense. A bit like in my painting. The physicality of words in Roussel could illustrate the physicality of the act of painting in my case. Postponement of the pictorial situation is in fact much stronger than a direct act. That central mark constitutes an interruption, but paradoxically, at the same time, as we've seen, a connection, an opening.

You're right, Matt, I think that in that figure, which entails certain acts, there's an "attack" on flat painting or the traditional picture.

To come back to Raymond Roussel, it's interesting that his writing is a false-bottomed box, and it's not for nothing that the title of his first book is *La Doublure*, "the double."

Since rereading Roussel I've made the leap to rereading Thomas Pynchon's first book, *Slow Learner*, and as it happens his slow learner is none other than his own double. But this choice on my part probably has to do with the imminent prospect of tracking down the Beat Generation, which, it has to be said, was the breeding ground for those early writings. So, Matt, on the road (AGAIN).