

Ricou Gallery, Brussels
Rue Souveraine 54, 1050 Brussels Belgium
www.ricougallery.com

DEGOTTEX AND PAINTING TODAY

Jean Degottex, Jean-Baptiste Bernadet, Travess Smalley and Keith J. Varadi

Opening September 6th from 2 to 8 pm
Exhibition until October 26th, 2013

Rien avant, rien après, tout en faisant.
Jean Degottex

Sébastien Ricou is proud to present a group exhibition including recent work by Jean-Baptiste Bernadet, Travess Smalley and Keith J. Varadi around a major painting by Jean Degottex, *Lignes-Report V* from 1977.

Jean Degottex (1918-1988) is a French painter, a major artist but still underestimated; twenty-five years after his death, he still hasn't been the subject of a retrospective exhibition in a French museum. Initiated by André Breton to Zen philosophy, Chinese calligraphy and the Surrealist automatic writing, Degottex spent his life creating series of paintings on canvas or paper aiming to erase the creative subject. Combined with his interest in American abstract painting this research lead him in the 70s to make a series of particularly ambitious paintings, not only by their unusual format in France at the time (two by three meters, two by six meters), but also by the almost total withdrawal of the gesture of the artist, an indirect inscription of the pictorial surface, a minimalistic and radical process that influenced, among others, Martin Barré.

In this series named *Lignes-Report*, the raw linen canvas is coated with black acrylic paint, folded in half, then a screwdriver is used to draw parallel lines while the material is still wet. Unfolded, the fabric have a recessed portion, the recessed lines of the screwdriver, and a raised portion. The paint lets the canvas appear in the places where the lines were drawn on the reverse. Background, shape, sign, writing, everything is played out in the process, which is an accident machine. As written by Maurice Benhamou in 1993, "It is thus the infinity of possibilities that the accident highlights. But at the same time it makes apparent the impossibility that constitutes the painting".

This makes Degottex a pioneer of what Raphael Rubinstein proposed to name "provisional" painting in an article published in 2009 in *Art in America*: "Provisional paintings are those that might appear unfinished or incomplete; that court intentional awkwardness, physical fragility and instability; that reject the display of conventional skills; that discover beauty in the most unassuming materials; that sometimes grapple with painting's 'impossibility'. Their lineage includes Joan Miró's anti-paintings of circa 1930, Giacometti's endless obliterations and restartings of his painted portraits, the early work of Sigmar Polke, and the spray-painted abstractions of Martin Barré. The theoretical underpinnings range from Samuel Beckett to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*."

This inclination towards the process, the rules of the game as a means to continue painting is one of the major trends of contemporary painting; which can not or does not want to rest on the idea of progress or invention and

that therefore seeks to avoid any form of grand narrative or heroism. Many artists of today share with the audience their own surprise about the endless possibilities of this medium. This humble approach, at a minimum, comes to us particularly from a new generation of American critics and painters. The rediscovery of artists such as Martin Barré, Simon Hantaï and Hans Hartung in Europe is partly due to the curiosity of American artists who had drawn into these works, neglected in their own countries of origin.

The large dimensions of the paintings in the series *Lignes-Report*, far from staging a kind of "physical" (or "virile" to use one of the adjectives often associated with American Abstract Expressionism) creative power, instead served Degottex to completely wipe himself out of the painting in order to better propose a space as vast as possible, which is deprived of any formal element. Degottex explains that the grounds of the painting are thus "neither real nor figurative." They are a space without reference, articulated with the space surrounding the painting.

When artist Jean-Baptiste Bernadet began to think of an exhibition of painters of his generation gathered around the work of Jean Degottex, whom he knows and appreciates since his formation at the Beaux-Arts, the unique format of the paintings in this series seemed a good starting point. Rather than proposing to the artists to reflect on the process or tools in the paintings of Degottex, he preferred to offer them to work on a common format, the same as the one from the series *Lignes-Report* lent for the exhibition, one could say to work on a common *space*.

The exhibition at Ricou Gallery thus presents four paintings of the same size, all identical to the dimensions of the painting by Degottex (290 x 205 cm). It is a painting exhibition, but also a coexistence of four spaces in which the viewers can immerse themselves just as in an architectural structure.

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Jean-Baptiste Bernadet (b. 1978 in Paris, lives and works in Brussels) appropriates the codes that make up the history of art and painting, both in his relation to the image and to the act of painting. Each painting appears as an attempt to appropriate painting, to make it one's own. Appropriation here is not about the simple reproduction of an act, an image or a code, but instead about a subjection that entails their displacement.

