

Keeping painting at bay

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Muriel Rodolosse hasn't conducted her work for some twenty years without, in the course of her career, being compelled to abandon trails, techniques, supports or motives for others more promising, more inviting. Listening to the artist recounting the chronology of her work, its stages, its slow maturing or sudden mutations, her slidings or adjustings are always made for quite distinct reasons.

If only retrospectively, she knows perfectly well how to explain what has led her to pass from the canvas to Plexiglas, from painting to silicone (and vice versa), from abstraction to figuration, or to venture towards performance. But, in spite of those countless experimentations through various mediums, in spite of passing from one means to the other, the credo remains the same, fundamentally the same: painting, that practise implemented and questioned so often in the history of mankind that it has become intimidating and glacial. A monster cold as death, on which everything should already have been said and tried in order to kill it and resurrect it successively, so much so that it would no longer be possible today to engage in it without stammering the lessons of the great masters or even those of the avant-garde, without repeating the same drama

but with the tone of a farce this time, finally without carrying on one's frail shoulders the weight of theory that ends up curbing the impetus. Painting became, in a way, sick of itself. The painters – in France especially – had to submit and their work bore witness to a certain form of pictorial masochism through tormented canvases, slashed motives, deformed bodies struggling to emerge from a matrix of asphyxiating painting. The other option was to go and search in the direction of amateur practices in order to free oneself from theoretical discourses and redefine the status of the painter. This option, milked for all its worth by Martin Kippenberger at the end of the Seventies, further excavated by Jim Shaw at the beginning of the Nineties, by Michael Krebber and many others today, also includes an ironic criticism of the laws of the art market.

A third way aims at rubbing painting against other mediums, by taking it out of its traditional surrounding, by using means generally considered inadvisable and in a way by pushing one's luck. In that vein, painters multiply the constraints like Oulipo used to cumulate willingly the handicaps with that purpose in mind: to destabilize the text, the syntax and narration to set them better in motion. To restart the novel's mechanics.

Muriel Rodolosse wants her art to be changing and eventful in order to put painting back in a forward direction in a better way. But that forward facing doesn't obey the whim of a vague and random wandering. It is moved by desires as well as by constraints (of time, place, means). It keeps the traces of that through which it has passed and doesn't abandon anything before having removed a thread, a conductor that will lead it somewhere, to the place where it will be necessary to undo all the stitches in order to rework a piece which constantly moves back, veers off course and changes its destination. Like that performance artist who carries along a whole set of schematic tools and bravely makes her way, though not without difficulty or detours, through the city to the exhibition place, let's try to recapitulate the stages of Muriel Rodolosse's work by following her side streets.

At the very beginning, she seems to recite the whole gamut of the painting of the time, those Eighties, matter-orientated and striving to write on the canvas as much as erase the artist's imprint. With a sandy and ochre palette, she proceeds by small round touches: the painting remains in a heap, a ball, tightened like a knot in the pit of the stomach. Something is not working. Is not obvious: the painting is looking for a way at the same time as the artist. It is, according to her words, the "magma of the studio" that coats the surface of the canvas. Which is therefore a mirror of the studio or rather its fragment or its extraction.

It is attached to it, to it and its components, to the matter that is stored there, and the tentative research the artist engages in. The canvas drags on forever in the process of its fabrication. And is logically finished as it fizzles out. Fizzling out in the shape of some kind of twist. Applied directly from the tube to the canvas, that rough paste brings to it the last touch and serves as "signature" in the eyes of the artist. It is the painting alone that signs, and that, alone, gives a sign. A sign of what? That one shouldn't see there the trace of a subject other than itself, as mysterious as derisory: painting (and not the painter, for example, and still less a landscape).

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To whom is it giving a sign? To the spectator obviously, but undoubtedly even more to the era, to the artist herself who is going to follow that "alleyway" like an Ariadne's thread. And will end up wearing it out. Soon, the plane and frontal space of the painting goes hand in hand with a space in perspective. The alleyway of painting couldn't care less and traces its furrow from one zone to the other and takes with it on its trails the artist, reassured to see it is still painting that bustles about. But it is then on this twist (this autograph of painting) that Muriel Rodolosse draws a line: if that principle still remains for a while, it won't take long to agonize and disappear in a last breath... of silicone.