For the exhibition, Bernadet produced the painting *Untitled (Screensavour)* with a single gesture. The colors, straight out of the tube, are arranged on the blank canvas. Using thinner, the colors are then spread, like melted together. The picture is therefore shaped by the gestures of brushing, spreading, filling the surface, virtually erasing rather than adding or composing, a priori. This is how the colors are connected to each other, like a layout of sensations, which determines the composition. This is a brightly colored painting, an unstable landscape, a projection screen for multiple and changing interpretations.

Travess Smalley (b. 1986, West Virginia, USA, lives and works in New York) is a painter and printmaker whose practice involves blurring the lines between the digital and the physical through prints, sculptures, and books. His process questions the changing definition of painting, and utilizes every day home office tools such as the scanner, inkjet printer, and creative computer software to explore modernist ideas of composition, color, and form.

Referring to the horizontal lines structuring the painting of Degottex, Smalley shows a printed tarp. The painting is produced on a computer from a hardcopy, then rescanned and further modified. This amplifies and maximizes the kinetic effect and the vibration of the grid while maintaining a visible trace of the materiality of the paper.

Keith J. Varadi (b. 1985, Pittsburgh, USA, lives and works in New York) is interested in the effects of color

saturation in the physical vs. color saturation in the virtual, the legibility of image vs. non-image, painting as labor, and paintings as self-marketing products. His paintings are mimetic in their allusions to the general hermetic nature of painting, as well as the often shallow language of abstraction, imitating both the act and the affect. Having said that, these paintings are not meant to be read as cynical, but rather as honest attempts at articulating the frustrating task of determining what is art, what is not, what is work, what is not, what is pleasurable, what is not, and so on.

The painting presented in the exhibition, *Reverse Quadchrome (RGB)* is the result of an almost blind protocol: after painting the canvas on the floor with three successive layers of paint, red, green, blue, the three colors were mixed then applied in a final layer of black color, producing a subtractive addition. The canvas is then stretched "reverse side up" on the frame, showing the four layers of paint penetrating the cloth, revealing the time of completion in the form of its thickness and flattening.

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Jean-Baptiste Bernadet was artist in residence at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, in 2010 and at the APT Studios in Brooklyn in 2011, as well as at Triangle, New York, in 2012, as part of a residency under the auspices of the Institut Français. He is laureate of the Young Belgian Art Prize 2013. Recent solo exhibitions include Marfa Book Company in Marfa, Texas (2013), Saks in Geneva, Torri in Paris, Renwick in New York (2011), the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, Maes & Matthys in Antwerp, Baronian Francey Gallery in Brussels (2010), Les Filles du Calvaire in Brussels. He has also participated in many group shows in places such as Angstrom in Dallas, Texas (2012), White Flags in Saint Louis, Missouri, Art-o-Rama in Marseille, and 8 rue Saint Bon in Paris (2011), WIELS in Brussels (2009 and 2010), Galerie Crèvecoeur in Paris (2009), Musée des Beaux-Arts in Tourcoing (2005), Galerie Catherine Bastide in Brussels (2004).

He is collaborating with American writer John d'Agata on the book *On Knowing & Not*, published by Karma, NYC, to be released in September 2013.

Travess Smalley, recent exhibitions include Higher Pictures, New York (solo, 2013), Seventeen, London (2013), and Foxy Production (2012). Upcoming exhibitions include Andreas Huber, Vienna (2013), Brand New Gallery, Milan (2013), International Center for Photography, New York (2013), M+B, Los Angeles (solo, 2013), and Higher Pictures (solo, 2014).

Keith J. Varadi is an artist, curator and poet. He obtained his BA from the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University and his MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University. His work has been exhibited at Primetime, Brooklyn, David Shelton Gallery in Houston, Future Tenants in Pittsburgh, Anderson Gallery in Richmond, Stadium Gallery in New York, Tompkins Projects in New York, Cirrus Gallery and Shoshana Wayne Gallery in Los Angeles, Reynolds Gallery and Reference Gallery in Richmond and The Joanna in Houston. He has curated or co-curated exhibitions in New York, Philadelphia, Houston, Baltimore, Richmond and Iowa City. Varadi was a resident at the Edward F. Albee Foundation in 2011 and the Vermont Studio Center in 2009.