Because, in the meantime, the artist has changed support, swapping her rough canvases of parachute or her wood panels for Plexiglas. Its smooth surface is an ice rink for oil paint that refuses to adhere. Metaphorically it begins to slip. The work tends to more fluidity. But it is a slight sudden progression for the artist, who appears to remain attached to that signature-twist (twisted). Then she tried silicone, an ersatz of painting, which cannot be trusted really to sign "painting". The artist turned for a while to photography, which allowed her to work the realist representation of the body into her paintings. Indeed if she willingly admits there was always for her a physical dimension to the gesture of painting, it was out of the question to give flesh to painting. All the more for figuration was at the time wiped off the map of the modernist landscape, under the double whammy of the Seventies avant-garde which promoted an autonomous painting and the performance that took over the representation (in acts) of the body. Which manifests itself on the canvas at the beginning of the Eighties under essentially oneiric or naively eccentric features through postmodernism (the American *New Image Painting* or the *Transavantgarde*). Which doesn't correspond to Muriel Rodolosse's demand for realism.

But the body for Muriel Rodolosse is above all an animated body, a body shaken by funny bounds and starts. Just like that character acrobatically riding a three-legged lamb. That improbable means whose stability is uncertain limps all the more for the background displays buildings with incoherent proportions. And then the title itself stammers, holds its breath, delivers an incentive to go forward. *Haaa... Dada!* formulates all that quite well by also keeping up the fierce and absurd tone of the Dada launching an attack on conformism. From that painting one remembers that position of imbalance (of the character but also of the elements between them). Something moves off while almost losing ground. Something hurls itself and half-sways. To gain a better seating (or else it is to put himself more in danger), the impetuous horseman catches his leg.

Elsewhere, a character holds on to the mask that bedecks his face and his hand takes its place (the hand taking the place of the face...). In another work still her mother holds a hosepipe, all tangled up, and in the other hand, a knotted cord. And let's not forget the shepherd busy shearing his ewe, holding its legs and shearing the fleece with the shears, nor that old lady whose fingers the artist covered with flowers. Everywhere Muriel Rodolosse's models have their hands busy. Like a sign of their bustling activity: they are busy.

But one cannot help detecting in those hands, recurrent and positioned in a prominent place, those of the painter. For Muriel Rodolosse paints with her fingers, which is not common. This technique derives from the support, that sheet of Plexiglas on which the brush doesn't cling. Smooth surface with no rent, Plexiglas demands an insistent contact, something that sticks to its skin and holds on tight, slides with flexibility but in a pressing way, insists and applies the paint unctuously until it models it. Putting one's hand in the paste is nothing. The other hand is taken too, and with it the body, riding on both sides at the same time, or rather from profile. Imagine the artist at work: one hand holds onto the Plexiglas sheet, the other paints, and she must constantly check what that hand is doing by leaning round to the other side, the good side, the side destined to be exhibited.

For a Rodolosse is painted on the wrong side. On the closed side, the hidden side, the workshop side with, necessarily, forays on the open side, the shown side, the exhibition side. On both sides of the support, on a thread, Muriel Rodolosse has kept in suspense the too-deferential fascination for painting from the beginning of her career, relegated this time into the wings, at the back. All the more for the work of painting follows here the inverted order of the rules of composition. Against the usual order of things, what is applied first comes to the foreground – since it is inscribed against the Plexiglas.

What comes after is inscribed behind. It is unanswerable. But such a reversal of the order of things is also a small revolution that immediately displays a first draft instead of rectifying it after the fact. The thickness of the paint doesn't appear or eclipse the image. At best it takes part in it, no longer superimposing itself like at the time of the twists. Muriel Rodolosse has found the way to keep in her hands the work of painting, to keep it to herself, sheltered, in the studio, if not in her intimacy. However, this putting aside is also a kind of highlighting.

To evade while surrendering. To exhibit an image (as vitrified and shining with a sparkling light) while spreading an opaque matter, secret, encrypted: it is that dual relation that Muriel Rodolosse stages, that ambivalence between transparency and the obstacle. Initial transparency of the support that acts like a plate on which "is exposed" the scene represented, developed after exposure to light at the hanging. Obstacle of the medium which in its materiality and the constraints it imposes would only display itself, traces, drips, daubs. Then, to erase the traces of that caesura, to reduce it and reabsorb it so that the work is not divided (side A versus side B) but united. Several motives work at synthesizing, in the quasi chemical sense of the term, this bipolarity. As many personal innovations that helped to nuance the very demanding dimension of painting, to hold it at bay, at a distance. To make use of other applications in order to master it better. To shift the expected.

Like that snowy background whose airy, downy and frothy aspect blurs some zones. Which, by contrast, make others sparkle where the fingers of the painter have made themselves more precise. The snow covers with softness without stifling anything, suggesting under the white round skin the presence of a buried motive. Something hides underneath. It's the trail of a ghost landscape, which sways between a blinding presence

(the brilliance of the snow to which is added that of the Plexiglas) and the fleecy, muffled, muted consistence of the various elements. (I see something of the *Peintures métaphysiques* passed into winter. In other words, something of those spectral environments, those "Places d'Italie", depicted with a realist and precise line by Giorgio de Chirico at the beginning of 1910 and which, crushed under a yellowy light, edged by theatrical architectures, allowed uncertainty to persist.)

From the human silhouette to the ground, through the animal, the world is seen as a continuum

In passing, I shall mention that the couple above/below is one of the occurrences of the dichotomy between transparency and obstacle, the shown and the hidden. It is for example presented in the painting *Under the Bridge*, staged on two rather distinct levels, the bridge serving as a line of demarcation, in the hollow of which nestles a miniature house. Or, in that other, *Détection humaine* that depicts two big rocks welcoming between them, in the shade of a narrow black gap, the outline of a structure. Everywhere else in the pieces, as far as their details (the strap of a baby doll, the stem of a flower planted in a base), their themes (including secondary, like the mask at a certain period) as well as the modalities of hanging (a painting nestled behind a hanging wall or partly concealed by a module), the ambivalence of what comes in turn above and beneath, before and behind, is activated. It joins (and feeds) that other paradigm of the work: its moving character hesitating, shaky, unstable.

Its swaying in a way, whose effects the spectator soon perceives through the aberrant proportions (outwardly) of the constructions represented in several paintings, like the structures that punctuate the landscape of *haaa... Dada !*. If their proportions seem erratic, it is because their sources differ: here it's a maquette by Didier Marcel, there a detail of the Villa Dall'Ava conceived by Rem Koolhaas, a bit further it's a miniature excessively blown up, and then elsewhere, it's an unfinished construction that is balanced on three stilts only while a crane announces the work still to be done. Losing rigour and lacking balance, modern architecture, set in a depopulated scenery, a white desert, is swaying. Gracefully.

Between parentheses, what pitches gracefully is also all that little crowd which, at a certain period in Muriel Rodolosse's work (perhaps less today) gained a foothold in the paintings: a heterogeneous group whose members (animals, vigorous plants and masked characters) trade their qualities between them. The vegetal and the animal, men and landscape, as in *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, mingle and merge. It's the result of a painting that proves it has the capacity to ascribe to the world and its actors malleable forms and an almost porous consistency. The slightly blurred edges, the vaporous and snowy consistency of the touch highlight that dissolution in the characters represented and the attenuated confusion that settles between them. Like that old man depicted in *La Tonte*: his white tousled hair echoes the ewe's fleece that he is in the process of shearing. The heaps of wool that pile on the floor join the frothy texture of the snow that covers the ground: from the human silhouette to the ground, through the animal, the world is seen as a continuum. It's the painting's responsibility to make itself its instrument: it foams in tune with the substances depicted. But it no longer has the monopoly. It no longer forms a screen. No longer seeing solely a disincarnated abstraction or a raw matter, it informs a realist situation. The back and head of the shepherd, leaning towards the animal curiously follow the contortions of its body and

muzzle, while the crossed arms of the man reflect the tangled up position of the ewe's legs: there is no scission between the work of painting, that of the painter (in the composition) and that of the character. End of parentheses...

Because it is no longer so much in those characters, slightly (too) unexpected that this continuum occurs now in the artist's work. Today, it is rather embodied in the image of the construction site and the figure of the master-builder – who by the way is a female builder – without the movement ever ceasing to impress its rhythm, full of bounce, but so-so, somehow or other, in spite of the obstacles. So many parameters that have appeared here or there in the previous pieces, but that are combined now, on the shoulder of those proud female silhouettes who set off (in *L'Arpenteur* and *x degrés de déplacement*), at their feet and behind them, in the shape of a crane.

There is obviously here something self-referential as far as painting is concerned. As Philippe Hamon wrote in *Expositions*¹ concerning the relations between literature and architecture in the 19th century, “the new edifice in construction is ideal development, ideal and progressive exhibition of the project of an architect that gradually becomes an object under the gaze of the spectator-onlooker. The construction site is the permanent autopsy of the act of making, of creating, of its unfolding. It presents by addition of layers, of successive stages, going from a flat (the plane) to a volume (the construction), from a latent (the project) to a patent (façades)”. What Muriel Rodolosse finds and represents in that motive of the construction site couldn't be better expressed: “a permanent autopsy” of the act of painting, at the same time made and remaining to be made, accepted and held at bay in and by the image represented.

1. Philippe Hamon, *Expositions*, José Corti, Paris, 1989, p. 160